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2025-2026 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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Case 5: “Like, Study, and Share?”

Rachel, a 16-year-old social media influencer, has built a large following by posting study tips and organizing hacks. Her audience trusts her, and brands have taken notice. Sponsorships now bring in steady income — money Rachel feels pressured to accept since her family relies on her financial contributions to cover school costs and other expenses.

Recently, she agreed to promote a new educational app. The company frames it as a tool to make completing assignments for school “simpler and more efficient.” At first, Rachel thinks it seems useful enough. But after her ads for it are posted, she notices a shift in her audience’s response. Students thank her for the recommendation, but many of the comments focus less on learning and more on getting through homework as quickly as possible: “I’m done in half the time now — finally free!” or “This makes homework so much less of a pain.”

Privately, Rachel feels torn. As a student, she knows school isn’t just about completing homework quickly. Often, she feels as if she learns most when she slows down and struggles through a problem or debates ideas with classmates. She isn’t sure she agrees with the promise of the app she is promoting. Still, the pay is significant, and walking away would mean turning down income she and her family need.

When Rachel raises these concerns with friends, they shrug it off: “It’s just advertising. Everyone knows influencers exaggerate.” But Rachel isn’t convinced. She worries that her influence, especially over younger followers, can carry more weight than she intends. If she believes that her content could have a negative impact on how students think about learning, how should Rachel navigate her commitments to her followers and to the company that hired her?

Match Questions

1. Should Rachel continue promoting the app even if she privately disagrees with the message it sends?
2. Would it make a difference to whether Rachel should continue promoting the app if she personally uses the app or doesn’t use it herself?
3. Is Rachel ethically responsible for the way her followers interpret her promotions?

Study Questions

1. What responsibilities do young influencers have when their followers are mostly other students?
2. Should society hold influencers to the same ethical standards as teachers, mentors, or other role models since they can shape attitudes and behavior?
3. Is it possible for Rachel to evaluate whether her influence helps or harms her followers? What difference would it make on her decision if the app’s impact could be determined?
4. When, if ever, is it acceptable for people to place their own financial interests above the well-being of their audience or community?