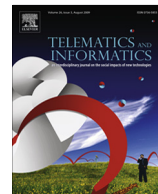




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The third-person effect on Facebook: The significance of perceived proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on an online survey of 503 participants who constitute a representative sample of Facebook users in Israel. The survey, based on eight pairs of items concerning potential Facebook risks, was used to explore the third-person effect on Facebook and Facebook users' sense of their own and of other users' vulnerability to these risks. It was found that participants believed that others were more vulnerable than themselves with respect to all eight Facebook risks. Nonetheless, when controlling for Facebook literacy, this main effect was eliminated, and only the interaction effect between the third-party effect and perceived Facebook literacy remained.

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1. Literature review

1.1. The third-party effect and the significance of perceived knowledge

Davison's (1983) third-party effect hypothesis maintains that people who are exposed to persuasive media messages believe that these messages have a greater impact on others than on themselves. While extensive support has been found for the third-person effect in mass media, it has only recently become a topic of research on Facebook, which is a source of attraction for hundreds of millions of Internet users throughout the world and a key arena for forging and maintaining social ties, consuming information, and remaining apprised of events in one's private environment and in the public sphere. Facebook use does, however, subject users to potential risks, including the risk that the information one uploads may be used in unintended contexts, others may upload negative content about oneself, the risk that one's Facebook account may be hacked and used for objectionable purposes, and the risk that problematic information about oneself may be discovered by current coworkers or future employers. The paper studies the existence of a third-person effect on Facebook, in reference to the potential risks derived from Facebook use which were mentioned above.

The third-person effect has gained extensive empirical support in the past two decades and has been the topic of hundreds of papers and several meta-analyses (e.g., Sun et al., 2008) that distinguished between the perceptual and behavioral components of the effect. The perceptual component refers to a biased perception of media effects, as a result of which people tend to attribute to media messages a greater impact on others than on themselves. The behavioral component reflects the anticipation that people will act on the basis of such perceived media effects (Perloff, 2002), such as supporting censorship of media contents in view of the increased assessment of their perceived impact on others (Gunther, 1995; McLeod et al., 1997; Salwen, 1998).

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Several explanations have been offered for the third-party effect, focusing on ego-enhancement (Zhang and Daugherty, 2009). Since people possess much more information about themselves than about others, they tend to develop a sense of self-esteem and control in which they perceive themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable as not to be influenced by media messages that may influence others, and more qualified than others and therefore less vulnerable to the impact of undesirable media messages (Perloff, 2002; Zhang and Daugherty, 2009; Zhong, 2009).

Furthermore, the perception that others are more vulnerable to undesirable media messages may be related to an optimism bias, or people's tendency to subscribe to unrealistic beliefs and perceptions regarding negative events, which lead them to believe that they are less at risk than others of experiencing negative events (Li, 2008; Perloff, 2002; Zhao and Cai, 2008).

Several factors may influence the existence and intensity of the third-person effect, including the *type of content* to which people are exposed. For example, exposure to undesirable media content may lead to a third-party effect while desirable media messages may not have the same impact (Gunther and Mundy, 1993). In addition to the *presumed social desirability* of the persuasive message, the third-person effect may also be influenced by the *social distance* between the individual and target others, and the *attributes ascribed to other individuals and groups*, such as the attribution of socio-demographic or psychological features that are considered vulnerable to the effect of media messages (Perloff, 2002; Sun et al., 2008).

Additional variables are related to the *individual exposed to the media message*. For example, within the literature on comparative optimism (Baek et al., 2013) perceived risk of privacy invasion to oneself or others may be addressed on three levels: cognition, personality, and previous experience in dealing with this specific risk. Since comparative optimism is based on the difference between perceived personal risk and the perceived risk to others, factors related to cognition, personality and experience can influence perceptions of risks to self and others, and this impact the magnitude of the third-person effect.

In this context, knowledge and perceived knowledge may also affect the magnitude of the third-person effect (Perloff, 1999), where "knowledge" is defined as possession of information or expertise on topics that are the subject of undesirable media messages (Price and Tewksbury, 1996). Price and Tewksbury's study showed that *general knowledge* that is not directly related to the issue in question increases the third-person effect. Other studies, however, have shown that what influences the magnitude of the effect is actually *self-perceived knowledge*, or the belief that one has more knowledge, proficiency, or expertise in a specific field (Driscoll and Salwen, 1997; Lasorsa, 1989), which may be the result of familiarity or prior experience. The perception of a person who is knowledgeable on the issue in question may cause him to believe that he is less vulnerable to the effects of the persuasive message, in contrast to others, who are more vulnerable (Driscoll and Salwen, 1997; Lasorsa, 1989).

It was also found that people who have adequate knowledge about a specific topic demonstrate a greater sense of perceived control and comparative optimism (Helweg-Larsen and Shepperd, 2001). For example, Internet users with knowledge or high proficiency in online media use have better knowledge about protecting their privacy and personal information by eliminating traces of their Internet use by deleting cookies or modifying social media privacy settings (Debatin et al., 2009). Such knowledge can also translate to behavior. Park (2011) studied the connection between digital literacy (particularly, familiarity with the technical aspects of the Internet, awareness of organizational practices, and understanding of current privacy policies) and openness to experiences, and engagement in Internet-related activities. The findings indicate that users' knowledge predicts behaviors related to privacy control. Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) also found that Internet use proficiency – the ability to use the Internet effectively and efficiently – is related to various categories of online behavior, ranging from a propensity to join certain communities such as Twitter, to involvement in the creation of Internet content (Correa, 2010; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Hargittai and Litt, 2011; Wasserman and Richmond-Abbott, 2005). It can therefore be assumed that Internet proficiency, and specifically proficiency in Facebook use, is connected to individuals' sense of control and optimism bias, and will consequently lead to a third-person effect.

1.2. The third-person effect on the internet

Third-person effect studies have long focused on mass media, although studies from the past decade demonstrate that this effect is also common on the Internet. Lee and Tamborini (2005), for example, found evidence of a third-person effect concerning exposure to online pornographic content, although Internet self-efficacy had no impact on the effect or its magnitude. Another study of the third-person effect related to exposure to online pornographic content found that women tended to believe that online pornography has a greater impact on men than on other women, and were willing to support restrictions on online pornographic content (Lo and Wei, 2002). Computer use had no impact on the effect or its magnitude in this study either (for other studies on the third-person effect related to online pornographic content, see Wu and Koo, 2001; Zhao and Cai, 2008).

Studies on the third-person effect in online auctions found that Internet users attribute greater risks of purchasing illegal products in online auctions, including pirated software, to other adults and teenagers than to themselves (Yang, 2005). It was also found that duration (measured in years) and frequency of Internet use had an impact on the magnitude of the third-person effect. A third-person effect was also found in the area of addiction to online games, and the magnitude of the effect was found to be related to Internet efficacy, such that the more efficacious individuals considered themselves, the greater their concerns for others than for themselves (Zhong, 2009). Computer proficiency, computer knowledge, and perceived self-defense skills were significant predictors of optimism bias with respect to threats of viruses, hacking, identity theft, and theft of credit details, privacy intrusion, and online attacks (Li, 2008).

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