

Empathy in the World of Virtual Reality

Abigayle Wright

College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University

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Dr. Robby Ratan

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In the world of virtual reality (VR), empathy has started becoming a prevalent discussion topic, and VR has been highly credited as a tool for improving empathy among users. According to Lesley University, empathy “refers to the cognitive and emotional reactions of an individual to the observed experiences of another.” With this, “having empathy increases the likelihood of helping others and showing compassion.” (*The Psychology of Emotional and Cognitive Empathy*, n.d.). For some, empathy comes very easily and has lasting impacts that people may carry with them through life. However, empathy does not come as easily to others; whether that be by choice or by nature, it is risky to generalize an increase in empathy through virtual reality without more reliable research or findings. This is important to discuss because of how highly credited virtual reality is for improving empathy recently. Studies have been conducted, but virtual reality is still a very new concept and needs time to be integrated into society. This essay strives to explore the positive and negative aspects of virtual reality’s effect on empathy, ultimately suggesting that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, but the final result is up to the individual user. Virtual reality does have the potential to provide a positive empathetic effect on users, yet it is unclear how impactful and/or lasting those effects will be.

When it comes to virtual reality, people have the ability to indirectly demonstrate empathy. More specifically, virtual reality simulations hold the capacity to recreate the world through someone else’s eyes, but in a highly realistic way. Unlike realistic movies or television shows on a flat screen, virtual reality facilitates an even deeper sense of immersion into a highlighted environment, such as through 360 degree videos. In these videos, the virtual reality headset allows for more of a first-person 360 view due to the lack of an uncontrollable background and its possible distractions. This gives the illusion of “presence” or the overwhelming feeling of simply “being there”. As discussed in class, presence is a key aspect in

understanding VR, due to its psychological power and influence on users. Some argue that when users are placed into simulated experiences that others face, but they may never have to deal with themselves, it could have a significant impact on users' empathy, inciting an increase in empathy in particular. Although it is argued that virtual reality has the ability to increase empathy among users, there is still the possibility that it ultimately has no effect. Authors, including Jeremy Bailenson of "Experience on Demand", have described virtual reality as "an empathy machine with the potential to change the world". However, that is not always the case. Virtual reality's immersive and engaging atmosphere has led to greater recognition for its potential influence on empathy, but it is important to remember how individualistic empathy and its effects can be depending on the user and context of use.

In a news article by Naveen Joshi of BBN Times, it discusses the positive impact virtual reality can have on social change. Joshi goes on to describe how VR can foster awareness on social issues, which has the potential to amplify feelings of empathy among users. Although the author mainly focuses on the positive impacts virtual reality can have on users, he also identifies the challenges of using VR as a social tool to create more of a balanced perspective. However, it is worth noting that the author's overall message remains "despite these challenges and limitations, virtual reality remains a promising tool for social change," (Joshi, 2023). Joshi argues that "by immersing users in an experience, VR can help raise awareness and drive action on social issues by creating empathy and understanding in a way that other media cannot,". Along with this, the author includes specific examples of issues VR has been tackling in order to increase empathy long-term, such as simulations on homelessness, poverty, inequality, racism, climate change, and even more (Joshi, 2023). However, in any compelling argument, it is crucial to examine both sides of the debate. In his article, Joshi mentions a challenge around "the

potential for VR experiences to reinforce existing biases and stereotypes”, which is also a highlighted issue discussed in a research article by Lisa Nakamura in relation to empathy. With focuses on racial and sexist empathy, Nakamura’s article discusses how virtual reality’s attempt to increase users’ empathy has good intentions, but there are still flaws that can be criticized. Nakamura proceeds to describe how some VR experiences expose the fact that many have limited or one-dimensional knowledge about racism, which has the unfortunate potential to bolster prejudice and discrimination without explicitly meaning to. A particular term illustrated is “toxic empathy”, which is based upon the belief that virtual consumption of racial experiences creates a sensation that “enables white viewers to feel that they have experienced authentic empathy for these others, and this digitally mediated compassion is problematically represented in multiple media texts as itself a form of political activism,” (Nakamura, 2020). In other words, some portrayals of racial experiences can be taken advantage of by those who do not experience much discrimination, leading them to become problematic. To many, it is frustrating that these issues are still not fostering change in actions or empathetic feelings. Instead, they are essentially being overlooked and oversimplified while serving as a scapegoat for people to be untruthful about how much of an impact any of it really had. Although the author does admire the efforts made in developing influential simulations, she expresses apprehension about the “empathy machine”, and how the simulations may invoke feelings of presence that most people will never experience in reality because of how staged the environments are. Due to the fact that the user is unable to make their own choices or judgements in these virtual realities, they are not given the full experience; in Nakamura’s words, “their recorded ‘experiences’ become the alibi for VR’s excesses and un-virtuous uses,” (Nakamura, 2020). Although the news article contains more generalizations of the positive and negative effects of VR simulations on empathetic responses, it

creates a connection to the research article due to Joshi briefly mentioning Nakamura's argument. Nakamura then goes in depth on the issue, but even with these differences, both articles emphasize that virtual reality will, if not already, have a significant impact on social issues. As also mentioned in both articles, virtual reality has the potential to become an authentic tool for social change, but there is still an ample amount of maturing and innovation to be added into the VR world (Joshi, 2023; Nakamura, 2020). With all of this in mind, it may be incorrect to label virtual reality as an empathetic machine, since the levels of cognition and emotions vary when in VR. In general, people may not take away the same message or feeling as others around them, and even though they can be very realistic, the consequence of learning a lesson from a VR simulation may not fully translate into real life. A lot of the time, it has the ability to affect someone for a short period of time where they feel immediate results, but they ultimately do not end up doing anything about it.

Although virtual reality may possess the ability and intentions of increasing empathy, it is unjust to say that it has an entirely positive effect on individual users. Upon reflection, virtual reality does seem to have more of a positive than negative effect on empathy, but giving it the bold title of the "ultimate empathy machine" would not be entirely correct (Nakamura, 2020). It has the possibility of putting people through experiences that they would never normally encounter, but it may not always have a lasting effect. Using virtual reality as a tool to help increase the emotional capacity of users could be beneficial, but overall, it is still drowning in uncertainty. To be rightfully called the "empathy machine", more studies and analysis should be done regarding this topic since it is quite new to the scene. Therefore, given the current circumstances, it would be unfair and potentially dangerous to make such a generalization.

Sources

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