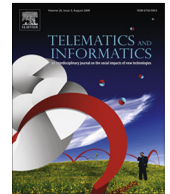




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## Third person effect and Internet pornography in China

Hongliang Chen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Yue Wu<sup>b</sup>, David J. Atkin<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, United States<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The current study contributes to the examination of third-person effects in the context of Internet pornography in China. Drawing from third-person effect theory, this study investigates what factors determine the self-others perceptual discrepancy in estimations of Internet pornography influences. Using data from a 2014 online survey ( $N = 533$ ) conducted in China, study results indicated a significant difference between the perceived effects on self and others. Second, the study confirmed the theoretical linkage between perceived effects on others and respondent support for censorship of pornography. Third, study results revealed that the self-others perceptual gap was influenced by social distance between self and others, perceived feminism and perceived sexual conservatism.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the web opens a window for people to search for information and entertainment, online platforms have greatly increased public access to pornography (e.g., Lee and Tamborini, 2005). Internet pornography refers to pornographic materials distributed on the Internet, predominantly via websites, peer-to-peer file sharing, or discussion forums. These sexual materials account for a large proportion of circulated Internet flow (Wu, 2009; Liang and Lu, 2012; O'Donnell and Milner, 2007). Unlike the traditional pornography obtained from rentals, magazines and videotapes—which require effort and cost to purchase—pornographic videos can be downloaded within seconds owing to the high-speed Internet. The key concern with this modality involves the lack of a major gatekeeper governing the circulation of pornography. Compared to other types of pornography, Internet materials have the potential to reach a larger audience and be more detrimental to society (Zhao and Cai, 2008).

Research suggests that growth in the online pornographic video and sex trades is associated with increasing rates of sexual crime, such as child pornography, sexual abuse and family violence (Slayden, 2010; Leth, 2005; Procida and Simon, 2003; Jasper, 2009). Other work finds that the proliferation of Internet pornography is associated with a drastic decline in sexual violence in the U.S., a finding that “casts doubt on widely-accepted government findings on the causal connection between pornography and criminality and suggests that one impact of porn may be positive” (D’Amato, 2006, p. 1).

Unlike Western democratic nations—where the distribution of sexual materials is protected by freedom of expression laws and commercial interests—in China, the distribution of pornographic materials is illegal (Lo et al., 2013). A content analysis of the official Communist party’s People’s Daily newspaper found that asceticism—a combination of revolutionary ideology and Chinese traditional culture—represented the core value when the Communist Party of China first governed the country in 1949; the influence of this secular culture peaked during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 860 634 8677.

E-mail addresses: [hongliang.chen@tamu.edu](mailto:hongliang.chen@tamu.edu) (H. Chen), [yue.wu@uconn.edu](mailto:yue.wu@uconn.edu) (Y. Wu), [david.atkin@uconn.edu](mailto:david.atkin@uconn.edu) (D.J. Atkin).

After the policy of Reform and Opening up was issued in 1976, a more tolerant atmosphere surrounding the subject of sex emerged. The three decades following 1949 saw no public access to pornographic materials. However, since the 1980s, the battles between pro- and anti-pornography forces have persisted. Scholars began to realize the need to balance these interests and even considered implementing a content ratings system (Li, 2014). Nonetheless, the dissemination of pornographic material online remains illegal in China. From the government's perspective, pornographic material has a deleterious effect on people's physical and mental health, and worse yet, will corrupt social morals (Reuters, 2014).

Technologically speaking, pornography has been censored in two ways. First, via the implementation of a technological regime known as the Great Firewall of China (GFW), the government has blocked people's access to websites involving pornographic video scenes. Second, online policemen limit user's posting of sensitive words relating to banned materials (King et al., 2013; Mou et al., 2013a,b, 2014). The Chinese government has also utilized a campaign-style anti-pornography strategy to block Internet pornography. In the three rounds of government campaigns (2004, 2007, and 2009), different forms of pornography such as adult fiction, erotic pictures, and videos have been targeted and removed; a large number of porn producers were sent to jail and numerous websites were suspended (Liang and Lu, 2012).

Although most third-person effect (TPE) research on pornography addresses Western contexts and Asian countries such as Singapore (e.g., Wu and Koo, 2001), very little empirical work addresses these dynamics in China. Almost all overseas adult websites have been blocked and people who set up websites containing "harmful" information received prison sentences in successive "Cleaning Up the Web" initiatives (Liang and Lu, 2012). On the other hand, Japanese adult video idols were allowed to endorse online games and sex toys, and Chinese authorities also allowed the release of less sexually explicit materials on commercial websites (Levin, 2013).

To fill this research void, the present study investigates predictors of Chinese perceptions of Internet pornography, using TPE theory. We focus, in particular, on the impact of social distance, perceived sex knowledge, perceived feminism, perceived sexual conservatism, perceived collectivism and frequency of pornography exposure on third-person judgments. These TPE perceptual dynamics are further examined in relation to pro-censorship behaviors.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. Third person effect

Davison (1983) first proposed the TPE hypothesis to explicate how people perceive the media's influence to be greater on others than it is one's self. The gaps between self and others perception were found to be significant in a variety of contexts, such as political news, violent media content, video games and the advertisements (Price et al., 1997; Innes and Zeitz, 1988; Scharrer and Leone, 2006; Thorson and Coyle, 1984; Henrikson and Flora, 1999). However, very few studies address the cognitive process of third-person judgments (Boyle et al., 2008). In the Chinese context, studies conducted in Shanghai and Hong Kong (Lo et al., 2013) found that Chinese college students perceive greater negative effects of pornography on others than oneself. The current study explores the validity of this TPE perceptual component in the greater Chinese college student population, utilizing a wider range of locales than past work.

These perceptual elements are joined by behavioral components of TPE. This proposition argues that, when people perceive others as more vulnerable to potentially harmful information, they tend to support restrictions on the circulation of this negative information (Davison 1983; Lo and Paddon, 2001). The literature provides robust support for the relationship between this biased perception and behavioral components, indicating that the greater the perceived negative impact, the greater the motivation to support censorship (Gunther, 1995; Wu and Koo, 2001; Rojas et al., 1997; Lambe and Shah, 1999; Youn et al., 2000).

We also aim to assess the association between perceptual and behavioral components of TPE, which holds that the discrepancy between self-others perceptions leads one to support restrictions on certain media contents, especially those featuring undesirable information (Andsager and White, 2009; Perloff, 1999). Predicting the agreement on censorship by the self-others perceptual gap can be problematic, however. This is because TPE fails to differentiate between those who hold perceptions of a powerful influence on both self and others and those who perceive the influence to be low on both self and others (Lo et al., 2013).

A raft of empirical work underscores the utility of predicting support on censorship based on measures of perceived effects on others (Lo and Wei, 2002; Salwen and Driscoll, 1997). In this study, we use the perceived effects on others to predict the pro-censorship attitudes. We focus on two means of support: (1) general support for censorship, and (2) support for a ratings system governing Internet pornography, one that restricts vulnerable populations from accessing Internet pornography. More formally, based on the TPE dynamic outlined above, we posit that:

**H1.** Participants will judge Internet pornography to have greater negative impact on others than on one's self.

**H2a.** The perceived negative effects of Internet pornography on others is positively related with general support for such censorship.

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