Understanding Empathetic Shifts During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Online Mental Health Communities

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Introduction

Hypothesis

(i) The shared experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has created a greater potential global empathetic connection, leading to a positive shift in empathetic expression patterns in Online Mental Health Communities (OMHCs).

(ii) Positive empathetic shifts have created a more prosocial discourse between Seekers and Supporters in OMHCs in posts related to COVID-19.

Collected and Analyzed Data: from Pushshift Reddit Dataset.

- We are seeing a trend in greater empathetic statements (via emotion and interpretation) during the pandemic, which has contributed to positive feedback from the seeker and community towards supporters.
- The findings can inform supporters on how to use different empathetic expression strategies to make more prosocial responses in OMHCs.
- We believe this work can inspire and support the design of further studies, and analysis of trends in empathetic communications of text-based communities.

Empathy Detection

Empathy Detection Training Data: Released by Sharma et al. (2020), the training data (labeled using the proposed empathy framework) contains 3,081 examples from 55 mental health focused subreddits.

Empathy Detection Evaluation Data: Using the same empathy framework, we labeled 450 examples of collected data as a team (average Fleiss’ Kappa = 0.57 on 30 examples).

Findings

Does higher level of expressed empathy lead to more positive feedback from help seeker and community?

Responses with stronger interpretation receive more upvotes from the community, especially in COVID context. Responses with stronger emotional reaction and exploration are more likely to receive replies from help-seeker.

Conclusion & Future Implications

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