

# People are more likely to film an incident than help: Do social media Likes matter more?

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April 15, 2019



SINGAPORE - A mass brawl in Geylang involving around 20 people: Caught on camera.

Two men fighting at a Geylang coffeeshop, with one allegedly using an axe to slash the other: Caught on camera.

A woman with her leg trapped in the gap between the platform and an MRT train during the morning peak period: Caught on camera.

Behind the lens of such clips are curious onlookers who are filming the incidents, but not intervening or stepping forward to help.

When a woman travelling on the Circle Line fell and got her leg trapped in the gap between the platform and the train at Buona Vista Station last week, Facebook user Brandon Wong said he tried to calm the woman down, and helped SMRT staff to lift her leg out of the gap.

However, other commuters were less forthcoming. Mr Wong urged train commuters to help others in need and sympathise with them, rather than simply "stand around taking photographs and videos".

In instances of public fights or altercations, parties involved may whip out their phones to capture potential evidence, should the incident be reported to the authorities.

A video showing an April 4 spat between a 47-year-old man and a security supervisor in Roxy Square in East Coast Road recently went viral. The clip ended in the man punching the security supervisor, who had asked a colleague to film the incident in case anything happened.

Mr Rajan Supramaniam, managing director of Hilborne Law, said photos and videos taken of such public incidents can be submitted as evidence in the court of law.

The police have used such visuals in some cases like rioting or fighting, and they have been played in open court, he added.

He noted that the defence may sometimes challenge the authenticity of the video, whether it has been edited or altered, in which case experts will be called in to examine the video.

While such videos can be used as evidence, Mr Rajan said police will still do their groundwork, such as by taking statements from the accused, victims and witnesses, and referring to other camera footage such as that from police cameras and CCTVs.

A police spokesman told The Straits Times that when a report is lodged, police will assess the facts and circumstances of each case and take necessary action where needed.

This will include reviewing all forms of evidence, including any relevant social media post, to determine if an offence has been committed, she said.

Mr Rajan also said a person who captures the footage could be called up by police as a witness in the investigations.

"While they may not have intended to report it or make known the footage to the police, the authorities can still call them up if they chance upon it online," explained Mr Rajan.

Experts say the practice of onlookers filming incidents on their devices instead of taking action is symptomatic of the social media age.

Assistant Professor Liew Kai Khiun from Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information said that, these days, the act of witnessing is seen to be equivalent to taking action.

Also, filming such videos is probably safer for the witnesses than stepping forward into the limelight, he added.

Agreeing with Dr Liew, Mr John Logan, programme director of addiction rehabilitation facility The Cabin, said this is due to the fact that people are increasingly addicted to getting attention from others.

"People have always looked and watched when accidents happen. But now what's happening is that people can get Likes and hits on social media."

He said that social media algorithms are designed to get users to keep clicking and posting, and constantly engaging on the platform, so as to keep getting approval from other people.

"There seems to be a shift as to what is more important. If someone fell into the gap between the train and platform 30 years ago, people would step forward to help. Nowadays their priorities are wrong. Rather than filming, people should step forward to help," said Mr Logan.

The pervasiveness of technology also plays a part in worsening this trend, with devices such as smart phones becoming more accessible.

"The thing is once your brain is rewired to technology at a young age, it is hard to change. Older people who are introduced to such platforms can actually change. But once you are given the technology from a young age, your neuro-pathways are rewired."

Mr Logan added that using a phone to film someone invades that person's privacy. "It's highly inappropriate. In this social media era, the boundaries of what's acceptable and not acceptable have become lowered."

He added that it could be even more traumatic for someone involved in an accident to come across the video later on.

The whipping out of a smart phone to capture visuals of such incidents can actually act as a triggering factor to worsen an already tense situation, say experts.

Ms Sophia Goh, principal psychotherapist at Sofia Wellness Clinic, warned that the presence of the devices may cause the parties to take more impulsive actions.

She said these people are typically already in a rage, and their logic and reasoning have been clouded by anger.

"It makes the person likely to interpret the camera filming, whether by the other person or by other bystanders, as an attack, whatever the original intentions are," explained Ms Goh.

"It's also easier to misinterpret words, actions or anything else as an attack in a state of anger."