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### **Third-person Effect**

Today, people in society witness messages from a variety of media every day. These messages can influence what people spend their money on, who they vote for, how they react to a crisis, just to name a few examples. Yet, most people are confident that they are not impacted by media messages. They see themselves as more aware and less vulnerable to be strongly affected by the media. Despite this, most people also believe that other people are more likely to be susceptible to media messages. The third-person effect theory sheds light on this phenomenon.

The third-person effect is a hypothesis in mass communication that attempts to explain how people perceive how they themselves and how others are impacted by mass media messages. According to this theory, people generally believe that mass communication does not have as great of an effect on themselves as it does on other people. People feel that while media messages have a powerful impact on other people, they themselves are not impacted by messages. Researchers have been developing and studying third-person effect theory since the 1980s and have found robust support for the theory through experiments and surveys. Third-person effects have expanded our knowledge of people's perceptions of the effects of fields such as advertising, political communication, and entertainment. Third-person effects can apply to a wide range of fields, including social media analysis and health communication.

Sociologist W. Phillips Davison first to systematically study the third-person effect. Other researchers had observed the third-person effect but not to the same methodical standard as Davison. He was inspired to study the third-person effect after discovering that in World War II,

Japanese soldiers distributed leaflets trying to convince African-American soldiers to stop fighting against them; although the leaflets did not appear to have any impact, the soldiers were pulled out anyways, potentially because officers believed the materials would influence the black soldiers. In his 1983 study “The Third Person Effect in Communication,” Davison conducted four experiments in order to find support for the third-person effect. One study examined third-person effect in the context of the presidential election and found that participants believed that, while the New Hampshire primary would not influence their voting choice, it would influence the voting choices of others. Another experiment revealed that participants believed that they would not be as influenced by a New York governor not making his income tax return public, but that other New Yorkers would be more impacted by this. A different experiment examined whether or not people believed exposure to television advertisements would cause children to ask their parents to buy them things they would not otherwise want. Again, the results supported third-person effect: respondents believed that other children would behave this way, but when they themselves were children, they did not.

Fifteen years later, Perloff (1999) found that while there was enough evidence to support the theory, third-person effects were not always consistent and have varying degrees of effectiveness depending on factors such as social distance and desirability of messages. When people perceive a media message to be more desirable and positive, they are less likely to show third-person effects and instead show first-person effects, the opposite phenomenon from the third-person effect. Researchers Innes and Zeitz observed first-person effects in 1988 when participants in an experiment showed that they perceived themselves to be more perceptive to a public service announcement. Additionally, people are more likely to believe the existence in third-person effects in people they perceive to have a greater social distance from them. The

farther away someone is socially, the greater the likelihood that someone will believe they are influenced by mass media messages.

Two major hypotheses make up third-person effect theory: perceptual hypothesis and behavioral hypothesis. The first, perceptual hypothesis, means that individuals believe that media messages impact others more than themselves. This hypothesis has received more support than the behavioral hypothesis, which states that the third-person effect influences people to take certain actions. In particular, as brought up by Davison, it may motivate people to support censorship of negative content such as pornography or violence to prevent those who they perceive as more vulnerable from being exposed to the content.

Researchers have studied third-person effects in a wide range of communication subjects, from entertainment to advertising to political communication. According to Connors (2005), third-person effects have been studied mostly in the context of undesirable media messages. One realm of mass media that third-person effects has shed light on is advertising. People tend to see advertising as a negative influence and do not see themselves as being susceptible to advertising messages, because they see themselves as “rational consumers” (Connors, 2005, p. 6). With political communication, the behavioral hypothesis comes more into play: people who believe others are more susceptible to the influences of political campaigns and advertisements may be more likely to support censorship and monitoring of this content. (Connors, 2005, p. 8).

Additionally, the third-person effect has been used frequently to examine the perception of effects of violence on television and other media. Individuals generally are more likely to believe that certain types of people—specifically children and marginalized social groups—are more susceptible to violence than themselves (Scharrer, 2002). Respondents in one study believed that people who they perceived to have a greater social distance from them would be

more susceptible to television violence. However, the study also found that individuals who enjoyed violent television saw themselves being less affected by the violence than others. (Hoffner et al., 2001). Similarly, respondents in another study indicated that they believed the effects of violent rap music lyrics were greater in other people than themselves.

With the rise of the internet, researchers began studying third-person effects in an online context, frequently with issues relating to online pornographic content. Individuals are more likely to believe they will not be as negatively impacted as others by internet pornography, in comparison to other forms of pornography (Chen, Wu & Atkins, 2015). Lo & Wei (2002) identify gender as a significant factor in the relationship between third-person effect and perceptions of online pornography; women are more likely to see men as being negatively affected by internet pornography than other women.

One study even verified an extension of the third-party effect called the “web third-person effect” (Antonopoulos et al, 2015). Several factors predict the degree to which individuals perceive online media having greater influence on others than themselves, such as the number of users online on a website, the number of users who have read the online content, and age.

These studies, along with many others, have broadened communication researchers’ understanding of media influence in many areas. Among many fields, the findings have been relatively consistent, showing that most people do tend to believe they are not as susceptible to media messages as others. This is especially relevant today with the phenomenon of “fake news” becoming more salient with people believing that while they themselves can discern which news is true or false, while others (those who disagree with them) less competent in doing so.

There are several limitations to third-person effect theory. First, researchers have not yet been able to explain exactly why people believe the perception that they are less susceptible to media messages than other people. Also, while third-person effects can influence behaviors, the theory does not explain in what ways third-person effects can cause people to take action. Researchers have conducted fewer studies on the behavioral outcome of third-person effects than the perceptual outcomes (Baek, 2017, p. 82). There are inconsistencies in the way different studies measure factors relating to behavioral implications of third-person effect. Additionally, many people simply do not show a third-person effect in response to media messages; third-person effect is not always present.

Studies have presented the possibility that third-person effects have come about as a result of the research conditions. Researchers cannot measure people's genuine, natural response to receiving media messages and cannot always be completely sure they truly perceive themselves to be less affected by media messages than others.

I did not use third-party effects theory in my professional project, which was a strategic communication plan for a nonprofit organization. However, I am interested in health and science communication, and in my research, I have found that third-party effects can be useful when studying people's perception of health-related media and information, particularly in an online setting.

Stavrositu and Kim (2014) found that social media metrics (the number of shares and comments) can change people's perceptions of online health content. Through the third-person effect, social media metrics can influence behavioral intentions. Individuals perceive online health content with lower levels of social media metrics to have a greater impact on others than

themselves. The presence of the third-person effect led to people being less willing to take preventive steps against health issues.

Another study examined people's perception of media related to avian flu and found that respondents tended to believe that other people were more influenced by news about avian flu than they themselves were. Because getting avian flu is unpleasant and undesirable, people were less likely to believe that anything to do with would happen to them. One positive finding from this study was that exposure to news about avian flu minimized the mental gap between themselves and others. Third-person effects can hinder people taking action, but when this narrowing of the gap between self and other occurred by increasing the knowledge about avian flu news, respondents were more likely to take action, such as information-seeking and looking up Tamiflu. (Wei, Lo & Lu, 2008)

Researchers have also studied the relationship between mental health in media and third-person effect. Diefenbach & West (2007) found that people think the negative portrayals of mental illness impact others more than themselves, despite the fact that television portrayals of mentally ill people as violent criminals causes people to not want to live near mentally ill people. In this study, the respondents were partially accurate in their assessment that portrayals of mentally ill affect people's attitudes and behaviors in real life towards mentally ill people.

Health and science communication professionals should be aware of third-person effects and how it can impact individuals' perception of media and potentially their behaviors. In the case with the mental health portrayals, the researchers suggest that broadcasters practice responsible and accurate portrayals of mental illness.

Future research focusing on the relationship between third-person effect and health communication should focus on behavioral outcomes, as it is not as studied as the perceptual

effects and also because behavioral outcomes can have real-world implications on people's health. Some of the studies measured behavioral intention but not behavior. Additionally, many studies that examine the relationship between third-person effect and health information and communication utilize surveys. In order to gather more detailed information on the subject, researchers should conduct more experiments and focus groups.

Researchers have found enough evidence supporting that, in some capacity, the third-person effect theory is prominent when observing people's perception of how media affects themselves and others. Of the two hypotheses, the perceptual hypothesis is more studied and better supported than the behavioral hypothesis. There are several limitations to third-party effect which warrants more research on the theory. The theory has been explored in a variety of communication fields, and researchers have learned that when third-person effect is present, it can potentially lead them to action such as supporting censorship to protect those people view as more vulnerable.

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