

On Medium Theory and the Third Person Effect

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Abstract

Although in the last three decades many works have been devoted to the study of Davison's (1983) Third-Person Effect (TPE) for a great variety of media contents, as far as we know none of them has explored the presumed impact of media type on the magnitude of the effect. The objective of this study is to compare the magnitude of the TPE for news, advertising, violence and pornography on TV and the Internet, and its behavioral consequences for controversial contents. The study shows that media type has an impact on the TPE for news, advertising and pornography, but not for violent content. On the contrary, it shows that there is not a clear relationship between media type and people's willingness to support the limitation of controversial contents, such as violence and pornography.

Keywords: third-person effect, medium theory, violence, pornography, Internet, television, censorship

Introduction

Scholars have been questioning the hegemony of contents on media effects, suggesting, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) did, that the medium has also its influence. From this point of view, the focus on the content of a message does not recognize the effects of the means through which it is made available to the audience. Cantril and Allport's (1935) were the pioneers of the media comparison experiments, who considered media type as a moderating variable in the process of influence of messages. Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet (1948) also compared the influence of radio and newspapers in presidential campaigns, concluding that radio played a stronger role than newspaper. This kind of research has been continued by other authors that have compared the effects of print versus network news (McClure & Patterson 1976), or radio versus television (Katz, Adoni, & Parness 1977; DeFleur, Davenport, Cronin, & DeFleur 1992). In his analysis of agenda-setting, Wanta (1997) concluded that television news had more immediate effects on public opinion, but the effects of print media appeared to have more duration. Other works (Tewksbury & Althaus 2000; Eveland & Dunwoody 2002) have compared the effects of the same information content (online vs. traditional print), concluding that learning was greater in traditional newspapers; similarly, Eveland, Seo & Marton (2002) found several differences in learning across media conditions (television, print and the Internet).

Beyond information and news, other disciplines like marketing studies have also analysed the variance in the processing of information by customers in ads across different media platforms (Buchholz, & Smith

1991). Dijkstra, Buijtelts & van Raaij (2005) have argued that media planners should focus not only on the minimization of the costs of a campaign, but also on the effectiveness of a certain message across media types. We can find in the work of Farrelly, Hussin & Bauer (2007) an example of the effectiveness of advertisements promoting smokers' Quitline in TV, radio and print. They concluded that there was a strong evidence of the effectiveness of television and radio ads, but a weaker evidence of the effectiveness of newspaper ads. Recently, using electromyography and skin conductance measurements, Peacock, Purvis and Hazlett (2011) analysed the differences in the way television and radio affect consumers emotionally and communicate brand messages. All these works bear witness to the interest of marketers to elucidate the different effects of advertisements across media types in order to optimize their investment on campaigns.

Meyrowitz has called this perspective 'Medium Theory' (MT) (1985; 1994). He stated that each medium is an environment that influences communication regardless of the content (Meyrowitz 1998), and that the same cultural content can have different influences if placed in different media (Meyrowitz 2008). Eveland (2003) claims that communication studies cannot focus solely on content effects. He argues that content interacts with other media attributes to produce effects and requires to take into consideration these attributes. However, there are some studies that have not found suitable the MT in order to explain variations in the media effects. Strömbäck & Kiosius (2010) did not find any evidence of differences related to media channel (TV, print and radio), and Bell & Dittmar (2011) proved that the type of media did not have any effect on girl's body and appearance dissatisfaction.

Despite of being of interest for scholars and media companies, the analysis of the influence of media channel is still a poorly developed area of communication research. Although investigated on its own, the MT still needs to find its place within the media effects context, and more importantly, to be confronted and validated in relation to other effect theories. The aim of this work is to explore the interaction of the Medium Theory and the Third-Person Effect (TPE) theory, and specifically to examine if the MT has an influence on predicting people's behaviour regarding controversial content, one of the fundamental corollaries of the TPE. It completes a preliminary research on the impact of MT on the perceived influence of media contents on people (Guerrero-Solé & López-González, 2016)

Conceived by Davison (1983), the TPE states that people tend to perceive that media exert a stronger influence on others than on themselves. TPE has two main hypotheses: people tend to perceive a greater media influence on others than on themselves (perceptual component), and it leads them to take rectifying actions (behavioral component). Many studies have given support to both hypotheses. Research has found evidence of the perceptual component in several contexts: sexual contents (Gunther 1995), violence (Rojas, Shah & Faber 1996; Scharrer 2002), news (Price, Tewksbury, & Huang 1998; Rauch, 2010), cigarette ads (Henriksen & Flora 1999), controversial advertising (Shah, Faber, & Youn 1999), political advertising (Meirick 2004), public service advertising (Duck 1995), gambling advertising (Youn, Faber and Shah 2000), violent video games (Boyle, McLeod, & Rojas 2008), reality shows (Cohen & Weimann 2008), social networking (Zhang & Daugherty 2009) and trash talk shows (Guerrero-Solé, Besalú, & Lopez-Gonzalez 2014). As far as we know, no research until now has been devoted to the study of the influence of media type on TPE. Thus, drawing on previous literature, the first hypothesis was to ascertain the relationship between MT and TPE:

H1: People will tend to perceive media and media messages to have greater influence on others than on themselves.

In particular, TPE shows up with undesirable media messages, and reverses or vanishes with messages considered socially desirable (Brosius & Engel 1996, Day 2008; Duck 1995; Eveland & McLeod 1999; Gunther & Mundy 1993). This characteristic has been called the negative influence corollary (Gunther and Storey 2003). Social distance is another factor that may have an influence on the TPP gap, as it magnifies the self-other discrepancy (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Eveland & McLeod 1999). Research on TPE has also found that one of the factors related to the TPE discrepancy is people's perceived exposure. McLeod et al. (1997) proposed that the perceived exposure to media contents may predict the perceived influence of these contents on others, arguing that people use exposition as a measure to determine media impact. This cognitive factor is related to Perloff's (1996) media schema: people use a magic bullet-like approach to guide the perceptions of media messages' influence on others. In consequence, the more we perceive people to be exposed to a content, the more we perceive this content will have an effect on them. Thus, our second hypothesis was:

H2: The perceived effect of media and media messages will be correlated to the perceived exposure to media and media messages.

Other cognitive factors that can explain self-other discrepancies are: ego involvement (Perloff, 1989) or self-perceived knowledge (Atwood 1994; Peiser & Peter 2000. Age, gender and group identity (Hoffner & Rehkoff 2011) or education (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne 2000), can also be good predictor variables of TPE. On the other hand, TPE has been linked to psychological theories such as ego-enhancement and optimistic bias (Brosius & Engel 1996; Gunther & Mundy 1993; Henrikson & Flora 1999), cognitive adaptation theory (Atwood 1994), attribution theory (Rojas et al. 1996), or the theory of reasoned action (Golan & Banning 2008). Most of these explanations have an analogous logic based on the thought that individuals tend to see themselves as more invulnerable than the rest of the people (Lee & Tamborini 2005). However, as we have already mentioned, media type has not been considered a factor that mediate the discrepancies between the effects on others and on the self. Thus, drawing on works on MT, our third hypothesis was as follows:

H3: The type of media will have an influence on the perceived effects of media messages.

We may note that in our research we will only consider two types of media, television and the Internet, and four different media contents: news, commercial advertising, violence and pornography. These contents have been analysed in a great majority of the researches on TPE.

More recently, scholars have oriented their efforts toward the behavioural outcomes of TPE. The research has been mainly focused on the support to censor controversial contents, such as pornography (Chia, Lu and McLeod 2004; Gunther 1995; Sun, Shen, & Pan 2008), misogynistic songs (McLeod et al. 1997), violence (Gunther & Hwa 1996; Hoffner et al. 1999), negative political advertising (Salwen & Dupagne 1999), unfair and misleading political messages (Hoffner & Rehkoff 2011) or trash talk shows (Guerrero-Solé, Besalú, & López-González 2014). Besides the support for censorship, other behavioural responses studied have been: political decision making (Perloff 1996); parental mediation (Hoffner & Buchanan 2002); residential mobility (Tsfati & Cohen 2003); likelihood to vote (Golan, Banning, & Lundy 2008); or the support for the regulation of alcohol product placement in films (Shin & Kim 2011).

One of the most controversial questions in relation to TPE is the relationship between behavioural and perceptual components, a fact that was already mentioned by Davison (1983) in his seminal work. However, research results have often been contradictory, and while in some cases scholars have found a weak or non-existent relationship between both components (Atwood 1994), in other cases the linkage has been found as being strong (Gunther & Storey 2003; McLeod et al. 1997; Wan & Youn 2004). Considering that a significant majority of the research about the behavioural component of TPE has analysed people's support to censor or restrict controversial contents, in our work we also asked about this linkage in the case of violence and pornography on TV and the Internet. Since the research about the linkage produced divergent results, we posited the following research question instead of hypotheses:

RQ1: Do the discrepancies in the perceived effects of violent and pornographic contents have an influence on the willingness to approve the limitations of these contents,?

And, finally, considering that the research was devoted to the role of media type in the TPE, our last research question took the following form:

RQ2: Does media type have an impact on the willingness to approve the limitation of violent and pornographic contents?

Method and measurement

123 undergraduate students (79 males and 44 females) that were taking a course of Communication in a major University in Spain participated a the survey. We asked them to answer two questionnaires about the perceived influence on the self and on others of media and media contents (news, advertising, violence and pornography). We also asked participants for their willingness to approve limitations to controversial contents, such as violence and pornography.. Ages ranged from 17 to 31 years old, with mean age of 20.89 (2.47). To measure the magnitude of the TPE on media type and contents, students were asked about:

- Perceived influence of TV/Internet. Respondents had to answer about their perceived influence of the media (TV/Internet) in general on the others and on the self.
- Perceived influence of news, advertising, pornography and violence on TV/Internet. Respondents were asked about the influence they perceived of media contents on TV/Internet on the others and on the self.
- As exposure has been found to be strongly correlated to the perceived influence, we also asked respondents for their perceived exposure of people to media (TV/Internet) and media contents (news, advertising, violence and pornography) across media.

Participants were asked to rate the perceived influences and exposures using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (no influence/exposition) to 5 (strong influence/exposition). Similarly, participants were asked for their readiness to support the restriction of violent and pornographic contents on media. Item were also rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (no support) to 5 (strong support).

Results

As already confirmed in previous studies, we found that participants perceived media, in general, and media contents across media platforms, in particular, to have a greater influence on the others than on themselves (Table 1). However, we performed paired samples t-tests that showed that the all differences were significant, except in the case of the influence of news on the Internet. We also may note that the media, in general, were considered as having more influence than media contents, both for TV and for the Internet. Our results show that participants perceived themselves as being far more invulnerable to TV influence than the others, while they consider that they are as invulnerable as the others to the influence of the Internet.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for perceived influence and exposure on others and on oneself of media, in general, and violence and pornography across media types (N=123).

	Perceived influence			Perceived exposure		
	Others	Self	Difference	Others	Self	Difference
Television	4.19 (0.65)	2.50 (0.91)	1.69**	4.12 (0.75)	2.45 (0.82)	1.57**
News	3.80 (0.85)	3.07 (0.90)	0.73**	3.38 (0.74)	2.72 (0.93)	0.66**
Advertising	3.23 (0.91)	2.14 (0.93)	1.09**	3.46 (1.04)	2.26 (0.94)	1.20**
Violence	3.30 (1.00)	2.15 (0.94)	1.15**	3.34 (0.96)	2.00 (0.95)	1.24**
Pornography	2.80 (1.09)	1.72 (0.92)	1.08**	2.58 (0.89)	1.46 (0.78)	1.12**
Internet	4.32 (0.74)	4.07 (0.79)	0.25*	4.59 (0.63)	4.55 (0.62)	0.04
News	3.53 (0.83)	3.49 (0.95)	0.04	3.57 (0.85)	3.63 (0.93)	-0.06
Advertising	2.54 (1.02)	1.90 (0.88)	0.63**	3.14 (1.19)	2.24 (0.98)	0.90**
Violence	3.13 (0.96)	2.11 (0.99)	1.02**	3.22 (1.02)	2.12 (1.04)	1.10**
Pornography	3.85 (0.99)	2.30 (1.13)	1.64**	4.19 (0.93)	2.18 (1.15)	2.01**

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01

We also calculated the correlations between perceived influence and perceived exposure (Table 2), confirming the target corollary: there was a strong correlation between perceived influence and perceived exposure for media in general and media contents, except in the case of TV for others and the Internet for the self. Consequently, hypothesis 2 was confirmed except for these two cases.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations between perceived influence of and exposure to media contents (N=123).

	Others	Self
Television	.52	.50**
News	.34**	.61**
Advertising	.47**	.63**
Violence	.31**	.56**
Pornography	.52**	.55**

Internet	42**	.24*
News	.53**	.70**
Advertising	.43**	.52**
Violence	.52**	.68**
Pornography	.50**	.85**

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01

We performed paired t-tests between the perceived influence of media contents across media to confirm our third hypothesis. The perceived influence of media contents depends on media in the case of news (t=-3.809, p<.01 for the self, and t=3.009, p<.01 for others), advertising (t=2.357, p<.05 for the self, and t=6.170, p<.01 for others) and pornography (t=-6.253, p<.01 for the self, and t=-9.234, p<.01 for others), confirming our third hypothesis. However, we found that media type had no impact on participants' perceived effect on themselves nor on the others. Thus, news, advertising and pornography are perceived as having a greater impact on the Internet than on TV, while violence is perceived as being equally influential no matter the media type.

Besides the analysis of the perceived influence of media contents across media types, we also analysed participants' willingness to support the limitation of controversial contents across media types. As we have already mentioned, TPE research has been traditionally focused on people's willingness to support the restriction or censorship of controversial contents, mainly pornography (Chia et al. 2004; Sun, Shen, & Pan 2008) and violence (Hoffner et al. 1999; Hoffner et al., 2001). In this sense, we have examined people's support to restrict violence and pornography on TV and the Internet. Our results show that people are not particularly willing to support the restriction of controversial contents on these media (Table 3), in particular pornography on the Internet.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for the support to restrict controversial contents across media types (N=123).

	Mean	SD
Support to restrict violence (TV)	3.27	1.34
Support to restrict violence (Internet)	3.01	1.42
Support to restrict pornography (TV)	3.07	1.31
Support to restrict pornography (Internet)	2.58	1.37

We also calculated the correlations between the support to limit contents and the exposure to these contents. Our results showed significant correlations only between the support to the limitation of Internet violence and the perceived exposure to Internet violence of the self (r=-.44, p<0.001), and between the support to limit pornography on the Internet and the perceived exposure to this content of the others (r=-.27, p<0.001) and of oneself (r=-.45, p<0.001).

Our RQ1 was about the linkage between the perceptual and the behavioral components of the TPE. We performed a multiple regression analysis We found that people's willingness to restrict violence on TV and

the Internet ()to be positively related to the perceived influence of TV violence on others ($B = .300^*$ for TV and $B = .229^*$ for Internet), and to be negatively related to the perceived influence of Internet violence on the self ($B = -.302^*$ for TV and $B = -.239^*$). Thus, the perceived impact of the TV violence on others increases people's likelihood to support the limitation of violence, while the perceived impact on Internet violence on the self decreases (and, practically in the same proportion) people's likelihood to support this limitation. In the case of TV pornography, we did not observe any linkage between both components, and in Internet pornography people's likelihood to support limitations was negatively related to the perceived impact of pornography on the self ($B = -.295$, $p < .05$). The values of R^2 were $.180^*$, for TV violence, $.143^*$ for Internet violence and $.165^*$ for Internet pornography ($* p < 0.05$).

Finally, to answer RQ2, we performed two paired t-tests to the influence of media type on the magnitude of the support to the limitation of violence and pornography (Table 4). Results show that MT can explain those discrepancies on the support to restrict pornographic contents, and to a lesser extent, on the support to restrict violence.

Table 4. Paired t-tests of differences between the support to restrict violence and pornography across media.

	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Support to restrict violence (TV - Internet)	0.26	0.94	3.071	.003
Support to restrict pornography (TV - Internet)	0.49	1.23	4.397	.000

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this research was to analyze the discrepancies in people's perception and behavior of media contents' impact across different media types. The objective was to examine the intersection between Medium Theory and Third-Person Effect and assess how the research on MT can improve scholars' knowledge of the TPE, complementing a past research on the topic (Guerrero-Solé & Lopez-Gonzalez, 2016). Our research has showed that the perceptual component of the TPE shows up in different media contents and across media types (TV and the Internet). We found that the variable media type had an impact on participants' perception of the influence of media contents. The influence is not homogeneous across different media contents: media type has an influence in the cases of advertising and pornography, but it has no influence for violent contents. In consequence, media type ought to be considered as a mediating factor of the TPE, as it can have an impact on the magnitude of the differences observed between the perceived effects on others and on the self.

We also observed that TPE only shows up on TV, but vanishes on the Internet. Media type, then, does not only have an influence on the measure of the TPE, but it can also be a condition for it to occur. Works on TPE have confirmed Gunther & Storey's (2003) negative influence corollary: TPE appears for contents that are perceived by people as being socially undesirable; on the contrary, first-person effect appears for contents with positive social values. Besides the already commented linkage between the perceived

influence and the perceived exposure, these results make us reflect on whether media type can have also an impact on what people perceive as desirable contents or not. In our case, we could hypothesize that some media characteristics could lead young people to perceive TV news as having a negative influence: the perceived obsolescence of TV as a mass media among young people in contrast to digital media, TV news' mainstream character, media credibility or TV audience passivity, among others. On the contrary, they may perceive the process of consumption of Internet news as an active process that demands high levels of people's selection due to Internet's interactive nature, thus the impression that less protection is required against it.

Besides this, people also differ in their willingness to support the banning of controversial contents depending on the media showing them. Our findings show that people tend to support the limitation of pornography on TV more than on the Internet, despite the discrepancy is not that strong in the case of violent contents. The multiple regression analysis we performed showed that the support to limit violent content on TV and on the Internet followed a similar pattern: the perceived influence of TV violence on others positively contributes to explain this support, while also in both cases the perceived influence of Internet violence on the self contributes negatively to explain this support. For pornographic contents, only the perceived influence of Internet pornography contributes negatively to explain the support to limit Internet pornography.

We may note that our work is not free of limitations. Firstly, our sample was skewed to undergraduate students. Although some studies have proven that the differences between undergraduate students' and non-students' judgments are insignificant (Guerrero-Solé et al. 2014), age and gender distributions can have an influence on the results obtained. Secondly, our work lacks of measurements of other variables that could better explain the differences observed on the perceived influence and the behavioral outcomes, such as socio-demographic variables or other variables traditionally related to the TPE. Since one of the most controversial questions about TPE is the linkage between the perceptual and the behavioral components, the addition of other variables could remove any track of this linkage and lead scholars to different conclusions. And thirdly, the respondents that participated on the research were not exposed to any stimuli, and had to answer general questions about the influence of media contents, exposition and willingness to support the limitation of controversial contents. In this sense, Jensen and Hurley (2005) had already manifested their concerns about the use of general question because they do not necessarily reveal what people really thinks about media and media contents.

Finally, another limitation is linked to the distinction between media types in the context of technological hybridity (Hay & Couldry, 2011) and media convergence (Jenkins, 2004; Jenkins, 2006). Since we can access any kind of content from the Internet—in particular those contents broadcasted by TV and radio, that can be accessed on a cell phone (Hay & Couldry, 2011), and the so-called transmedia contents and storytelling (Scolari, 2009)—, the distinction between media types should move to the distinction between types of devices or situations in which the content is finally consumed. It is also an unexplored field in the theory of the third-person effect that ought to be analyzed in the future. However, our work confirms that despite current technological changes that affect the distinctions between media types, people still have different perceptions about the influence of contents in different media.

It is evident that more research is needed to find out what specific characteristics of the medium can have an impact on the perceived influence of certain contents. In this sense, scholars who investigate direct and

indirect effects of media on people have to consider media type and media content as an inseparable pair, and study the interaction between them as both elements contribute to the magnitude of the effect. In this regard, some authors have suggested that attributes of the Internet, such as the global scale, the use and access, the limits to control it (Lee & Tamborini 2005) or the interactive nature of the Internet (Li 2008) could have an influence on the magnitude of the TPE. Our future research should be focused on experimental researches that could be able to modify media and content characteristics to find out to what extent they have an influence on people's perceived influence. And as we already pointed out, devices and situations should play a role in the identification of the cause that lead people to perceive a different influence of contents in what we still call media types. Finally, future research will also have to explore to what extent these different perceptions are rooted in our culture, or whether they fade away or live on in a scenario of vanishing frontiers and divergences between media types.

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