

Exploring Virtual Empathy versus Real-life Empathy among Undergraduate University Students across Five Faculties

Bidyadhar Sa¹, Christine Ealie¹, Virginia Victor¹, Farid Youssef¹, Michael Campbell², Md. Anwarul Azim Majumder²

¹Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies; St Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies.

²Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, West Indies.

E-mail: bidyadhar.sa@sta.uwi.edu

1. RATIONAL & OBJECTIVES

Empathy is important for effective social interactions since it helps people understand others' feelings, thinking, and intentions, and therefore aids in predicting behavior (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Additionally, the capacity to understand and feel another's pain often leads to compassionate responses (Riess, 2017). Virtual empathy has been described as an important competence for promoting learning given the increasing use of online forums in education (García-Pérez, Santos-Delgado, & Buzón-García, 2006). It is particularly important for students to cultivate empathy since it benefits not only them but their future place of work (Gentry, Weber, & Sadr, 2007; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2013). The current study further seeks to explore any links between real world empathy and empathy expressed online. There is existing evidence to suggest that a person's online social activity is reflective of their personality (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011). Similar to real world tendencies, extroverts had higher online social networking engagement than introverts, and openness and conscientiousness in online settings were also reflective of that in the real world (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011). Following this pattern of reasoning, one can assume that a person's virtual empathy levels might mirror their empathy levels in the real world.

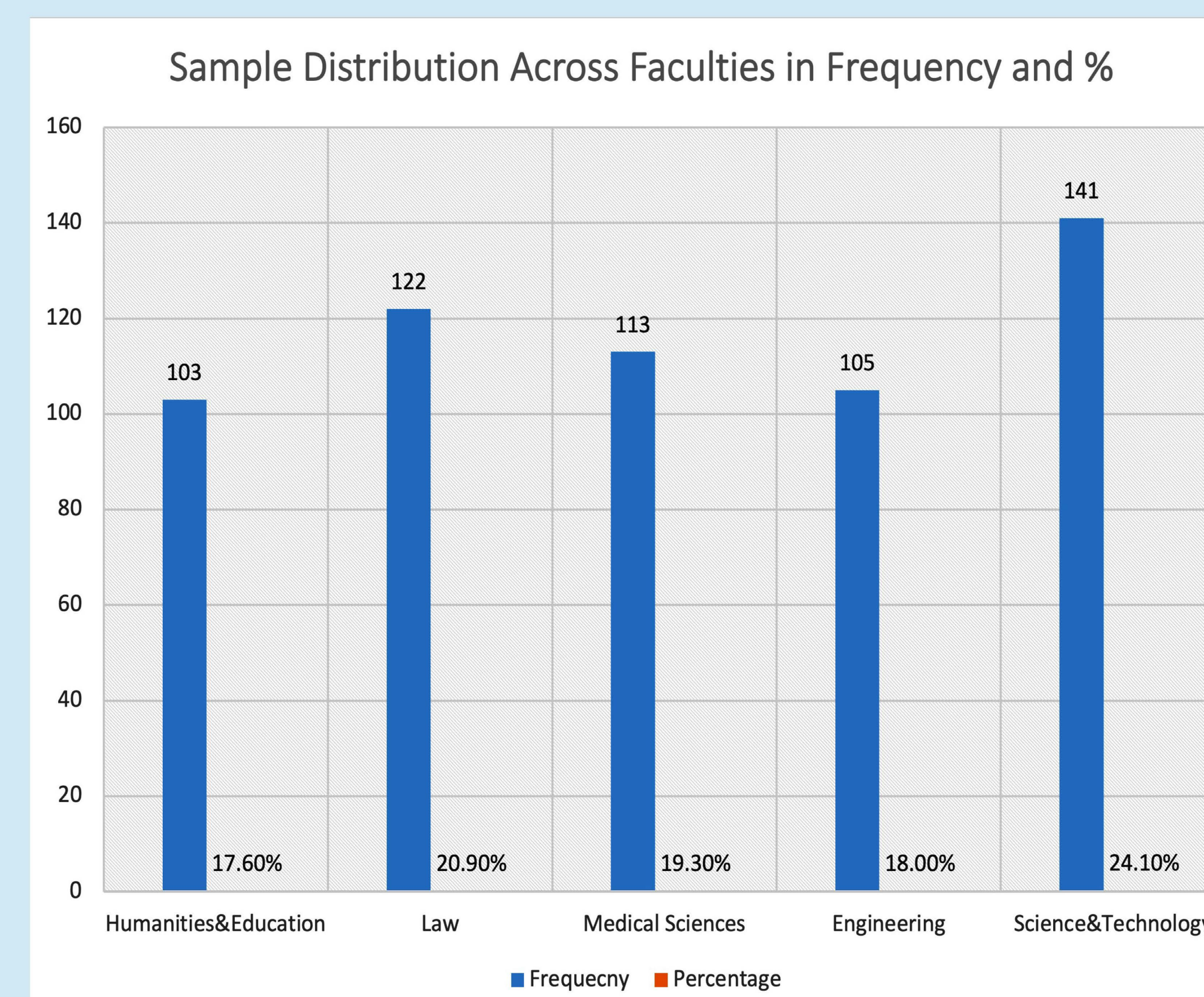
For this reason, the authors of this current study sought to determine whether online social media use had any impact on a person's capacity for empathy. With this background the objective of the current study to explore empathy on social media and in the real world among undergraduates from five faculties (Law, Engineering, Medical Sciences, Humanities and Education, Science and Technology) at The University of the West Indies.

2. DESIGN & METHODS

A descriptive, cross-sectional study design was used to measure real life empathy (RLE) using the Empathy Quotient (EQ) for adults and virtual empathy (VE) using an adapted version of the EQ. A convenience sample of 584 respondents from 5 faculties completed the questionnaires. Data analysis employed Pearson's correlation, t-test, and one-way ANOVA using SPSS 24.

3. RESULTS

As shown in the graphs the sample selected from five faculties varies from 17.6% to 24.1%. Majorities of students were female (63.2%) and between 17 and 21 (79.6%). Pluralities were of East Indian descent (44%) and from the Faculty of Science and Technology (24.1%). The mean RLE score (42.80) was higher than the VE score (37.00), and positively correlated ($r = 0.665$, $P < .001$). Other findings include: female participants' RLE ($44.558 \pm .494$) was higher than males' ($39.795 \pm .769$), $t = -5.44$, $p < 0.001$; and females' ($38.793 \pm .533$) VE was higher than males' ($33.953 \pm .719$), $t = -5.43$, $p < 0.001$; Engineering faculty had lower RLE than all other faculties ($F(4, 579) = 6.978$, $p < 0.001$), and lower VE than all other faculties ($F(4, 579) = 8.825$, $p < 0.001$); Year 3 students' VE ($33.944 \pm .991$) was lower than Year 2's ($38.14 \pm .979$), $p = .045$; and RLE of Mixed participants ($44.223 \pm .85$) was higher than Afro-Trinidadians ($41.416 \pm .75$, $p = .044$).



4. CONCLUSION

These results suggest that students may experience less empathy in virtual than in real-life social interactions. Promoting empathy in the real world and online can prepare students to function better in future professional and social settings.

5. REFERENCES

- Baron-Cohen, S., & Wheelwright, S. (2004, April). The Empathy Quotient: An Investigation of Adults. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 34(2), 163-175.
- Riess, H. (2017). The Science of Empathy. *Journal of Patient Experience*, 4(2), 74-77.
- García-Pérez, R., Santos-Delgado, J., & Buzón-García, O. (2006). Virtual empathy as digital competence in education 3.0. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 13(30), 1-10.
- Gentry, W., Weber, T., & Sadr, G. (2007). Empathy in the Workplace: A Tool for Effective Leadership. The Society of Industrial Organizational Psychology Conference. New York: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Lilius, J., Kanov, J., Dutton, J., Worline, M., & Maitlis, S. (2013). Compassion revealed. *Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship*.
- Gosling, S., Augustine, A., Vazire, S., Holtzman, N., & Gaddis, S. (2011). Manifestations of Personality in Online Social Networks: Self-Reported Facebook-Related Behaviors and Observable Profile Information. *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking*, 14(9), 483-488.