

Are S'poreans a Bunch of Voyeurs?

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Abuse, fights and even molestation in trains here. Singaporeans have seen it all - through videos and photos that others upload online.

But why are people whipping out their phones to document these incidents, instead of rendering help at the scene?

"Some may see this as a way of helping, by exposing the deviant act, via producing evidence of wrongdoing," said sociologist Tan Ern Ser from the National University of Singapore.

But other experts pointed to less altruistic reasons.

Social-media expert Michael Netzley, from the Singapore Management University, said: "People may be looking to boost their popularity online by having a video that attracts some attention."

Leong Chan Hoong, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that when people identify what they see as a problem and decide to take a video without the intention to help, it borders on "voyeurism".

However, Dr Leong - who is the deputy head of the IPS Social Lab, which researches on social perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in Singapore - added that some may take videos with the intention of helping.

He pointed to the case in which the boss of an IT company allegedly physically abused an intern; his actions were caught on video, with the footage being posted on popular online forum Hardware Zone.

"In cases involving physical violence, where it is difficult to stand up to the perpetrator...videos can be used to help the victim," Dr Leong said.

William Wan, general secretary of the Kindness Movement here, said that people sometimes assume that others will do the helping.

But he added that Singaporeans should not be judged too harshly, because there are some civic-minded people in society.

One video that illustrates his point is that of a fight between two men in the MRT earlier this year. It was broken up by a commuter. Both men have since been fined.

But it is normal for people not to want to get involved in cases where there is physical violence, he said.

But sometimes, no one steps in to help even when they may not be in danger themselves. The video of a man spitting at two women at Woodlands Interchange garnered more than 20,000 shares in three days. But, despite other people being present, no one helped.

In other incidents where a crime appears to be unfolding, like molest, ambiguity may prevent people from springing into action, he said.

"Sometimes, it may be hard to gauge, because we wouldn't know if the perpetrator is really guilty, or if it is an accident," he said.

Psychologist Ang Yong Guan noted that people tend to take videos exposing the ugly side of society rather than the good side, and that there is usually a public message about what is considered inappropriate or indecent behaviour.

Dr Netzley said he thinks it is a global phenomenon.

"There is not yet a relatively substantial and clear case history to guide us. The media is simply too new," he said.

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