Does social media cause people to lose empathy for others?

Introduction

With the popularity of smart phones, social media has become the main channel for people (especially young people) to communicate with others and perceive the world. Under the background of this serious phenomenon, people's face-to-face communication is slightly out of place, and non-verbal media such as facial expressions and body language that can assist in conveying feelings are also limited, thus the communication between people might be more indifferent than before. In this case, a serious social problem came into being. Does social media make people gradually lose empathy with others? In my opinion, although social media might have influenced the life attitude of people, it is not that serious for a loss of empathy.

Main

Social media, to some extent, reduces the cost of getting information about other people's misfortunes. Thus, there are opportunities to trigger an emotion called schadenfreude. “Research suggestions that effective reactions towards the dispersed other depend on the self-other social distance.” (Lewen Wei, 2020) We will be more willing to witness the misfortune of our opponents. In addition, Lewen Wei & Bingjie Liu (2020) argued that “Social media, designed to connect people, are rich in cues with implications for competent interpersonal distance.”It is easier for people to divide themselves into specific groups through hobbies, views and even political positions. When people catch the failure of their opposite side, they are more likely to gloat rather than show empathy. Moreover, because the cost of obtaining information has become low, even in a very close self-other social distance, people might hesitate whether the events is worth to show more empathy, which also leads to people's indifference.

Identity information on social media is with privacy and virtuality. People are not as careful about their remarks as they are in real communication, thus they show more indifferent. In addition, some people with distorted mentality comment on others and could evade punishment if without violating the law. Under this condition, once they encounter setbacks, they might have a higher probability to consider to attack the victims who share their misfortunes in the network to obtain their abnormal satisfaction.

Social media can also breed many sensational rumors. Social media could “separate erroneous, alarm, and exaggerated information that can cause fear, stress, depression, and anxiety in people with or without underlying psychological ills.” (González-Padilla, 2020) In this case, people will be wary of the information from social media, resulting in them becoming more prudent and worried before showing empathy.

However, these do not mean that social media had made people indifferent to each other. On the contrary, the widespread use of social media might make more people pay attention to an unfortunate phenomenon. Those who are relatively close to each other might help the victims out of their psychological shadow as soon as possible in different ways of cheering up, or makes justice be done on unfair matters through collective public opinion. The social atmosphere become more just and the victims could have the opportunity to receive more assistance in this condition. It seems to be difficult in the general way of social interaction, but through social media, much problems in society that were once unsolved have been solved.

In fact, social media is not the main cause of the lack-empathy condition. Gender, age, income level, education standard and psychological state all affect the way people treat others. A survey shows that although the influence of gender on people's apathy is not obvious, age has a negative effect on empathy; Among the high-income and highly educated people, empathy is higher than other people; Anxiety will significantly reduce empathy, but those anxiety people who get more support on social media will show more empathy. Therefore, it is obviously one-sided to blame social media for contemporary people's lack of empathy.

Social media gives all human opportunities to express their emotions, and social media platform’s high-technological support has greatly increased the amount of information it could carry, which is more specific than newspapers and magazines. Therefore, when people record their daily in the form of photos, dynamic graphs and videos, they can more comprehensively reflect the information of the event, thus that others could experience the feelings of the parties, so as to be more prone to empathy. Different from the formal social interaction, these recorded states can be replayed repeatedly, which not only expands the audience area, but also avoids the information distortion caused by orally spread. This trend of diversified forms of expression increases people's interest in spreading information, and is more conducive to the dissemination of some important information, which can further arouse people's empathy.

While the world is suffering with covid-19 epidemic, social media has shown its significant role in stimulating people's empathy. When the COVID-19 broke out in different regions of China, people would always spontaneously connect with each other through social media, set up various WeChat groups in the isolation areas to face the shortage of living resources caused by the blockade. At this time, people united with empathy, helping each other through the difficulties. Moreover, the government officials will also catch the opinions of the masses from mainstream social media, which could enhance the managers' empathy with the people, which is more conducive to the unity of the whole nation. It can be seen that, in some cases, the popularity of social media has promoted people's empathy for each other and the process of government work.

Conclusion

Although the popularity of social media might make the authenticity of information confusing, thus people will have a strong sense of vigilance towards others, it is inevitable for all social ways. Social media is not the main reason why people lose empathy in general because empathy is related to many objective factors. On the contrary, the widespread use of social media not only makes it more feasible to generate empathy through a small amount of information, but also makes the scope of empathy for others broader. During the COVID-19, the support of social media for living resources and information was more commendable. The whole nation understood and helped each other, showing a strong sense of empathy. Therefore, the conclusion seems to be obvious, social media does not make people lose empathy.

References

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