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## Moral Exemplars and Moral Followers on Twitter: Human Rights Activism and Politeness

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**Abstract:** Until recently, studies on moral exemplars focused on the characteristics or roles of exemplars in moral education. However, the issue of the possible effects of moral exemplars on their followers lacked adequate coverage in studies on psychology. Thus, the current study discussed the concept of moral following in the context of social media. The study conducted a comparison between Twitter users engaged in Malcolm X and human rights activists unengaged in moral exemplars. The accounts of moral followers (N = 20) were compared with those of human rights activists (N = 20). Tweets were subjected to content analysis, and categories related to activism were determined. The groups were compared in terms of the seven categories using the Mann-Whitney U-test. Statistically significant differences were observed between the groups in terms of impoliteness (U = 83;  $p < .01$ ), prejudice/discrimination (U = 130;  $p < .01$ ) and antisocial rights/justice-seeking (U = 126,5;  $p < .05$ ). The results demonstrated that moral followers preferred offensive and impolite language. The findings were discussed in the context of possible explanations.

**Keywords:** Moral exemplar, Moral follower, Twitter, Politeness, Malcolm X

### Introduction

How do moral characters, who are committed to certain moral attitudes and actions, impact prosocial behaviours? Studies in this context particularly emphasise the concept of moral exemplars. However, many studies use the terms *altruist* and *moral exemplar* interchangeably without discrimination. However, a moral exemplar refers to an individual who leads a life committed to moral values, such as serving humanity for the welfare of other people (Mastain, 2007), whereas an altruist lives in a motivational state with the goal of enhancing the welfare of another individual (Batson, 1991). One of the pioneering studies on moral exemplars is the book of Colby and Damon (1992) entitled 'Some Do Care' (Dunlop et al., 2012; Matsuba & Walker, 2005). According to their widely accepted definition, moral exemplars are 'people who have shown long-standing commitment to moral purposes, thus exemplifying good principles and virtues' (Colby & Damon, 1992). In addition, Rugeley and Van Wart (2006) defined moral exemplars as individuals who 'put their principles before their own immediate needs and happiness, even if this entails a cost'. The common features of moral exemplars include moral autonomy and respect for human life (Han et al., 2018).

Moreover, moral exemplars provide a means of examining phenomena, such as moral behaviour, altruism or prosocial behaviour. The lives, experiences or reactions of such people provide insight into these concepts (Mastain, 2007; Walker, 2013). For example, Mastain (2007) conducted a phenomenological investigation and concluded that the altruistic experiences of moral exemplars exhibited certain common features. Accordingly, moral exemplars can identify a person in need of help faster than others and easily shift their attention in this direction. They display an empathic response that leads to the motivation to help. Their empathy or compassion for a person in need of help is dependent of the history of their life span development. Thus, their moral values lend them with much ease in providing long-term care, concern or support to a person in need of help. In addition to the difficulties of helping, these people feel pleasure and satisfaction. Finally, they acquire deep insight into their acts because they have internalised altruistic actions and adapted them as an identity. Therefore, they differ in various aspects based on personality, which distinguish them from other people. They are more

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mature socio-cognitively and more committed to moral behaviour. Lastly, their prosocial and personal goals are more intertwined (Dunlop et al., 2012).

Moral exemplars are functional to society. Especially in moral education, they set an example for students in terms of learning moral values, attitudes and behaviours effectively and provide a portrait of how such moral values are to be manifested in practice (Han et al., 2018). Highlighting the importance of prototypes and examples on recognising and perceiving concepts is another method for understanding the role of moral exemplars in acquiring moral concepts and judgements (Stout, 2016). When viewed from the perspective of social learning theory, moral exemplars serve as inspiration for similar behaviours by evoking admiration for behaviour beyond providing information on approaches and possible actions in this regard through observation (van de Ven et al., 2019). Moreover, this sense of admiration and emulation plays a key role in the field of moral education (Vaccarezza & Niccoli, 2019; Zagzebski, 2017).

The characteristics of individuals considered moral exemplars are a controversial topic. Such attributes may vary by country, definition or context. Although moral exemplars are exemplified as historical or widely known heroes, philosophers, opinion leaders, authors, scholars, activist, religious or political leaders (Han et al., 2018; Mastain, 2007), the concept of moral exemplarity in studies on psychology is unlimited. In studies on moral exemplars, it is possible to identify individuals who worked for the benefit of humanity (e.g. Han et al., 2018; Mastain, 2007; Matsuba & Walker, 2005), such as Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr; religious figures, such as Buddha and the Dalai Lama and philosophers, such as Kant, Aristotle, Plato and Hobbes (Han et al., 2018). Other studies also cite ordinary moral exemplars, such as officials with exceptional work ethics or volunteers serving the society (Dunlop et al., 2012; Rugeley & Van Wart, 2006).

The current study focuses on the role of moral exemplars in human rights activism. Specifically, it aims to examine the role of moral exemplars in human rights advocacy on Twitter, which is a social media platform where users can express reactions, concerns, demands, criticisms and opinions quickly and effectively. In line with this purpose, accounts that post admiration for a moral exemplar are categorised as moral followers. In general, a moral follower is an individual who admires and follows a moral exemplar considered a role model. The study considers that a Twitter user who specifically posts descriptions of a moral exemplar (i.e., quotes, account name or pictures) appreciates the exemplar's moral understanding. Thus, the study identifies Twitter accounts that advocate human rights activism in Türkiye and finds Malcolm X as a prominent moral exemplar. Malcolm Little (1925–1965), also known as Malcolm X (Muslim name: al-Hajj Malik al-Shabazz), is an Afro-American charismatic Muslim leader. After his death, he became a hero and a moral model for people from all walks of life, such as Muslims, African-American, libertarians and human rights defenders (Mamiya, 2020; Kose, 2003). Malcolm X followers and accounts without posts about moral exemplars were compared by content analysis in terms of tweets on human rights activism. Briefly, the study seeks the answer to following question:

Does following a moral exemplar on twitter influence human rights activism in terms of language, type or content of rights/justice-seeking?

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The accounts of moral followers (N = 20) were compared with those of human rights activists (N = 20). The criterion for identifying moral followers was that at least two of the following attributes are related to Malcolm X: account name, bio, header photo, profile photo or pinned tweet. The criterion for human rights activists was that the self-description of users should include human rights activist or human rights defender in the bio excluding any elements associated with a moral exemplar. Recent 30 tweets for each account were examined. Non-personal accounts (i.e. associations, institutions or organisations) and those with less than 30 tweets were excluded. Tweets, retweets and replies were examined. In quoted news tweets, only tweets were included in the analysis. If the same tweet was retweeted, each was treated as a separate tweet.

### **Coding**

The study refrained from using commonly used programmes for qualitative analysis because they are based on word counts, which can be misleading. All tweet contents were focused. The target and null subject were also considered. Moreover, this analytical strategy introduces an important dilemma of qualitative analysis, that is,

objectivity versus reality (Koçak & Arun, 2006). Although such a dilemma frequently prompted researchers to compromise quantity, the implicit content of this study should not be overlooked.

The study searched for related categories in the tweets because the primary concern is the differences in human rights activism. For this purpose, tweets were subjected to a preliminary reading. Subsequently, prosocial or antisocial patterns were determined on the basis of the human rights axis. Out of 1,200, 468 tweets were classified into seven categories. A total of 732 tweets that could not be included in these seven categories were excluded from analysis. After creating categories, tweet content was read and coded using Microsoft Excel (2012). The categories were formulated on the basis of certain criteria, and each tweet was classified under relevant categories.

Table 1. Categories and criteria

Categories	N	Criteria	Example content*
Impoliteness	95 (%8)	Insulting, Bad word, Stigmatising or Humiliating	...shameless ...troll ...mistress ...drunkard...terrorist
Prejudice/Discrimination	17 (%1)	Discriminatory, prejudiced words or ideas about a particular person or group of people	(Negative content towards a country, an association / group, a nation or a lifestyle)
Rights/Justice-seeking	157 (%13)	Expressing the injustice that a particular person or group suffered or demanding justice for them without directly targeting or criticising anyone (No subjective assessment was made about injustice or cruelty; the opinion of the account was considered)	...stand by the righteous.....no to racism ...increase the minimum wage...calls for an end to the persecution of Uyghur Turks
Altruistic Tweets	25 (%2)	Announcing the need of someone in need, seeking help for her/him or caring about this	...Awareness towards the disabled...Call for help to orphans
Quotes	31 (%3)	Tweeting a prosocial quote or aphorism from a famous person	Prosocial quotes from philosophers, politicians or moral figures such as Malcolm X, Yunus Emre, Rumi
Antisocial rights/justice-seeking	24 (%2)	Insulting/marginalising in the name of defending rights	Accusing a particular ideological view of being inconsistent and spineless on the grounds that it is involved in injustice
Critical rights/justice seeking	119 (%10)	Expressing an injustice or persecution by censuring the perpetrator of it, aggressive defence	'Those who shout for women's rights are silent about the injustices suffered by men' 'India has become a dangerous place for Muslims'

\*Since example tweets may violate the privacy of the analysed accounts, partial content or sample words are included in the examples.

Analysing implicit meanings provides in-depth information, whereas analysing content addresses the superficial part of the text (i.e. visible and countable physical elements). However, objectivity can be achieved and quantitative analyses can be possible only by using questions directed to data for coding in such analyses (Berg & Lune, 2015). After creating the categories, questions were asked to objectively classify the tweets. For example, does the tweet contain words considered insulting or bad words in Turkish or expressions of discrimination or exclusion regarding any social group or identity? Is the purpose of expressing victimhood or seeking justice indicated? Does it mention the perpetrator of such injustice or criticise the perpetrator? Such questions rendered the classification of relevant tweets easy. Neutral tweets unrelated to any of these categories were excluded.

## Results

Statistical analyses for quantitative data were performed using SPSS version 20. Data were examined for conformity to parametric analysis using histograms, q-q plots and the Shapiro-Wilk tests. Non-parametric tests

were conducted because the preliminary analyses demonstrated that data were non-normally distributed ( $W = .47$  to  $.91$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of both groups.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the study

Group	Account information				(Mean rank)						
	N	Following ( $\bar{X}$ )	Followers ( $\bar{X}$ )	Joined ( $\bar{X}$ )	Impoliteness	Prejudice/ Disc.	Rights/ Justice Seeking	Altruistic Tweets	Quotes	Antisoc. rights/ justice seeking	Critical rights/ justice seeking
Moral followers	20	1347,5	2121,75	2016	26,35	24	17,25	22,30	20,55	24,18	19,55
No exemplar	20	1001,25	2896,20	2012	14,65	17	23,75	18,70	20,45	16,83	21,45

The groups were compared in terms of the seven categories using the Mann–Whitney  $U$ -test. Statistically significant differences were observed between the groups in terms of impoliteness ( $U = 83$ ;  $p < .01$ ), prejudice/discrimination ( $U = 130$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and antisocial rights/justice-seeking ( $U = 126,5$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Table 2 shows that the tweets of moral followers contain more impolite language than the no-exemplar group. In addition, they posted more tweets with opinions including prejudice or discrimination. Finally, they posted more tweets on antisocial right-seeking.

## Discussion

This study revealed three significant findings. Individuals who were seemingly engaged in a moral figure on their Twitter account used a more impolite language, are more prejudiced and more marginalising in their human rights activism. These significant results suggest that moral followers on Twitter use antisocial social media by hiding behind moral exemplars.

How can this result be interpreted? One possible explanation is that moral exemplars on Twitter serve as a means of anonymisation. The group of moral followers appears to use moral exemplars as a shield for their aggressive activism. In addition, they may overcome the disturbing flaws in their tweets by associating their beliefs and moral struggles with those of moral exemplars. This concept can be explained better with moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1999, 2002, 2016). That is, individuals can temporarily disengage themselves from internal standards. In turn, such standards do not restrain them from immoral acts. In other words, they perform behaviours that deviate from their moral standards without feeling conscientiously disturbed. One of the mechanisms they use is moral justification. This concept can be summarised as legitimising an action when it serves a worthy and moral end. Thus, moral followers on Twitter may fail to see their faults in establishing their sense of struggle and justice in an offensive manner. Perhaps, they may attribute this tendency to the aggressive style of Malcolm X. In this manner, the abovementioned identification may ignore such excessiveness. In addition, another mechanism of moral disengagement is euphemism. For moral followers, renaming can be a means of legitimising inappropriate tweets. As another mechanism, diffusion of responsibility should be considered in the context of anonymity. Studies on social psychology demonstrate that anonymity plays a role in various immoral behaviours (e.g. Diener, 1976, 1977, 1980; Diener et al., 1976; Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo, 1969, 2007; Zimbardo et al., 1982). In relation, the anonymity, ease and speed provided by Twitter easily pave the way for the spread of hate and discriminating messages (Kalav & Certel Firat, 2017).

Two main points should be considered in interpreting the findings. First, the identity of the moral exemplar being followed is important. A wide range of activists, philosophers, poets, religious or political leaders can be considered in this regard as each exemplar represents a different approach. Moreover, the same exemplar can pertain to various concepts in different cultures. For example, although Malcolm X is an idealistic hero for Muslims in Türkiye, African-Americans may view him as civil rights leader. In other words, the Muslim identity of Malcolm X is more prominent in Türkiye. However, it may pertain more to black identity in the USA. In addition, this group of moral followers consists of people from different socio-economic levels and cultural backgrounds across countries. Second, the research was conducted exclusively on Twitter. Thus, it may not be representative of individuals who can exemplify the concept of moral followers in real life. In real life, following

a moral exemplar denotes adopting thoughts, internalising norms and acting accordingly, which differ from the attributes related to exemplars in Twitter accounts.

## Limitations and Conclusion

The results of the study should be interpreted given certain limitations. The first is that Malcolm X was not compared with other moral exemplars among Twitter users in Türkiye. In addition, the study cannot establish that the participants in the no-exemplar group do not follow a moral exemplar because only Twitter accounts were considered. In addition, the possible confounding variables, such as cultural differences, ideological views or level of education, which distinguish such groups from each other, should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, the study provides important information on the role of moral exemplars on Twitter. Thus, studies that examine real-life moral followers are required to collect in-depth information about the influence of moral exemplars on individuals in the relevant literature.

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