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How Much Do They Think It Affects Them and Whom Do They Believe?: Comparing the Third-Person Effect and Credibility of Blogs and Traditional Media

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How Much Do They Think It Affects Them and Whom Do They Believe?: Comparing the Third-Person Effect and Credibility of Blogs and Traditional Media

Stephen A. Banning & Kaye D. Sweetser

Using an experimental design, this study investigated third-person effect and media credibility as a result of media attribution. Specifically, we compared third-person effect across four media sources: personal blogs, media blogs, online news, and print newspaper. Overall, participants exhibited third-person effects equally across the mediums. Third-person effect regressed with credibility.

Keywords: Attribution Theory; Blogs; Credibility; Internet; New Media; Third-Person Effect

Today, the public has a variety of choices when seeking information. One can select broadcast or print media or go online. Once online, the choices are even greater: one can select news from a trusted source rooted in traditional journalism, or go to independent media producers, or "gatewatchers," who diligently watch the gatekeepers and provide instant punditry ad nauseam. In particular, blogs have been watched with great interest by the media and are said to be an influential source for news and information (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Dutton & Shepherd, 2006; Pew Internet and American Life, 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

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As an increased number of traditional media organizations set up shop online, Internet news and information has gained a degree of credibility. While one ''can't believe everything you read on the Internet,'' the branding of online content with a trusted source name (such as *New York Times* or CNN) can increase credibility of content found online. In an effort to keep up with information trends, some news organizations have found themselves competing with sources even more non-traditional than those once labeled such. That is, the emergence of blogs as a citizen journalist device has prompted some news organizations to adopt this commentary, ''diary-like'' approach to news and integrate blogs in their online offerings (Gillmor, 2004).

Rationale

With alternative sources for news and public affairs information growing, there have been many claims about the credibility and impact of particular information sources (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Kurtz, 2003). Such claims have led way to the classic sentiment that while the discerning mind can tell the difference between quality news and pseudo-news, ''others'' are incapable of making such determinations. Scholars call this the ''third-person effect'' or ''third-person perception,'' where one trusts one's own ability to evaluate media products, but is concerned that others are not so capable.

Most recently, third-person effect studies have started appearing in non-communication journals, suggesting more widespread application, knowledge, and interest in the phenomenon (DeLorme, Huh, & Reid, 2007; Diefenbach & West, 2007; Huh, Delorme, & Reid, 2006; Lewis, Watson, & Tay, 2007; Robinson & Umphery, 2006; Yang, 2005). The third-person effect in relation to political behavior is also gaining interest in regard to censorship and likelihood to vote (Banning, 2006; Price & Stroud, 2007).

Perloff (1993) suggests that that third-person effect may be situational. As such, researchers must continue to investigate mediating factors such as message topic and medium through which the message is received. A growing number of people cite blogs and other online content-delivery sources (e.g., sites offering RSS) as a source for political news and information (Pew Internet & American Life, 2005), and so it becomes increasingly important for researchers to investigate the medium and how it differs. Indeed, Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006) recently reported that while only a fraction of Internet users write blog posts, 39% of those online are reading blogs. The report notes that 51% of bloggers cite ''to influence the way other people think'' as a reason for writing blog posts. Furthermore, Johnson and Kaye (2004, p. 622) assert that blog ''influence may exceed their readership,'' suggesting a rich area for groundbreaking third-person effect research.

Blogs appear to be truly expanding the ideological range of news and opening new democratic spaces in the media system. As such, it would seem they would have to be seen as somewhat credible. At the same time, these are untested assumptions based on prima facie evidence. Even more importantly, if blogs can have an impact on

democracy, a strong case can be made to study the theoretical engines that drive blog communication.

It is also important to know if people think others are more influenced by blogs than themselves because the third-person perception has been shown to correlate with a desire to censor others' speech in order to protect them (Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). One body of research suggests that the higher the third-person perception, the greater the likelihood that someone will feel the need to censor. The logic goes something like this: "I am not influenced by this information, but others are. We should censor this to protect those poor gullible fools." Therefore, research on the third-person perception and blogs has implications for freedom of speech on the Web. As more Web content comes under scrutiny from consumer and government groups, understanding the fabric of opinion formation through the use of blogs becomes critical.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the third-person effect as a result of source attribution. Specifically, this study is a post-test-only experiment comparing third-person effect across four media sources. This study determined if increasingly popular, non-traditional news sources, such as blogs, resulted in different levels of third-person effect. In doing so, this study investigated type of blog (personal or media-run) to test if it is the medium or the messenger that makes a difference.

Literature Review

This study is guided by third-person effect scholarship, with an emphasis on media credibility and social distance.

Third-Person Effect
Third-person effect "predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others" (Davison, 1983, p. 3). In essence, third-person effect asserts that people believe that the media has a greater impact on others than it has on themselves. There have been two decades of research finding that persuasive communication and media products are reported as having a greater impact on others than on the self. While some have criticized third-person effect research, a meta-analysis of 32 published and unpublished studies found moderate support for the phenomenon (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000).

Several concepts underpin the third-person effect. Concepts pertaining to this study are pluralistic ignorance, ego involvement, and social distance.

Pluralistic ignorance
Pluralistic ignorance is a phenomenon that occurs when a person believes others in society are more different from themselves than is actually the case. Specifically,

people believe that others know less than they do (Mutz, 1989). For instance, many people tend to believe they are intelligent drivers and all others on the road are, for some reason, less intelligent than they are.

Ego involvement

An early third-person effect study investigated ego involvement as a motivation for the third-person effect (Perloff, 1989). Perloff's definition of ego involvement relates to the subject's preexisting interest in the topic of the media message. He found participants who had a strong political ''partisan'' position tended to have a higher third-person effect in regard to political messages, while subjects with a neutral political position tended to have less of a third-person effect.

Social distance

Many third-person effect studies base findings on the social distance corollary (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988). That is, when deciding the impact a particular message will have on someone else, the person questioned will determine how similar ''the other'' is to that person by contrasting the self with the target ''other.'' The further social distance (less likeness) the ''other'' has, the greater the third-person effect. Social distance can be measured geographically in how far away the ''other'' is (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997), psychologically in how well known the ''other'' is (Brosius & Engel, 1996), and the group size associated with the ''other'' (Tewksbury, 2002). In all of these cases, people who are more distant from the self are assigned a higher level of effect (Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden, 2005).

Social distance recently has been evaluated in terms of in-groups and out-groups, in keeping with identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985). In-groups are seen as likely to behave like one's self, while the socially distant out-groups are seen as likely to act differently than one's self. This has been researched in relation to both race and politics (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Meirick, 2004; Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002; Scharrer, 2002). The authors of this study extended the trend of evaluating social distance in terms of media type. As mentioned previously, blogs have been identified as a close medium, as compared to traditional media, which has been identified as more distant.

Mediating influences

Perloff (1993) discussed conditions that mediate the third-person effect, such as message topic and demographics. For example, Willnat (1996) reported that people with higher levels of education were more likely to believe that the mass media influenced others more than themselves. Additionally, there is evidence in third-person effect research that pro-social messages have a higher degree of influence on the self (i.e., first-person effect, reverse third-person effect), whereas socially undesirable messages are more influential on ''others'' (David, Liu, & Myser, 2004).

The medium through which one experiences a message can play a role in third-person effect (Paul et al., 2000). This study, which is aimed at examining the differences between an increasingly popular non-traditional medium, would not be complete without reviewing literature in this area. Previous studies note that newspaper reading was associated with a higher degree of third-person effect than television news (Salwen, 1998). Salwen argued that print readers saw themselves as smarter than television viewers, thereby increasing the third-person effect that the print reader would not be influenced by mediated messages but (presumably less-smart) others would. Beyond these single study and anecdotal examples, a meta-analysis of third-person effect studies found no significant differences among the media attributed with disseminating messages (Paul et al., 2000).

Media credibility

The growing popularity of the Internet as an information source has sparked a new interest in media credibility. Indeed, credibility was found to have an interaction effect in regard to third-person effect (Gunther, 1991). For instance, people reported a higher instance of third-person effect asserting that the "other" would be more influenced by non-credible sources like the tabloid *National Enquirer* than the self (Gunther, 1991).

While the public reports overall skepticism about the credibility of media, they do assign different levels of credibility to each medium (Kiousis, 2001). This section discusses relevant research regarding media credibility among traditional and non-traditional sources.

Noting the emergence of blogs as a popular source for information and entertainment, scholars have begun to study the tool itself. Initially, studies were descriptive (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004) and focused on the personal, diary-like blog. However, since the 2004 U.S. presidential election and the increased use of this medium for political information in making electoral decisions, blogs have moved away from being mere diaries to being valuable sources of commentary. This is evidenced by the number of people who say they read blogs for political information (Pew Internet and American Life, 2005) and the number of news organizations embracing the blog format dispatched from their own traditional media organization Web sites.

These blog studies, while scant compared to the number of other online media investigations, are rapidly growing, and blog inquiry can now be categorized by the purpose/use of the blog at hand. For example, a number of studies look at personal blogs, which most commonly resemble the traditional diary (Herring et al., 2004; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl, & Sapp, 2006). These studies investigate the personal communication, self-presentation/disclosure, and motivations for blogging. Separate from these personal blogs is a more professional or issue-orientated blog, sometimes called knowledge blogs (Herring et al., 2004). Blogs such as these might be industry experts blogging on the side about trends, politically interested provided commentary

on the issues of the day, blogs used during crises or war to communicate with an extended network, or those maintained by organizations blogging on behalf of the company (see Bichard, 2006; Herring et al., 2004; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Thelwall & Stuart, 2007; Trammell, 2006; Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006).

As blogging activity has increased, a hierarchy based on readership and popularity of blogs has developed among the personal publishers, creating an ''A List'' blog (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). These blogs are among the most read and linked to blogs on the Internet, and noted among the traditional press to be agenda-setters (Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Kurtz, 2003). This assertion is underscored by the number of public relations practitioners who see blogs as an important trend not to be ignored (Porter, Sweetser, Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007) and by the number of journalists who report conferring blogs to break scandals and search for source or story ideas (Euro RSCG Magnet, 2005).

Early studies found newspapers credible but consistently rated behind television (Abel & Wirth, 1977). More recent studies have noted that newspaper credibility has grown, closing the gap between the two forms of media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Kiousis (2001) reported that newspapers surpassed the credibility reported for TV news, claiming the title for ''most credible media source.''

In an early study measuring Internet credibility, Johnson and Kaye (1998) found the medium credible—even more so than print media. Sundar (1998) conducted an experiment and found that the use of traditional journalistic writing styles (e.g., use of quotes) could increase the credibility rating for online news sources. These findings indicate that the message and its construction indeed have a role in determining credibility, and that the medium alone is not the determining factor.

In regards to blogs, Johnson and Kaye (2004) cite the common arguments defacing blog credibility as those faced by early online news sites: anyone can create one, there is no responsibility for content, information can be posted in an anonymous manner, and posters may not be bound by journalistic ethics. Even so, the researchers assert that the peer-review process in blogging increases any credibility lost through the aforementioned problems. That is, others will read a blog post and contribute to the discussion to provide corrections if such are needed. In their study of the credibility of personal blogs (blogs not run by media organizations), the researchers found that almost all blog readers thought blogs were *moderately* to *very credible* (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). These blog readers also rated blogs more credible than any other online news source (e.g., online cable TV news, online news magazines, online radio news) and even traditional media sources (e.g., broadcast TV news, newspapers, news magazines, and talk radio). Such findings cannot be generalized to all media consumers, but they do lead to questions regarding credibility of various media sources.

In a study comparing the credibility of media based on medium, Kiousis found the rank order of credibility among the general public positioned newspapers as the most credible source of information, followed by online news and then television news (Kiousis, 2001). As such, television news was left out of this study, and the relationship between online news and newspapers was further examined.

Based on the literature discussed above, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1: Traditional news formats (online and print newspaper) will have a greater third-person effect than blogs (personal and media) because social distance predicts it.

H2: Media blogs will have a greater third-person effect than personal blogs because social distance predicts it.

H3: Online news will have a greater third-person effect than personal blogs because social distance predicts it.

H4: Online news will have greater third-person effect than print newspapers because it is viewed as a less credible attribution source.

The following research questions are asked:

R1: What is the relationship between blogs (personal and media) and more traditional news formats (online and print newspaper) as sources in regards to third-person effect?

R2: What is the relationship between personal blogs and media blogs in regards to third-person effect?

R3: What is the relationship between media blogs and online news in regards to third-person effect?

R4: What is the relationship between online news and print newspapers in regards to third-person effect?

Methods

This study used a post-test-only survey to measure third-person effects as a result of media attribution source. Participants (n = 145) were recruited from undergraduate communication courses at a large Southern university and received extra credit as an incentive. The study received human subjects review board approval. Because this population was used in the study, researchers took care in selecting stimuli that would be relevant to the participants in order to properly test third-person effect and the impact of media attribution.

The topics of the articles were chosen in line with previous third-person effect studies. Past studies have used a wide variety of stimuli ranging from rap music (McLeod & Eveland, 1997) to television violence (Hoffner, Plotkin, Buchanan, Anderson, Kamigaki, Hubbs, Kowalczyk, Silberg, & Pastorek, 2001). Two issues were chosen because of their perceived interest to students: the draft and charity. The draft is very relevant to college students in the draft age range, and charity events are popular on college campuses.

The question of whether an informational item, such as a charity drive story, would have a greater effect on someone else if it appeared in a personal blog than the *New York Times* can be likened to the following example:

Would you pay more attention to information that someone told you or something that you read in the *New York Times*?

Research shows that communication with personal contact is more likely to make a difference (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). In essence, the personal nature of the blog may break down the impersonal barrier between reporter and reader.

Participants completed a questionnaire asking basic demographic and media use questions, such as age, gender, and education level. Interest in national and international news was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very uninterested* to *very interested*. To test third person effect, two stories that were relevant to the sample in this study were constructed. Each participant read the same two stories; however, the source attributed with publishing the story was manipulated. Participants were randomly assigned to read two stories from different sources.

The headline for the first story read, "Local charity offers students opportunity to help tsunami recovery effort." This story discussed a campus organization raising money to assist tsunami victims in Southeast Asia and a "penny drive" that asked students to donate loose change to the charity. A campus address was provided to further localize the story. The second story was about reinstating a national military draft. This story discussed the call for local draft boards to fill vacant seats and a posting on a government Web site suggesting the draft could return.

Media sources attributed with publishing the story included a personal blog, a media-organization's blog, an online news source, or print newspaper. Data from the first two sources could later be combined to represent a "blog" source, and the latter two sources could be combined to represent a more "traditional media" source.

Each story was labeled as being from a single source. The personal blog source was explained as being "taken from a personal Weblog, or blog." Stories attributed to the media blog were described as being "taken from a Weblog, or blog, maintained by a news organization, like Fox News or ABC." In each case, subjects were given the following definition: "A blog is a frequently updated Web page with posts. Blogs have been compared to online diaries." Online news stories were described as being "taken from an online version of a newspaper, like NYTimes.com." Finally, print newspaper stories were described as being "taken from a newspaper."

Immediately after reading a story, participants were asked traditional third-person effect questions on a 10-point Likert scale. For example, participants indicated how likely the story was to affect themselves and the opinion of others in the United States. Additionally, questions gauged the likelihood of participants to give money (either donating to the charity or paying more taxes) or time (volunteering for charity, volunteering to help reduce need for draft). Based on the findings by Price and Tewksbury (1996), who determined that question order and contrast conditions (asking questions about self and others next to each other) did not influence results, this research posed all third-person effect questions on the same page.

Media credibility questions were also asked for each story. Items in the media credibility index were derived from previous research (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kiousis, 2001; Wanta, 1997). Participants were asked to rate the story on its factual nature, desire to make profits, invasion of privacy, interest in community, and trustworthiness. Specific questions were:

1. the story I just read is factual;
2. the story I just read is concerned about making profits;

3. the story I just read invades people's privacy;
4. the story I just read is concerned about the community's well being;
5. the story I just read cannot be trusted.

Media credibility was measured on a nine-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree.*

   Finally, story tone was rated on a nine-point Likert scale, as participants were asked how ''positive'' they would rate the story. Responses ranged from *not at all positive* to *very positive.*

Results

The average age for participants was 20.30 (*SD* = 2.04). The total N was 145 with 29 males (20%) and 116 females (80%).

Media Type

A one-way ANOVA was run on the third-person effect scores for the combined TPE scores of the personal and media blog-labeled articles and the combined TPE scores of the online news and newspaper-labeled articles. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics grouped by media type. Significance was not found [$F (1, 286) = .28, p = .60$], meaning there was no support for H1.

   A one-way ANOVA was run on the third-person effect scores on the four media attributions given to the two articles shown each of the study participants (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics related to this ANOVA). The result was not significant

Table 1   TPE Descriptive Statistics by Grouped Media Type

Media type	N	M	SD
Personal and media blog	146	.71	1.88
Online news and newspapers	142	.58	2.03
Total	288	.65	1.95

Table 2   TPE Descriptive Statistics by Media Type

Media type	N	M	SD
Personal blog	72	.68	2.05
Web blog	74	.73	1.72
Online news	71	.45	2.11
Newspaper	71	.72	1.94
Total	288	.65	1.95

[F (3, 284) = .32, p = .81]. There could be several reasons for this, besides the groups' variances being similar at the .05 alpha level. For instance, the effect size may be small, and the test may not be powerful enough to detect differences. A larger sample size might help in this area. Alternately, or in addition, the labeling of the articles may not have been prominent enough to register strongly with the participants. More prominent labeling could help in this area in future studies.

Finding no significance in the ANOVA means there is no support for H2, H3, and H4. This means there has been no support for a difference between TPE level for media blogs and personal blogs, TPE level for online news and personal blogs, and online news and print newspapers.

Credibility Index

Cronbach alphas were run on the five credibility questions for the each of the articles in the instrument, with the result that the Cronbach alpha for the first article was .65 while the Cronbach alpha for the second article was .54. These scores were consistent with those reported in previous studies. For example, Kiousis (2001) reported Cronbach alpha values for each medium tested in that study ranging between .50 (Internet) and .62 (newspaper and television). A correlation matrix of the current data indicated the second item in the scale had low correlations with other items in the scale in both sets of articles. The Cronbach alphas were run on the four credibility questions on both articles with the low correlating item removed, resulting in acceptable Cronbach alpha levels. With the four-item scale, the first set of articles received a Cronbach alpha of .70 while the second set of articles received a Cronbach alpha of .73.

To further explore H4, a regression run on the credibility scale and the third-person effect was run and found to be significant [R^2 = .14, F (1, 286) = 45.74, p = .0001], indicating a linear relationship between credibility and third-person effect. While the r value is not as strong as we might like, it is significant at the .05 level and reveals information not studied previously. However, a one-way ANOVA on credibility score indexes with the media attribution types (personal blog, media blog, online media, newspaper) as the factor did not result in significance [F (3, 286) = 1.57, p = .19], indicating there was no significant difference in credibility level among the four media attribution groups (see Table 3). Taken

Table 3 Credibility Index Descriptive Statistics by Media Type

Media type	N	M	SD
Personal blog	72	23.71	7.45
Web blog	74	23.39	7.40
Online news	72	23.87	7.00
Newspaper	72	25.76	7.08
Total	290	24.18	7.26

with the previous result, that credibility was linearly related to third-person effect, these results reinforce the previous finding that media attribution types (personal blog, media blog, online media, newspaper) are not a factor in third-person effect formation.

In order to test the relationship between third-person effect and likelihood to act, a regression was run between third-person effect and the results for the question "How likely would you be to sign a petition in support of the foundation described in this story?" The result was significant, indicating that an increase in the third-person effect was linearly associated with an increase in likelihood to act. This means the more people tended to believe others would be affected by the article, the more likely they were to be supportive of signing a petition.

Another regression lends support to this suggestion. The article's valance (positive or negative nature) as interpreted by the participants was regressed with third-person effect and significance was found. The finding that positively perceived messages affect the third-person effect is not new. However, the correlation between messages that are perceived positively tending to leave an impression of affecting the self more than others fits in with a motivation to affect change.

Discussion

Beyond the so-called cyperbole and exaggerated claims of blogs being a medium of increased personalization and thereby potentially influential medium (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), this study found that when it comes down to comparing blogs with more traditional media, there are no observable differences. That is, third-person effect is not mediated by source attribution, regardless of other factors such as social distance or credibility. Such findings, while surprising, are consistent with an earlier meta-analysis finding no significant differences based on medium source (Paul et al., 2000).

Even so, the failure to find a connection between third-person effect for media types (personal blogs, media blogs, online media and newspapers) was unexpected based on anecdotal findings (Willnat, 1996) and the integration of the social distance construct. If we believe personal blogs are a more personal medium than newspapers, one would expect social distance, a mitigating factor in the third-person effect, to boost third-person effect for socially distant media. Social distance did not play a factor, as the third-person effect levels of these personal blogs and newspapers were similar. Perhaps the public sees personal blogs and newspapers as similar news sources, equally socially distant. The similarity between traditional (online media and newspapers) and non-traditional media (personal blogs and media blogs) in the minds of the study participants was echoed in their perceptions of the media's credibility. No media type differed significantly according to credibility, indicating the participants did not see one type, such as newspapers, as more credible than another, such as personal blogs. This is interesting in that individual participant perceptions of credibility did vary in conjunction with the third-person effect, as a regression showed.

This suggests several things. First, the credibility of traditional news sources versus blogs should be looked at more closely. While Johnston and Kaye (2004) assert that blogs are "the most credible information source," such findings were obtained by asking people who read blogs rather than the general population. One could say it is surprising that a source such as a blog, which is highly personal, would not rate higher than a traditional newspaper in credibility. The fact that it does not suggests this area needs to be explored to understand the dimensions involved, such as what elements about each media type are rated high in credibility. Perhaps different elements of various media types balance each other out in terms of credibility. For instance, the highly personal nature of a blog might give a reader the feeling of being at the scene, but also make the reader feel the writer is likely to be biased. Conversely, the imprimatur of an article in a traditional media format might make the reader feel the article is less likely to be biased, but make them feel important areas have not been broached.

It is possible that different generations perceive media differently, a difference that would not be picked up in this study because of the college sample. However, while the data do not allow for an explanation for the lack of significance based on generational differences, they do provide exploratory building blocks. Future studies could compare audiences from different generations.

The most significant finding is that blogs achieved a credibility standing in line with traditional media. This suggests that a person with a computer and knowledge may be able to access the kind of credibility available previously just to traditional media.

While the freedom of the press has been said to be available only to those who could afford a press, the introduction of desktop publishing in the early 1990 s made paper and ink publishing available to those who could afford layout programs and basic knowledge of design. Personal publishing tools, like blogs, allow more people access to print and broadcast to an unlimited audience as only traditional media once could. Gillmor (2004), a noted journalist and commentator about the impact of technology on media, and others (e.g., Kurtz, 2003) argued that the introduction of blogs is further breaking down the walls of the gatekeeping media elite.

There are also implications of the public being too trusting of media sources such as particular blogs that may create a following of readers. The motives and training of such sources may be difficult or impossible to track, as may the factualness of the accounts.

The finding of a linear relationship between third-person effect and credibility in this study is as enigmatic as it is interesting. While it is interesting that the third-person effect increases as credibility decreases, this can be explained by the concept of perceived expertise (Lasorsa, 1989) or ego involvement (Perloff, 1989) on the part of the recipient. A person who perceives an article to be less credible may believe others are more likely to be affected because they perceive others as more gullible and themselves as less susceptible. This reinforces the concept of pluralistic ignorance, which suggests that others are less intelligent. Pluralistic ignorance has long been considered a foundational concept of the third-person effect.

The linear relationship between third-person effect and credibility presents a less clear view of how the third-person effect interacts with media type. Results here suggest they do not. It should be noted that this failure to find a difference in attribution goes against previous findings that suggest attribution does make a difference (Gunther, 1991). Gunther's study compared articles that were the same but had attributions of a tabloid newspaper versus the *New York Times*. The *New York Times*-attributed articles resulted in higher credibility ratings and lower third-person effect indexes, so the conclusion was drawn that higher credibility resulted in a decreased third-person effect. Simple manipulation of the attribution from tabloid to serious journalistic source seemed to make all the difference. However, in this study, the manipulation of four media types did not produce a difference in level of third-person effect. Despite the differences, the articles seemed to have similar third-person effect sizes across media types. However, something was at work to produce a lower third-person effect in relation to increased credibility. The cause is not evident, but it is not media type. Future research could delve into what caused this alignment of credibility with third-person effect, as it calls into question previous findings.

In regard to the behavior finding, the catalyst may be a feeling by some that because others are not going to be affected by the story, it is up to them to take action. Similarly, those who felt a lower level of third-person effect may have felt less of a need to participate because they assumed the story would affect others and that others would act. In this scenario, the presence of a personal belief that individual contribution would make a difference may have been the motivating factor. Perhaps the third-person effect factors into motivation in that people are less likely to act positively if they feel others are doing it for them. If this is true, the third-person effect may be key in helping raise personal responsibility in a public works campaign.

Regarding the article's valance, this level of the third-person effect behavioral concept adds to previous theory in that it addresses how positive messages, such as those embedded by public relations practitioners, intersect with the third-person effect. Previous third-person effect behavioral focus has been almost exclusively on negative stimuli, conjuring up feelings of censorship.

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