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ABSTRACT

A TEST OF THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT IN PUBLIC RELATIONS:
APPLICATION OF SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

By

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The third-person effect--the belief that media effects tend to be greater on others than on ourselves--has the potential for intriguing behavioral consequences within various political and social realms. Recognized as a prevalent or even robust phenomenon in the mass communication literature, the third-person effect has not been explained in terms of a single underlying theoretical process. In this paper, the social comparison approach is used to provide a parsimonious explanation for the third-person phenomenon. With this framework, situational variables such as perceived desirability of message, issue-involvement, self-esteem, and social distance are examined in association with the direction and magnitude of the third-person effect. Further, this study applies the third-person effect to the field of public relations, thereby expanding its applicability.

This study's test of the third-person effect with public relations messages is expected to help public relations practitioners design more effectively design messages

in a strategic manner across different situations. A lab experiment (n = 229) was conducted to examine the third-person effect in subjects exposed to two public relations messages, one dealing with a lawsuit against the company, the other with corporate philanthropy. Results showed that perceived desirability of the message was found to have a negative relationship with the third-person perception, which was verified in the negative message condition as well as in the positive message condition. Further, issue-involvement was also found to have a negative relationship with the third-person perception, a finding that is discussed in terms of previous research on the "hostile media" phenomenon. The study also examined who subjects consider as referents when making assessments of media effects on self versus other, and how these referents differ according to the nature of the message. These and other results are discussed in terms of implications for public relations practice and strategic message design.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of literature contends that public opinion is no longer best, or validly, represented best as the mere aggregation of individual opinions (e.g., see Glasser and Salmon, 1995). Instead, it is a social construction process influenced by perceptions of others' opinions. Individuals tend to form their opinions about social phenomena based on their perceptions of others' opinions, and behave accordingly. As social theorist Walter Lippmann (1922) once noted, the "pictures in our heads" of social reality are often more important than "reality" itself, because individuals act on the basis of their perceptions and beliefs.

Perceptions of others' opinions, as Noelle-Neumann has indicated (1977, p. 145), usually are based on a "quasi-statistical sense" rather than on a formal evaluation of objective evidence. The quasi-statistical assessment of social reality is facilitated and influenced by information mediated via the mass media. The mass media play a pivotal role as the common conduit for obtaining information about distant others' attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. The mass media, as Mutz (1992) has mentioned, are influential in telling people not only what to think about, but also what others are thinking about. Individuals' perceptions of their mediated reality constitute an integral component of the process through which public opinion is formed and molded, and must be considered in examinations of the relationship between public opinion and public policy outcomes.

Constructed reality via mass media content has long been recognized as influencing societal level judgment rather than individual level judgment, stemming back to research on "impersonal impact" (Tyler & Cook, 1984). According to Tyler and Cook (1984), individuals are supposed to be able to distinguish between two possible levels of judgments, societal and personal. Societal level of judgment refers to individuals' perceptions or beliefs about community or conditions of community residents in relation to some social events or issues, while personal level of judgment means individuals' beliefs about their own condition. Tyler and Cook (1984) demonstrated that mass media exert greater influence on societal-level judgment than on personal-level judgment. This type of conclusion has been reached, for instance, in studies of individuals' perceptions of crime and victimization. Most people tend to think that crime is an important and serious issue on the social level; however, they are optimistic and do not think that they personally will fall victim to crime.

Likewise, it has been proposed that people's ability to distinguish between the personal and the societal level when making judgments can be applied to their judgments of media effects (Brosius & Engel, 1996). That is, people tend to think that mass media effects are more influential on others than on themselves, which has been defined as "the third-person effect" by Davison (1983).

The third-person effect is a phenomenon related to perceptions of social reality through the mass media, an area of study that includes pluralistic ignorance (O'Gorman, 1975), looking-glass perception (Fields & Schuman, 1976), and false consensus (Ross, 1977). Pluralistic ignorance refers to mistaken beliefs about what constitutes the majority and minority positions on a given issue. False consensus and looking-glass

perception refers to similar perceptions that other people have the same beliefs or opinions as themselves. Whereas the previous concepts deal with perceptions of similarity between self and others, the third-person effect looks at perceptions of difference regarding media effects on self and others.

The perception of difference in mass media effect on self and others leads to intriguing behavioral consequences that may have significant impacts within political and social realms. For instance, during WWII, Japanese propaganda leaflets airdropped on a black military unit advising troops not to fight in a white man's war, caused white officials to withdraw the unit the next day because those officials were concerned about the leaflets' presumed effect on the black soldiers (Davison, 1983). In the arena of public policy, public policy makers and political elites have censored pornography and violence in media content on the basis of concerns that the general public may be more affected by the messages. Many parents want to install V-chip or parental control programs because they are concerned about harmful message effects on their children, rather than on themselves. In other words, across many realms of public policy, paternalistic concerns and efforts to forge regulations are rooted in concerns about presumed media effects on others. Yet consistently, if asked whether the same media content is perceived as potentially threatening or harmful to themselves, individuals consistently deny the need for regulation, believing that they themselves are not in need of regulators' protection.

The third-person effect, recognized as a prevalent or even robust phenomenon in mass communication literature since proposed by Davison in 1983, has generated a host of subsequent studies. Nevertheless, no single theoretical process underlying the third-

person effect has been identified or universally accepted (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1996, 1999). Most studies have applied attribution theory, especially focusing on fundamental attribution error and motivational bias; however, these theoretical frameworks do not provide consistent explanatory frameworks across situations. A review of the third-person effect literature reveals that the direction and magnitude of the third-person effect hinges on situations. Situational variables considered in previous third-person effect research have included: message topics, message valence (i.e., positive versus negative), or receivers' characteristics such as demographics. However, such situational variables do not seem adequate to explain the third-person effect (Perloff, 1999).

Based on social comparison theory, this study tries to further the third-person effect literature by examining variables overlooked by most previous studies. From the social comparison perspective, other situational variables such as perceived desirability of message, issue-involvement, self-esteem, and social distance are potentially relevant to the third-person phenomenon (Perloff, 1999, 2002), and included for analysis in the present study.

Another purpose of this study is to extend the third-person effect to the public relations arena. Since originated by Davison in 1983, the third-person effect has been observed in a wide variety of subject domains including social and political issues associated with public relations. The third-person effect is expected to have an important political meaning for public relations professionals as indicated by many previous studies. Nevertheless, the effect has not been examined using the staple of public relations communication, the news release. Because it is written by an

organization with a specific, vested interest and not news content subjected to editorial control, it may be viewed differently than media content previously studied in prior examinations of the third-person effect. Since unintended message effects of all kinds (i.e., spiral of silence, false consensus, pluralistic ignorance, etc.), are of importance in terms of public opinion formation; this should be taken into consideration when messages are created and distributed for public relations purposes. Considering its potential contribution to the theory and practice of public relations, however, little attempt has been made to interpret the third-person phenomenon in terms of public relations and to provide practical guidelines for campaigners. In addition, little research has investigated the third-person effect using explicit public relations messages dealing with more than one topic. In this sense, based on a social comparison theoretical framework, this study applies the third-person effect to the field of public relations and tries to further the third-person effect literature by expanding its applicability. The test of the third-person effect using public relations messages is expected to help public relations professionals design messages in an effective and strategic way across situations.

A lab experiment (n = 229) was conducted to examine the third-person effect in subjects exposed to public relations messages dealing with two different issues: a lawsuit against the company, and corporate philanthropy.

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one introduces the subject and purposes of the study. Chapter two reviews the literature on the third-person effect, focusing on the social comparison approach. Chapters three and four describe the method and the results of the study, respectively. Chapter five discusses the findings

and implications. The appendices include the informed consent form, two public relations messages, and measurements.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with the definition of the third-person effect, and follows with a review of prior third-person research. Next, theoretical underpinnings including fundamental attribution error, motivational bias, and social comparison approaches are described as potential, underlying theoretical processes of the third-person effect. Under the social comparison framework, relationships among situational variables and the third-person effect are discussed, and hypotheses and research questions are proposed accordingly.

Defining Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect, defined originally by Davison (1983), has been described as the phenomenon occurring when an individual believes that mass media content has a greater influence on other people than on himself or herself, a belief that often leads to subsequent action. Thus, the third-person effect consists of two components: perception and behavior.

The perceptual component of the third-person effect refers to the tendency for people to perceive that the media's greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you' but on 'them,' i.e., third-persons (Davison, 1983; Price & Tewksbury, 1996). The third-person effect refers to a perception of relative, rather than absolute, effects. That is, the effect is derived from a difference score involving perceived effect of media content on self *versus* on others.

The third-person effect proposes that in estimating media impact, people may be engaged in a cognitive bias that they are less susceptible than others to media effects. In other words, the third-person effect refers to the cognitive bias of the self-other disparity in media impact perception.

Cognitive bias in media impact perception may vary depending on several factors such as individuals' characteristics in perception of self-other differences (i.e., demographics, self-esteem, and involvement, etc), third-persons (i.e., comparison referent people have in mind) and situational factors (such as perceived desirability of the mass media content and perceived persuasive intent of message source) (Perloff, 2002). Specifically, the more people perceive the media content as undesirable to be affected by, the more they perceive they are less susceptible to the media impact, and less persuadable than are others. If people have in their mind an inferior comparison referent in terms of knowledge, ability, opportunity, etc., people may perceive they are better than others in resisting the media impact. Those who believe themselves superior in terms of self-esteem, motivation, etc., may perceive they are superior to others in controlling the undesirable media impact.

The perceptual bias of self-other difference in media impact is expected to lead people to take actions. The behavioral component that has been found in previous research takes two directions: either prevention of 'harmful' communication or support for 'beneficial' communication. The behavioral consequences of the third-person perception are particularly intriguing to policy makers and public relations practitioners. However, as Perloff (2002) suggests, the association between perception and its

behavioral consequences is described as too simplistic and vague, in that the hypothesis ignores the process mediating the perception and behavior relationship (p. 499).

The third-person effect has been found to be prevalent and even quite robust. According to a review by Perloff (1993), of 14 studies since 1988, all but one found evidence of the third-person effect. A meta-analysis by Paul, Salwen and Dupagne (Paul et al., 2000) found that the overall effect size between estimated media effects on self and others was r=.50, which is substantial. Yet although the third-person effect is an intriguing hypothesis that has generated many studies, there is little or no consensus regarding the underlying theoretical rationale (Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1996, 1999). Two such candidates, (1) attribution theory focusing on fundamental attribution bias and motivational bias, and (2) social comparison, are discussed herein.

Theoretical Explanations of the Third-Person Effect

Among several theoretical explanations for the third-person effect, attribution theory has been employed most frequently in third-person effect research, with social comparison theory being another plausible explanatory framework.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory attempts to understand why and how ordinary people interpret their own behaviors and the actions of others, forming causal inferences (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Ross, 1977; Ross & Fletcher, 1985). Attribution theory is a collection of diverse theoretical and empirical contributions, first proposed by Heider (1958) and then developed by Jones and Davis (1965), Kelley (1967), Schachter (1964), Bem (1967) and Rotter (1966). In its broad sense, attribution theory attempts to configure the possible

causes and observed effects that the observer attributes to internal dispositions of the actor (e.g., abilities, traits, knowledge or experience) or to the external situation of the actor (e.g., task difficulties, incentives or other environmental factors) (Ross, 1977; Ross & Fletcher, 1985).

In attempting to understand the causal inference of others' behaviors, ordinary people not only follow the normative process of attribution, but also systematically distort judgment, leading to misinterpretation of events or behaviors, hence to behavior in ways personally or socially undesirable. Systematic judgmental bias is categorized generally into fundamental attribution error (non-motivational attribution), originally defined by Heider (1958), and motivational biases (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Ross & Fletcher, 1985). The attribution bias approach seems well suited to the third-person effect, in that the third-person effect is another form of judgmental bias about media effects on the self and others.

Fundamental Attribution Error

Early study in third-person effect research (e.g., Gunther, 1991; Standley, 1994) relied on the fundamental attribution error, and the tendency for attributers to underestimate the impact of situational factors, and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors, in controlling behavior, when they explain or understand the behavior of others. In other words, ordinary people tend to attribute the behavior of others to others' personality traits (internal factor), while attributing their own behaviors to circumstances (external or situational factors). For example, Gunther (1991) explained that, "when judging message impact on others, observers will underestimate the effect of situational (external) factors and attribute relatively more opinion change to

those others; but in judging themselves, observers will estimate modest, if any, opinion change, attributing it to their greater awareness of, and discounting of, situational factors like persuasive intent" (p. 357). The apparent persuasive intention of the message source is considered an important situational factor in the third-person effect research (Perloff, 1999), in that "people may see different meanings in the same message if they make different inferences about the communicator's intentions (Gunther, 1991, p. 358). Gunther (1991) tested the intention of the message source by manipulating the source of message and proposed that people differ according to the situation. Hence, some might believe that they can notice the persuasive or manipulative intent of the message source and then take proper account of such intention in the process of media messages, but others might not because of personal traits like lack of ability, knowledge or experience.

However, Gunther's (1991) explanation raised the problem of a conceptual leap in the application of attribution theory to the third-person effect (Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). According to fundamental attribution error, we may expect that people may ascribe media messages (a situational factor) as influencing their own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors; however, third-person effect research demonstrated that people see media messages as having more influence on others than on themselves (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). On this question, Rucinski and Salmon (1990) suggested an explanation that people may avoid situational attributions because they want to perceive themselves as having control over the situational factors such as intent of message source, which leads to self-serving bias, a motivational bias.

Motivational bias

In addition to the fundamental attribution error, motivational bias such as self-serving bias has also been suggested as a mechanism explaining third-person effect literature (e.g., Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Rojas, Shah & Faber, 1996; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Shah, Faber & Youn, 1999; White & Dillon, 2000). According to motivational bias explanation, the third-person effect is said to result from people's tendency to attribute their own and others' behaviors to causes that are flattering to themselves (i.e., self-serving bias). People are motivated to enhance or reinforce their self-image by attributing their own and others' behaviors to causes that make them look better or more intelligent than most others.

Specifically, when media message is perceived as negative or socially undesirable or when being persuaded by it would be regarded generally as unintelligent (e.g., advertising, propaganda, or marketing messages), people tend to regard this situational or external factor (media messages) as affecting others more than themselves (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Rojas, Shah & Faber, 1996).

On the other hand, when people are exposed to positive media messages or desirable messages such as public service announcements or pro-social messages, people believe they are more affected by the messages than are others, a reverse of the third-person effect (i.e., the first-person effect). This reversed message effect may also be explained by self-serving bias, in that people attribute their behavior to their ability to know the value of desirable messages (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Peiser & Peter, 2001; White & Dillon, 2000).

Like fundamental attribution bias, motivational attribution bias provides inconsistent and limited applications of the attribution to the mass media impact. Instead, the social comparison approach (e.g., Atwood, 1994; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Paul et al., 2000; Peiser & Peter, 2000) seems more plausible than motivational attribution bias, in that the social comparison framework enables researchers to explain in one framework both the direction (i.e., the third-person *versus* first-person effects) and the degree of third-person effect. Furthermore, social comparison is a more comprehensive explanatory framework because it takes into consideration several mechanisms, as well as self-serving bias, to explain variations of cognitive bias phenomena, including third-person effect. Specifically, the social comparison approach helps understanding of why motivational bias such as self-serving bias occurs.

Social Comparison Approach

Another plausible explanation of the third-person effect can be drawn from social comparison theory (Atwood, 1994; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000; Peiser & Peter, 2000). Drawing on a social comparison framework, people have a tendency to perceive that they are less susceptible to negative and socially undesirable messages than are others, while they are more open to, or accepting of, desirable-to-believe media messages than others (Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000).

The third-person effect is regarded as conceptually equivalent to three related notions in the literature on social comparison: optimistic bias, the illusion of unique invulnerability and the better-than-average effect (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak & Vredenburg, 1995; Brosius & Engel, 1996; Gunther, 1991; Myers & Ridl, 1979; Perloff, 1983; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Weinstein, 1980, 1983; Weinstein & Klein, 1996,

Whaley, 2000). All these concepts constitute a cognitive bias regarding relative risk perception that results from the social comparison process involved in overestimating the probability of experiencing favorable events, as well as in underestimating the probability of experiencing negative ones.

Cognitive bias about comparative risk judgment has been thought to occur not only through non-motivational mechanisms such as cognitive error, egocentric tendency, or heuristics (Harris, 1996; Stapel, Reicher & Spears, 1994; Weinstein, 1980; 1982), but also through motivational mechanisms such as ego-defensiveness, anxiety reduction, self-esteem enhancement, or downward comparison (Burger & Burns, 1988; Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995; Gunther, 1991; Hansen, Raynor & Wolkenstein, 1991; Heine & Lehman, 1995; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Hoorens, 1996; Klein, 1996; Klein & Kunda, 1993; Kunda, 1987; Perloff, 1983, 1987; Smith, Gerrard & Gibbons, 1997; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein, 1984; Weinstein & Klein, 1995, 1996; Wills, 1991; Zakay, 1984). According to studies based on motivational mechanisms, comparative risk judgments seem to occur through downward comparison, in which people enhance their self-esteem and subjective well-being via comparison to a less fortunate other (Alicke et al., 1995; Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Harris & Middleton, 1994; Whaley, 2000; Wills, 1991).

Following the rationale of the social comparison framework, the third-person effect may be defined as the cognitive bias in comparative judgment of media effect on the self and others that usually occurs through the self-enhancement mechanism, depending on situations. Several situational factors that have been suggested to play an important role in the third-person effect include: message topic, perceived desirability of the message, subjects' characteristics (i.e., demographics, involvement and self-esteem),

and comparison referents (or, social distance corollary). The direction and magnitude of comparison of media effect on the self and others are proposed as variant, depending on situational factors. Under the social comparison framework, the direction and magnitude of the third-person effect depending on situational factors are reviewed and discussed.

Direction and Magnitude of the Third-Person Effect

Mass Media Messages and the Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect has been observed in a wide variety of subject domains, which is summarized in Table 1.

Message Topic: Negative and Positive Messages

Individuals' tendency to perceive themselves as invulnerable to media impacts, *vis-à-vis* impacts on others, has been apparent in most third-person effect studies with negative messages such as defamatory communication (Cohen et al., 1988; Gunther, 1991a), violence on television (Boynton & Wu, 1999; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Hoffner et al., 1999; Hoffner et al., 2001; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Paxton, 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999), sexually explicit message or pornography (Gunther, 1995; Gunther, 1996; Lee, 1996; McLeod, 1999; Lo, 2000; Paxton, 1996; Rojas, 1996; Wu, 2001), or negative political advertising (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), to name but some.

For example, Cohen, Mutz, Price and Gunther (1988) found that subjects estimated that other people would be more affected by defamatory messages than would they. Gunther (1995) also found that a substantial majority of U.S. adults see other people as more adversely influenced than themselves by pornography. Paxton (1996) found that, for messages with depictions of violence and sex, people showed the third-person

perception. As Gunther (1991) proposes, the effect is said to occur through better-than-average perception, a tendency of people to believe they are more intelligent or better off than most other people, consequently they are motivated to enhance self-esteem by perceiving themselves less vulnerable to negative influences, including media messages.

However, several studies found that when people are exposed to positive media messages such as public service announcements or moral messages, people generally believe they are more affected than are others by the messages, that is, the reverse third-person perception (i.e., the first-person perception) (e.g., Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995; Henriksen & Flora, 1999). Contrary to the third-person perception, however, the reverse third-person perception (or so-called "first-person perception") has not been documented with much regularity. Much empirical evidence supports the conclusion that even with positive messages, people show a tendency to perceive less message effects on self than on others. The tendency may result from individuals not perceiving a message to be sufficiently desirable to be influenced by, thus triggering ego-defensiveness in an attempt to maintain self esteem (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; McLeod, Eveland & Nathanson, 1997).

Duck and Mullin (1995) compared the magnitude of the third-person effect of three types of media content, negative content (violence, sexism, racism), positive content (resisting antisocial temptations, behaving pro-socially, demonstrating sympathy and concern for others), and Public Service Announcements (to reduce drunk-driving, to promote safe sex, to wear seat belts). They found the third-person effect existed for both negative and positive content, but was much greater for negative content. Innes and Zeitz (1988) also tested magnitude of the third-person effect with three different media

issues: violence in the media (a negative issue), a political campaign (a neutral issue), and a drunk driving advertising campaign (a positive issue). They found that the greatest perception of the third-person effect was found with respect to the issue of media violence, a socially undesirable influence.

In addition, the magnitude of the third-person perception was tested in other various topics such as rap lyrics and body image. Eveland and McLeod (1999) tested the third-person effect with four versions of rap lyrics either advocating or condemning violence or misogyny. They found that the magnitude of the third-person perception was significantly greater for anti-social rap lyrics than for pro-social rap lyrics. David and Johnson (1998) selected body image as a topic for the third-person effect and manipulated the degree of social undesirability of the outcome, increasing from perceptual (perception of ideal body weight) to psychological (effect on self-esteem) to behavioral (likelihood to lead to an eating disorder). They found evidence of the third-person perception in three conditions; further, as the outcome undesirability worsened, the magnitude of the third-person effect increased.

Based upon previous research with regard to message topics (positive *versus* negative), the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Individuals will perceive that they are less susceptible than others to a negative public relations message.

H2: Individuals will perceive that they are less susceptible than others to a positive public relations message.

H3: Individuals exposed to the negative message will show higher third-person perception than those exposed to the positive message.

Perceived Desirability of the Message and the Third-Person Effect:

Perceived desirability of message is defined as people's perceptions of the level of desirability of being influenced by the message (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Peiser & Peter, 2001; Salwen & Dupagne, 2000).

As shown in the previous section, the message topic (positive *vs.* negative) was assumed to be perceived as positive (desirable) or negative (undesirable) at face value as manipulated by researchers, without manipulation checks. In most cases, researchers have assumed that subjects exposed to negative topic (e.g., messages regarding violence or pornography) would perceive the message as undesirable, thus show the third-person effect (e.g., Wu & Koo, 2001). Meanwhile, positive topics were supposed to bring about the reverse third-person effect in that the pro-social message is assumed to be good enough to influence themselves.

Many researchers have suggested that the desirability of the message should be tested empirically because individuals may perceive the same message differently, thus leading to different perception of message impacts on themselves and others (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995; Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Peiser & Peter, 2000; 2001; Perloff, 1999, 2002; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997). For example, Duck and Mullin (1995a) found that even in a study with positive content, people perceive themselves as less influenced or as more influenced than others, depending on whether they perceive the impact of the message as desirable or undesirable (i.e., perceived desirability of message).

In this sense, beyond the valence of message topic (pro-social *versus* anti-social), the perceived desirability of message should be measured and its role in the third-person effect should be examined (Perloff, 1999), which is in the perspective of this study.

In the social comparison framework, perceived desirability of events or messages plays an important role in perceiving risk vulnerability to themselves compared to others. According to social comparison, for self-esteem enhancement, individuals make downward comparisons and perceive that they are less susceptible to undesirable messages and more susceptible to desirable ones than are others. The less individuals perceive the message to be desirable to be affected by, the more they perceive the message impact on other people than themselves. That is, the less the perceived desirability of the message, the greater the third-person perception.

Based on the previous notion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: The less people perceive the message to be desirable to be affected by, the greater the perceived message effects on others than on themselves (i.e., the greater the third-person perception).

Message Receivers and the Third-Person Effect

Receiver characteristics are reviewed with three categories, demographics, self-esteem, issue-involvement.

Demographics

Some studies have found that age (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Shah, Faber & Youn, 1999; Tiedge et al., 1991), ethnicity (Matera & Salwen, 1997), gender (Gunther, 1995; Hoffner, Plotkin, Buchanan, Anderson et al, 2001; Howitt, Driscoll & Salwen, 1998; Lambe & Shah, 1999), and family income (Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Rojas, Shah & Faber,

1996) emerged as relevant factors. Other studies examined the magnitude of the third-person effect according to people's media use, regarded as a significant factor in some studies, with newspaper readers primarily being subject to the third-person effect (Atwood, 1994; Cohen & Davis, 1991; Coehn et al., 1988; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Glynn & Ostman, 1988; Mutz, 1989; Perloff, 1989; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Tiedge et al., 1991). However, the results have been inconsistent and mixed and the relationship between media use and the third-person effect is unclear (Atwood, 1994; Brosius & Engel, 1996; Chapin, 2001; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Hu, 2000; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Peiser & Peter, 2000; Price, Huang & Tewksbury, 1997; Rojas, Shah & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998).

Meanwhile, education has emerged as a factor relevant for predicting the third-person effect (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Glynn & Ostman, 1988; Gunther, 1995; Hu & Wu, 1996; Lang, 1995; Lasorsa, 1989; Mutz, 1989; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen & Driscoll, 1995, 1997; Schoenbach & Becker, 1995; Tiedge et al., 1991; Willnat, 1996). Researchers have suggested that better educated individuals tend to show higher third-person effect, in that they are more aware of media effects, confident in being more knowledgeable than others, and feeling superior to others (Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen, 1998; Tiedge et al., 1991).

With regard to demographics and its relationship with the third-person perception, there have been no consistent results. In the sense of enriching the third-person effect literature, a research question with regard to demographics and the third-person perception is asked as follows:

RQ1: How do individuals' perceptions of message impacts on themselves compared to others differ according to their demographic characteristics?

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem means the collection of beliefs or feelings that people have about themselves. In other words, self-esteem refers to beliefs about values, confidence, worthiness people put on themselves. How they define themselves hugely influences motivations, attitudes, and behaviors.

Little research has focused on the relationship between self-esteem and self-other disparity in message impact perception, even though the third-person effect has been interpreted in several studies under the theoretical framework of motivational bias engaging in self-esteem enhancement. Only David and Johnson (1998) took into account self-esteem as a related factor and found that subjects with high self-esteem exhibited stronger third-person effect than those with low self-esteem. Self-esteem is taken into account in this study as one of the receiver's characteristics.

According to the social comparison framework, the third-person effect is explained in the framework of self-enhancement motivation in social comparison (Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995a). According to studies based on motivational mechanisms, the third-person effect seems to occur especially through downward comparison in which people enhance their self-esteem and subjective well-being via comparison to a less fortunate other (Alicke et al., 1995; Davidson & Prkachin, 1997; Harris & Middleton, 1994; Whaley, 2000; Wills, 1991). In other words, when people are asked to compare themselves with others, people are assumed to take a person they suppose to be less intelligent or knowledgeable than themselves, as a comparison referent. And then they

are supposed to think that those referents are less intelligent in noticing and understanding the persuasive intent of message source than themselves, which leads to enhancement of self-esteem.

Based on this notion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Individuals with high self-esteem will tend to show higher third-person perception than those with low self-esteem.

Issue Involvement

Issue-involvement, defined as "possession of extreme attitudes on an issue relevant to the group," is another receiver characteristic that has been associated with the third-person effect (Gunther, 1992; Perloff, 2002). Issue-involvement means the extent to which individuals are concerned about the issue and how much the issue is relevant and matters to them.

The third-person effect in association with issue-involvement has been referred to as hostile media phenomenon (Atwood 1994; Cohen & Davis 1991; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther 1991; Gunther 1995; Gunther & Mundy 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Kressel, 1987; Mutz, 1989; Perloff 1989; Perloff 1993; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985). According to the hostile media phenomenon, people strongly involved or people holding extreme attitudes perceive the media as hostile towards their own position, and perceive greater media effects on others.

The hostile media phenomenon was studied by Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985). They showed pro-Israeli and pro-Arab students the television stories on the 1982 Beirut massacre and asked them to judge the objectivity of those stories. They found that whereas pro-Israeli students perceived that the stories were pro-Palestinian and hostile to

their own position, the pro-Palestinian students perceived that the stories misrepresented the Palestinian standpoints. Both groups believed that the stories would affect neutral viewers' attitudes to become more unfavorable toward their own side and more favorable toward the opposite side. Perloff (1989) also found similar results with the same issue. In addition, Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken (1994) also found similar evidence for television news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the issue of abortion.

The hostile media phenomenon has been found not only for television stories and news coverage but also for advertisements. For example, Price, Tewksbury and Huang (1998) investigated college students' judgments about a controversial advertisement claiming that the Nazi campaign against the Jews in the WWII was an exaggeration. They found that Jewish students tended to show larger third-person effect than did other students and that they were more likely to oppose publication of the advertisement.

Even with recognition of little previous research on the relationship between issue-involvement and the third-person perception in the context of news releases, as found in the previous studies, issue-involvement is proposed to be related with the third-person effect for news release types of message as follows:

H6: Individuals highly involved with the message issue are likely to show more third-person perception than those with low involvement.

Comparison Referent and the Third-Person Effect: Social Distance Corollary

The comparison referent refers to people who individuals have in their minds when asked to compare message impacts on themselves and other people. Consistent with optimistic bias research, the magnitude of the third-person effect varies depending on who is chosen as a comparative referent (Alicke et al., 1995; Chapin, 2000; Harris &

Middleton, 1994; Klar, Medding & Sarel, 1996; Perloff, 1987; Weinstein & Klein, 1996; Whaley, 2000). Along with optimistic bias research, the third-person effect research has been reported to be greatest when subjects have compared themselves to others generally, such as typical or average group members (Cohen, Mutz, Price & Gunther, 1988; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Weinstein & Klein, 1996; Wood, Taylor & Lichtman, 1985).

This tendency is referred to as the social distance corollary in the third-person effect literature. Social distance corollary refers to the tendency that the greater perceived distance between self and comparison referent, the greater the magnitude of the third-person effect. The third-person effect is proposed to hinge on the particular comparison referent that subjects have in mind when they are asked to compare.

Duck and Mullin (1995) asked subjects to think about different types of media content while bearing in mind influence on one of four comparison others: the 'average person' (vague distant); or one of your friends (vague-close), Robert de Castella (specific distant) or your closest friend (specific close) (Duck & Mullin, 1995). The perceived self-other difference was more pronounced when respondents compared themselves with vague others than with specific others. The results provided initial evidence to indicate that the third-person effect is not an ubiquitous response to the issue of social influence, but is mediated by the nature of the comparison other, by the nature of the media issue, and by the characteristics of the perceiver. These findings are consistent with the notion of the social comparison that vague comparison others facilitate downward comparisons with someone who is more at risk than the self, while the vulnerability of specific others is not so easily distorted.

Cohen, Mutz, Price and Gunther (1988) also found that the third-person effect was magnified as the "others" became gradually more distant from subjects (e.g., from "other Stanford students" to "other Californians" to "public opinion at large"). In addition, studies by Hoffner, Plotkin, Buchanan, Anderson et al (2001), Gunther (1991), Brosius and Engel (1996), and Gibbon and Durkin (1995) supported it. However, studies by Cohen and Davis (1991), Conners (1994) and McLeod et al. (1997) did not support it.

As Perloff (1993, 1999) indicated, however, none of the third-person research employed any perceptual measure of social distance. Furthermore, no effort has been made to investigate who individuals actually have in mind when they are asked to compare message impacts on themselves and other people. This concern is taken into account in this study.

RQ2: Who, as a comparison referent, do individuals actually construct in their minds when they are asked to compare media effects on themselves and others?

RQ3: How does the magnitude of the third-person perception differ according to the comparison referents?

Not only the direction and magnitude of the third-person effect but also its behavioral consequences are important in understanding the third-person effect, examined herein.

Consequences of the Third-Person Effect

The perceptual bias of self-other difference in media impact is expected to lead people to take actions. The behavioral consequence of the third-person effect has been observed in some studies regarding negative topics - violence, pornography or

defamatory communication (e.g., Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1997; Price et al., 1998; Rojas et al., 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wu & Koo, 2001).

The behavioral component found in previous research takes two directions: either prevention or support, depending on media content. For example, a cognitive bias of people to think that others are more likely to be influenced by violence or pornography in media may lead them to take action such as censorship or restriction of the press, to prevent the impact of media message on others (e.g., Davison, 1983; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1997; Price et al., 1998; Rojas et al., 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wu & Koo, 2001). This behavioral intention of the third-person is supposed to result from a paternalistic attitude that they have to protect vulnerable people from undesirable effect (Ruscinski & Salmon, 1990) or an illusion that they are superior to others in controlling negative things. However, most studies with positive message topics such as public service announcements, have examined the perceptual component of the third-person effect, without attention to its behavioral consequences.

The behavioral consequences of the third-person perception are particularly intriguing to policy makers and public relations practitioners. However, as Perloff (2002) suggests, the association between perception and its behavioral consequences is described as too simplistic and vague, in that the hypothesis ignores the process mediating the perception and behavior relationship (p. 499).

To verify the association of the third-person perception and its behavioral consequences, more research is needed to examine various message contexts such as news releases, which this study has in perspective.

In this sense, a research question is proposed as follows:

RQ4: What are the behavioral consequences of the third-person perception with regard to positive and negative news releases?

Table 1 Message Topic of the Third-Person Effect

Research Subject	Examples
Defamatory Communication Message	Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Gunther, 1991b
Violence on Television	Boynton & Wu, 1999; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Hoffner et al., 1999; Hoffner et al., 2001; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Paxton, 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999
Sexually Explicit Message or Pornography	Gunther, 1995; Gunther, 1996; Lee, 1996; McLeod, 1999; Lo, 2000; Paxton, 1996; Rojas, 1996; Wu, 2001
Violent and Misanthropic Lyrics	Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; McLeod, Jr., & Nathanson, 1997
Television Drama	Lasorsa, 1989; Perloff, Neuendorf, Giles, Chang, & Jeffres, 1992
News Reports	Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Fuse & Chang, 1998; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Gunther, 1992; Gunther, 1998; Kressel, 1987; Perloff, 1989; Price, Huang & Tewksbury, 1997; Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985; White, 1997
Political Message	Duck, Hogg & Terry, 1995b; Hu, 1999; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Salwen, 1998; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997; Willnat, 1996
Political Adwatch	Cappella & Jamieson, 1994; Ognianova, Meeds, Thorson, & Coyle, 1996
Political Advertising	Cohen & Davis, 1991; Price, Tewksbury & Huang, 1998; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999
Commercial Ads	Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Shah, Faber & Youn, 1999
Public Service Announcements	Chapin, 2000; Duck & Mullin, 1995b; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995c; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; White & Dillon, 2000
Others (Internet message, Media usage, Technology Issue, Moral Issue, & Body Image)	David & Johnson, 1998; Gibbon & Durkin, 1995; Mason, 1995; Matera & Salwen, 1999; Peiser & Peter, 2000; Salwen & Dupagne, 2000; Wu, Zhou, & Koo, 2001

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Research Design

Overview

A post-test only, between-subjects experiment involving two public relations news releases on the topics of "a lawsuit against a corporation" and "corporate philanthropy" was designed to test the proposed hypotheses and to answer the research questions.

The message valence of the news releases was manipulated in two ways. A company's message regarding a lawsuit against the company's products was manipulated as a negative message. A company's message with regard to corporate philanthropy was manipulated as a positive message.

Several questions were asked about message valence after respondents were exposed to the messages for manipulation check. The two issues provide different contexts for testing the third-person effect in various situations in association with respondents' characteristics such as involvement, predisposition or self-esteem.

After being exposed to the messages, subjects were asked about perceived desirability of the message, self-esteem, issue-involvement, and comparison referents. The variables were used as independent variables.

The dependent variables included message effects estimates on the self and on others (the third-person perception) and its behavioral consequences.

Sampling and Respondents

A convenience sampling method was employed. Subjects of this study (n=229) were Michigan State University undergraduate students recruited from advertising, communication, and telecommunication courses for extra credit. According to Cohen's Power Tables (Cohen, 1988), 229 cases give the power of .95 with medium effect size (d=.5) for the α= .05 significance level.

The sample ranged in age from 18 to 41 years with an average of 22. Forty-four percent of the respondents are male, 56% female. Ninety-two percent of them were single. Seventy-one percent of them are Caucasian, 16% are African-American, and 13% are other, including Asian and Hispanic. Ninety five percent were juniors and seniors.

Procedure

Experimental sessions were run in classrooms on the campus of Michigan State University for two weeks from June 26 to July 9, 2002. Subjects were given a consent form to sign. Only those who agreed to participate in the study were instructed to sign the form and continue the experimental procedure. After completing a one-page questionnaire assessing their knowledge and attitude about the company, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (positive, negative messages). Subjects were asked to read the message carefully and then fill out self-administered questionnaires. Upon completing the experimental session, they were debriefed about the purpose and design of the study and dismissed.

Stimulus Materials

Two public relations messages were developed: a corporation's news releases about a lawsuit against the corporation (negative message) and about corporate philanthropy (positive message) (see Appendix A2 and A3).

To control effects of predisposition, about the company, on message impacts perception, a fictitious and nonexistent corporate name was used. To give a genuine sense of corporate news releases, the messages were refined by public relations professionals. To control other possible confounding variables in the conditions, an effort was made to keep message elements such as layout, word count and font size, identical across the conditions.

Measures

Message Valence (Positive versus Negative)

Message valence is defined as people's perception of message balance in content. Message valence was measured with the statements anchored by descriptive terms including positive/negative, desirable/undesirable, and legitimate/ illegitimate. The three items were aggregated to make an index of message valence (α = .88; $\underline{M}$ = 5.30; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.51) for manipulation check.

Predisposition of Company

Predisposition of company is defined as people's overall feelings and attitudes toward the company, in other words, associations and meanings a person has about the organization (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Predisposition of the company was measured on 7-point scales anchored by descriptive terms including positive/negative, good/bad, favorable/unfavorable, beneficial/not beneficial, valuable/worthless, credible/not

credible, agreeable/disagreeable, pleasant/unpleasant, and responsible/irresponsible. The nine items were aggregated to make an index and Cronbach's alphas was .94. ($\underline{M}$ = 4.29; $\underline{SD}$ = .72). This was also measured for manipulation check.

The Third-Person Perception: Perceived Message Impact on the Self and Others

A standard third-person effect question regarding general media effects on themselves and others, as used in previous third-person research, was measured with the following two questions on a 7-point scale anchored by "not at all" and "very much": For the self measure, "How much do you think you are influenced by the message?" For 'other people' measure, "How much do you think other people would be influenced by the message?" In order to avoid the potential question order effect when people knowingly compare themselves to others, random assignment of question order was conducted. The measure of the actual third-person effect involves subtracting "self" from "other" measures.

Perceived Desirability of Message

Perceived desirability of message is operationalized as the extent to which people perceive the message they read as personally desirable to be affected by. This concerns the message's desirability to-be-affected, not the perceived goodness of the issue involved. Perceived desirability of message was measured on 7-point scales anchored by descriptive terms including good/bad, desirable/undesirable, harmless/harmful, helpful/helpless, beneficial/not beneficial, and valuable/worthless. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to verify unidimensionality of the six items for the perceived desirability of the message. Table 2 presents a correlation matrix of the six

items. The initial estimates of factor loadings were .86 (good), .87 (desirable), .84 (harmless), .81 (helpful), .87 (beneficial), and .85 (valuable). Squaring these figures produced corresponding communality estimates of .74, .76, .71, .66, .76, and .72 respectively. These figures were inserted into the diagonal of the correlation matrix, and factor loadings were estimated. This procedure was repeated until stable factor loadings were obtained. The stable factor loadings were .84, .85, .80, .76, .85, and .82 respectively. These values were used in conjunction with the internal consistency theorem to produce the predicted correlation matrix. As a result, residuals were calculated and the error size was trivial, so the data were consistent with the unidimensional model. These items were aggregated to make an index for perceived desirability of message and its Cronbach's alpha was .92 ($\underline{M}$ = 4.71; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.25).

Table2. Zero-Order Correlations between Items for the Perceived Desirability

	Good	Desirable	Harmless	Helpful	Beneficial	Valuable
Good						
Desirable	.81***					
Harmless	.70***	.68***				
Helpful	.62***	.59***	.60***			
Beneficial	.63***	.68***	.67***	.71***		
Valuable	.65***	.69***	.63***	.62***	.75***	

*** $\underline{p} < .001$

Comparison Referent

Comparison referent refers to an individual or a group of individuals whom respondents actually construct in their minds when they are asked to compare message effects on themselves and others. A question asking specific comparison referent was posed as follows: Who did you have in mind when you were asked to think about the message impact on other people? The following answer category was given: family members, closest friends, close friends, students your age on campus, students your age at other universities in the U.S., the general public, and other (please specify).

Respondent's Characteristics: Demographics, Issue Involvement, and Self-Esteem

Basic demographic information was measured. In addition, issue involvement and self-esteem were measured.

Issue involvement was measured on 7-point scales anchored by descriptive terms including important/unimportant, significant/insignificant, of concern to me/of no concern to me, relevant/irrelevant, means a lot to me/means nothing to me, matters to me/doesn't matter to me.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to verify unidimensionality of the six items for issue involvement. Table 3 presents a correlation matrix of the six items for Issue involvement. The initial estimates of factor loadings were .72 (important), .65 (significant), .83 (of concern to me), .80 (relevant), .84 (means a lot to me), and .86 (matters to me). Squaring these figures produced corresponding communality estimates of .52, .42, .69, .64, .71, and .74 respectively. These figures were inserted into the diagonal of the correlation matrix, and factor loadings were estimated. This procedure was repeated until stable factor loadings were obtained. The stable factor loadings were .63, .53, .80, .75, .82, and .85 respectively. These values were used in conjunction

with the internal consistency theorem to produce the predicted correlation matrix. As a result, residuals were calculated and the error size for correlations with item 1 and 2 are large, so item 1('important') and 2 ('significant') were not included in the issue involvement index. Four items ('of concern to me,' 'relevant,' 'means a lot to me,' and 'matters to me') were aggregated to make an index for issue involvement and its Cronbach's alpha was .90 (M = 4.62; SD = 1.52).

Table 3 Zero-Order Correlations between Issue Involvement Items

	Of concern to me	Relevant	Means a lot	Matters to me
Of concern to me				
Relevant	.59			
Means a lot	.79	.53		
Matters to me	.82	.58	.88	

Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1979) (Cronbach' α = .89; M = 5.60; SD = 1.01).

Behavioral Consequences of the Third-Person Perception

Behavioral consequences of the third-person perception were measured by several items in the positive and negative message conditions. To respondents exposed to the positive message condition, 5 items were asked on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by "very unlikely" and "very likely": After reading the message, how likely are you to (1) support the company? (M = 3.97; SD = 1.83), (2) prefer the company's

products to competitors'? (M = 3.78; SD = 1.87), (3) volunteer to help the company? (M = 2.88; SD = 1.63), (4) donate money to help the issue? (M = 3.02; SD = 1.78) and (5) register to donate bone marrow? (M = 3.14; SD = 1.85)

For those who were exposed to the negative message condition, 5 items were asked on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored by "very unlikely" and "very likely": After reading the message, how likely are you to (1) tell other people not to buy the company's products? (M = 2.89; SD = 1.89), (2) support enforcement of product safety regulation? (M = 3.48; SD = 1.98), (3) avoid purchasing the company's products? (M = 3.28; SD = 1.91), (4) boycott the company? (M = 2.14; SD = 1.50), and (5) join the lawsuit? (M = 1.74; SD = 1.33).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Company Name and Predisposition of the Company

Ninety-three percent of respondents said they never before had heard the company's name, "Allied Toy." Overall, subjects showed a neutral attitude toward the company ($M = 4.29$; $SD = .72$). Eighty-seven percent of respondents were found to have neutral attitudes ranging from 3 to 5 in mean (on a 7 point scale) toward the company. The other 13% of respondents who were found to have a little positive or negative predisposition did not show any particular pattern in terms of demographics and message impact perception. Most respondents seemed never to have been exposed to the hypothetical company name and did not have any directed predisposition towards the company.

Message Valence

Subjects exposed to the positive message perceived that the message was more positive ($M = 6.60$; $SD = .48$) than did those exposed to the negative message ($M = 4.06$; $SD = 1.05$) [$t\ (227) = 23.20$, $p < .001$]. The negative message was not perceived as absolutely negative, which seems to be appropriate rather than problematic, because news releases from a company even with regard to negative events tend to be written as appearing neutral or legitimate so as not to elicit negative reaction from the public.

Question Order Effect

To avoid the potential question order effect when people knowingly compare themselves to others, random assignment of question order was conducted. Mean differences in message effects on themselves and on others were not statistically significant ($p > .05$) in the others-as-standard questionnaire, where estimation of message effects on others was followed by an estimation of message effects on themselves, and self-as-standard questionnaire.

Confound Checks

Subjects who were exposed to the positive and negative messages did not show any significant difference in predisposition towards the company and in demographics including self-esteem.

Hypothesis 1

Before testing the following hypotheses, the third-person perception was calculated by subtracting 'the self' measures from 'other people' measures. In the positive message context, the estimate of the third-person perception was .47 (perceived message impact on the self: $M = 4.49$; $SD = 1.40$; perceived message impact on others: $M = 4.96$; $SD = .98$). In the negative message context, the estimate of the third-person perception is .76 (perceived message impact on the self: $M = 3.75$; $SD = 1.60$; perceived message impact on others: $M = 4.51$; $SD = 1.24$).

H1 predicted that individuals perceive that they are less susceptible than others to negative public relations messages, i.e., the third-person perception in the negative message context.

Significant mean difference in perception of message effects on the self and other was found for subjects who were exposed to the negative messages, as can be seen in Table 4. Subjects exposed to the negative message perceived that they (M = 3.75; SD = 1.60) are less susceptible to the message than others (M = 4.51; SD = 1.24). The estimate of the third-person perception (M_{diff} = .76) was significantly different from zero [t(116) = 6.01, p<.001]. Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Table 4 One-Sample t-test for the Third-Person Perception in the Negative Message

Message Impact								
On the Self		On Others						
M	SD	M	SD	M_{diff}	SD	t	df	sig.(1-tailed)
3.75	1.60	4.51	1.24	.76	1.36	6.01	116	p < .001

Hypothesis 2

H2 predicted that individuals perceive that they are less susceptible than others to the positive public relations messages, i.e., the third-person perception in the positive message context.

Table 5 indicates that significant mean difference in perception of message effects on self and others was found for subjects who were exposed to the positive messages. Subjects exposed to the positive message perceived that they (M = 4.49; SD = 1.40) are less susceptible to the message than are others (M = 4.96; SD = .98). The estimate of

the third-person perception (M_{diff} = .47) was significantly different from zero [t(111) = 4.35, p<.001]. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table 5 One-Sample t-test for the Third-Person Perception in the Positive Message

Message Impact								
On the Self		On Others						
M	SD	M	SD	M_{diff}	SD	t	df	sig.(1-tailed)
4.49	1.40	4.96	.98	.47	1.13	4.35	111	p < .001

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the magnitude of the third-person perception would be greater for individuals who were exposed to the negative message than for those exposed to the positive message.

An independent-sample t-test was conducted to examine mean difference of the third-person perception estimates between subjects in the positive and negative message conditions. Table 6 indicates that no significant mean difference in the third-person perception was found between subjects in the positive and negative message conditions. H3 was not supported.

Table 6 An Independent-Sample t-test for the Third-Person Perception between Positive and Negative Messages

	Positive Message		Negative Message				
	M	SD	M	SD	t	df	sig. (1-tailed)
Third-Person Effect	.46	1.13	.76	1.37	-1.78	227	p > .05

Hypotheses 4

Hypothesis 4 proposed that the less the perceived desirability of the message, the greater the third-person perception. To examine the relationship between perceived desirability of the message and the third-person perception, correlations were calculated.

Table 7 indicates that in both positive and negative message conditions, perceived desirability of the message is negatively correlated with the third-person effect. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Table 7 Correlations between Perceived Desirability of the Message and The Third-Person Perception

	Positive Message	Negative Message
	Perceived Desirability	Perceived Desirability
Third-Person Perception	-.50**	-.20*

* p<.05 ** p<.01

For more specific analysis, correlations between each item of the perceived desirability index and the third-person perception were examined. Table 8 indicates that in the positive message condition, the more the subjects perceive the message to be good, desirable, harmless, helpful, beneficial, and valuable, the smaller the third-person effect. In the negative message condition, however, three items, "helpful," "beneficial," and "valuable" had significant negative relationship with the third-person perception, whereas other items such as "good," "desirable," and "harmless" did not. That is, for those exposed to the negative message, if they perceive the message as helpful, beneficial, and valuable to be affected by, they perceive more message impact on themselves than others.

Table 8 Correlations between Items of the Perceived Desirability of Message and the Third-Person Perception

	Positive Message Condition	Negative Message Condition
	Third-Person Perception	Third-Person Perception
Good	-.49***	.05
Desirable	-.51***	-.07
Harmless	-.33***	-.12
Helpful	-.37***	-.22*
Beneficial	-.41***	-.26**
Valuable	-.45***	-.28**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 5 proposed that individuals with high self-esteem would tend to show higher third-person perception than those with low self-esteem.

Two independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine the relationship between self-esteem and the third-person perception. Self-esteem was dichotomized at the median for the analysis. As can be seen in Table 9, there were no significant mean differences in estimates of the third-person perception between individuals with low self-esteem and those with high self-esteem in the positive and negative message context respectively. Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Table 9 Independent-Samples t-test for Self-Esteem and the Third-Person Effect

	Self-Esteem								
	Low		High						
	M	SD	M	SD	M_{diff}	SD	t	df	sig. (1-tailed)
Positive Message Condition	.51	1.14	.42	1.13	.09	.21	.40	110	$p > .05$
Negative Message Condition	.68	1.24	.87	1.52	-.19	.26	-.74	115	$p > .05$

Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 6 stated that individuals highly involved with the message issue are likely to show more third-person perception than are those with low involvement.

Two independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine the relationship between issue-involvement and the third-person effect. Issue-involvement was dichotomized at the median for the analysis.

Table 10 indicates that in the positive message conditions, subjects with low issue-involvement ($\underline{M}$ = 1.07; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.21) showed higher third-person perception than did those who with high issue-involvement ($\underline{M}$ = .38; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.09). [$\underline{M}_{diff}$ = .69, t(110) = 2.18, $p<.05$]. The same tendency was found in the negative message condition. As can be seen in Table 10, subjects with low involvement ($\underline{M}$ = 1.00; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.38) showed higher third-person perception than those with high involvement with the issue ($\underline{M}$ = .48; $\underline{SD}$ = 1.31). [$\underline{M}_{diff}$ = .52, t(115) = 2.07, $p<.05$]. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

Table 10 Independent-Samples t-tests for Issue-Involvement and the Third-Person Effect

	Issue-Involvement								
	Low		High						
	$\underline{M}$	$\underline{SD}$	$\underline{M}$	$\underline{SD}$	$\underline{M}_{diff}$	$\underline{SD}$	$\underline{t}$	df	sig. (1-tailed)
Positive Message Condition	1.07	1.21	.38	1.09	.69	.32	2.18	110	$\underline{p} < .05$
Negative Message Condition	1.00	1.38	.48	1.31	.52	.25	2.07	115	$\underline{p} < .05$

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was about how individuals' perception of message impacts on themselves compared to others differs according to their demographic characteristics.

No statistically significant relationship was found between the third-person perception and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, major, marital status, and ethnicity.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was about who, as a comparison referent, individuals actually construct in their minds when they are asked to compare media effects on themselves and others. Table 11 shows that subjects who read the positive message thought of family members (22.3%), students their age on campus (16.1%), or the general public (49.1%) as their comparison referents. Subjects exposed to the negative message thought of family members (26.7%), the general public (46.6%), and others (12.1%) as their comparison referents. For "others" category in the negative message condition, subjects referred to parents with children victims in the message as their comparison referents.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked how the magnitude of the third-person perception differs according to the comparison referents. Table 12 presents the result where the third-person perception was shown when individuals took family members, close friends, students on campus, and the general public as their comparison referents in the positive message context. In the negative message context, except in the case of closest friends,

the third-person perception was shown when the comparison referents were family members, close friends, students on campus and at other U.S. universities, the general public, and victims represented in the message.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 was about behavioral consequences of the third-person perception in the positive and negative news releases context. To examine the relationship between the third-person perception and behavioral intentions, correlations were calculated.

Table 13 indicates that in the positive message condition, a significant, moderate negative relationship was found between the third-person perception and behavioral intention. Specifically, the more people perceive more message impact on other people than themselves (i.e. the greater the third-person perception), the less they tend to: support the company, prefer the company's products to competitors', volunteer to help the company, donate money to help the issue, and register to donate bone marrow.

Meanwhile, as can be seen in Table 13, for those exposed to the negative message, the greater the third-person perception, the lower the likelihood of boycotting the company and joining the lawsuit. No significant relationship was found between the third-person perception and the other three items for the behavioral consequences.

Table 11 Cross-tabs of Comparison Referents in Positive and Negative Message Conditions

	Positive Message N (%)	Negative Message N (%)
Family members	25 (22.3)	31 (26.7)
Closest friends	5 (4.5)	6 (5.2)
Close friends	5 (4.5)	5 (4.3)
Students your age on campus	18 (16.1)	4 (3.4)
Students your age at other U.S. universities	3 (2.7)	2 (1.7)
General public	55 (49.1)	54 (46.6)
Others	1 (.9)	14 (12.1)
Total	112 (100.0)	116 (100.0)

Note $\chi^2 = 21.06$, df=6, $p < .01$

Table 12 The Third-Person Perception and the Comparison Referents

	Third-Person Perception	
Comparison Referents	Positive Message*	Negative Message**
Family members	.52	.77
Closest friends	.00	.00
Close friends	.60	1.00
Students your age on campus	.22	.50
Students your age at other U.S. universities	.00	1.50
General public	.60	.74
Victims (for Negative Message)		1.00

* $F(5,105) = .61, \quad p > .05$

** $F(6,109) = .51, \quad p > .05$

Table 13 Correlations between The Third-Person Perception and Behavioral Intention

Behavioral Intention Items	The Third-Person Perception
Positive Message Condition	
Support the company	-.42***
Prefer the company's products to competitors'	-.45***
Volunteer to help the company	-.47***
Donate money to help the issue	-.34***
Register to donate bone marrow	-.34***
Negative Message Condition	
Tell others not to buy the company's products	-.15
Support enforcement of product safety regulation	-.12
Avoid purchasing the company's products	-.05
Boycott the company	-.18*
Join the lawsuit	-.19*

* $p<.05$ *** $p<.001$

Post Hoc Analysis

Even though not stated in hypotheses and research questions, predictors of the behavioral intention may be one of the important aspects policy makers and campaigners are concerned about. Analyses about these are presented below.

Predictors of Behavioral Intention

To examine the contribution of explanatory variables to behavioral intention, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted because of multicollinearity among

third-person effect variables (e.g., estimate of message impact on the self, estimate of message impact on other people, and the third-person perception computed by subtracting mean estimate of message impact on the self from that of impact on others). Respondent's characteristics such as age, gender, self-esteem, and issue-involvement were entered in the first block across two separate regression models. Situational variable such as perceived desirability of the message was entered in the second block across two regression models. Variables for block 3 were estimate of the third-person perception for Model 1 and estimate of message impact perception on the self and estimate of message impact perception on others, for Model 2.

In the positive message condition, as can be seen in Table 14, Model 1 accounted for 40% of variance of behavioral intention (R^2 =.40, F(6,104)=11.58, p<.001). In Model 1, controlling for gender, age, and self-esteem, issue involvement showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention. Controlling for respondent's characteristics, perceived desirability of the message showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention. Controlling for other variables, the third-person perception accounted for 33% of variance of the behavioral intention. The third-person perception showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention.

Model 2 accounted for 52% of variance of the behavioral intention (R^2 =.52, F(7,103) = 15.76, p<.001). In Model 2, controlling for receiver's characteristics, perceived desirability of the message showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention. Controlling for other variables, estimate of message impact on the

self accounted for 54% of variance of the behavioral intention. Estimate of message impact on the self showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention.

In the negative message context, as Table 14 indicates, Model 1 accounted for 20% of variance in the behavioral intention (R^2 =.20, F(6,108) = 4.59, p<.001). Specifically, controlling other variables, issue involvement showed significant positive relationship with the behavioral intention.

Model 2 accounted for 20% of variance of the behavioral intention (R^2 =.20, F(7,107) = 3.89, p<.001). In Model 2, controlling for other variables, issue involvement accounted for 39% of variance of the behavioral intention, showing significant positive relationship.

Table 14 Regression Analysis: Predictors of Behavioral Intention

	Model 1	Model 2
Positive Message Condition		
Block 1		
Respondent's Characteristics		
Gender	-.02	-.03
Age	.05	.02
Self-Esteem	-.03	-.05
Issue-Involvement	.27***	.10
R^2 Change	.18***	.18***
Block 2		
Situational Variable		
Perceived Desirability of the Message	.24*	.21*
R^2 Change	.15***	.15***
Block 3		
The Third-Person Perception	-.33***	
R^2 Change	.08***	
Estimate of Message Impact on the Self		.54***
Estimate of Message Impact on Other People		-.01
R^2 Change		.19***
Model Fit		
R^2 Total	.40***	.52***

Table 14. (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2
Negative Message Condition		
Block 1		
Respondent's Characteristics		
Gender	.08	.08
Age	-.12	-.12
Self-Esteem	.01	.01
Issue-Involvement	.39***	.39***
R^2 Change	.19***	.19***
Block 2		
Situational Variable		
Perceived Desirability of the Message	-.06	-.06
R^2 Change	.00	.00
Block 3		
The Third-Person Perception	-.12	
R^2 Change	.01	
Estimate of Message Impact on the Self		.14
Estimate of Message Impact on Other People		-.11
R^2 Change		.01
Model Fit		
R^2 Total	.20***	.20***

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The Third-Person Effect

As found in tests of H1 and H2, the third-person perception was found for both negative and positive messages. Subjects perceived that they were less affected than others by the negative news releases from the company, types of communication that might be perceived as undesirable to be influenced by. According to the social comparison framework, individuals tend to have better-than-average perception or illusion of superiority so that they perceive they are more resistant than others to negative things. Therefore, individuals perceive greater impact of negative messages on other people than on self, as supported in the study.

The third-person perception was found to occur with positive, as well as negative messages in this study. Unlike studies where the reverse third-person perception was found with positive messages such as Public Service Announcements, this study found the third-person perception to exist also for the positive news releases. Even though the news releases were about positive corporate philanthropy, they might be perceived differently from general Public Service Announcements in terms of message format and desirability of being influenced. From the public relations perspective, taking the characteristics of news releases into consideration, positive news releases should not be expected necessarily to elicit positive and favorable message impact perception on people themselves. Depending on situational factors mentioned above, the positive corporate

news release may bring about unintended communication effects such as the third-person perception. Therein, communicators ought be careful in designing news releases and be cautious in their expectations of their communication effects.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the magnitude of the third-person perception would be more pronounced for the negative message than for the positive message. The third-person perception was greater for those exposed to the negative message than for those exposed to the positive message; however, the mean difference of the third-person perception for the two groups was not statistically significant. The failure to support this hypothesis may have resulted from the negative message stimulus not being sufficiently negative to elicit a more pronounced third-person perception. This may be an artifact of the use of a news release rather than a news story, which has been more typically used in third-person research. News releases—even those focusing on negative events—tend to be written in such a way as to convey negative information in manner that reflects positively on the sponsoring organization; news stories are much less likely to be written in this manner. A news release, a message is not subject to the same "neutral" or "objective" editorial control that it would receive once it appears in the pages of a newspaper, and thus tends to be written in a positive fashion. It would have been unrealistic to use as a stimulus a news release that openly emphasized the most negative news about the fictitious company used in this study, and hence some degree of internal validity was sacrificed for the sake of realism and external validity.

Perceived Desirability of the Message and the Third-Person Effect

Perceived desirability of the message was proposed as an important situational factor in the third-person effect research from the social comparison perspectives, in that

people tend to overestimate the possibility of experiencing desirable or positive events on themselves, or to underestimate the possibility of having undesirable or negative events on themselves, in order to enhance self-esteem. Along with the rationale, when it comes to message impact perception, if people believe the message to be good and desirable to be affected by, they would perceive that they are more likely susceptible than others to message impact because they are smarter and more open to the good thing. If the message is perceived to be undesirable to be affected by, people would not let the message influence themselves because they are sufficiently smart to resist message impact.

As supported in H4, perceived desirability of the message was found to have a negative relationship with the third-person perception, which was verified in the negative message condition as well as in the positive message condition.

The result suggests that message valence positive or negative assumed by researchers is one thing and perceived message valence by subjects is another. As shown in the result, even for those exposed to the positive message, if they perceive the message as undesirable to be affected by, they perceive more message impact on others than on themselves. Meanwhile, for those exposed to the negative message, if they perceive the message as desirable to be affected by, they perceive more message impact on themselves than on others. More specifically, the more subjects perceive the negative message as helpful, beneficial, and valuable to be affected by, the more they perceive the message impact on themselves than on others.

As implied in the result, the perceived desirability of the message, rather than merely its valence, should be taken into consideration more in the estimating and comparing of message impact perception.

Self-Esteem, Issue-Involvement and the Third-Person Effect

Based on the social comparison framework, self-esteem was proposed as one of the important factors that may affect the third-person perception, even with a lack of empirical research. The result, however, showed no statistically significant relationship between self-esteem and third-person perception. The main reason may be because the subjects of this study were undergraduates who, supposedly, have higher self-esteem than do the general public, therefore it might be difficult to detect significant differences in message impact perception.

In addition to self-esteem, issue-involvement was proposed to have a positive significant relationship with the third-person perception. A statistically significant relationship was found, though contrary to what was proposed in Hypothesis 6. Issue-involvement was found to have a negative relationship with the third-person perception, that is, the less involved with the issue in the message, the greater the perceived message impact on others than selves, which is contrary to the hostile media phenomenon.

The result suggests that the relationship between issue-involvement and the third-person perception hinges upon the issues dealt with in the study. For example, hostile media phenomenon was found usually in previous research on the Middle East conflict (e.g., Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994; Perloff, 1989; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). The Middle East conflict was an issue on which several attentive publics with special interest and concerns may have been formed, in that the issue has a long history on the

public agenda. Furthermore, the Middle East conflict is an issue which tends to polarize, to compel individuals to identify themselves and others as in-groups or out-groups regarding the issue. Subjects in the previous studies might identify themselves and others as pro-Israel *vs.* pro-Palestine, in-groups *vs.* out-groups, or majority *vs.* minority in the issue. According to the previous studies, subjects whose attitude regarding the issue is established and who have high involvement in the issue are likely to show the hostile media phenomenon.

Unlike in the previous research, issues employed in this study were newer, less familiar, less involving. The degree of the issue-involvement of apathetic publics differs from that of attentive or active publics, thus leading to different effects on the perception in message impact on themselves and others. The result suggests that members of an inattentive or apathetic public with low involvement may tend to show higher third-person perception than those with high involvement. That is, members of an inattentive or apathetic public, who have no interest or has never identified with the issue, are likely to have low involvement with the issue and hence have less concern about the impact of the message on themselves.

The result implies that from the public relations perspective, segmentation of the publics based on issue-involvement and message impact perception, according to the configuration of the publics formed around issues, should be taken into account in designing public relations campaign messages.

Comparison Referent and the Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect is equivalent to the cognitive bias regarding comparative risk judgment in terms of social comparison. Unlike previous third-person research, this

study directly asked subjects whom, as a comparison referent, they actually construct in their minds when they compare media effects on themselves and others. Subjects in the positive message context had family members (22.3%), students their age on campus (16.1%,) or the general public (49.1%) as their comparison referents. Subjects exposed to the negative message said that they have family members (26.7%), the general public (46.6%), and others (12.1%) as their comparison referents. As frequently employed in previous research, the general public was found to be the most general comparison referent in the positive and negative message context. When people make a social judgment, they usually seem to have a general comparison referent rather than specific comparison objects. According to the social comparison framework, the general comparison referent facilitates downward comparisons because people do not have specific information regarding the comparison referent, thus easily distort risk susceptibility of the comparison referent in the way of self-esteem enhancement.

In the negative message condition, for "others" category which accounted for about 12%, subjects referred to victims represented in the message as their comparison referents. The "victim" in the message as a comparison referent has never been identified in the previous third-person research. The result suggests the possibility that when people are exposed to negative news releases from the company in a crisis, they may tend to compare themselves with the victims of the message. Thus, people may differentiate themselves from victims, or sometimes identify themselves with victims, if needed to enhance self-esteem or empathy. Public relations practitioners ought to take into account with whom people identify or compare when they read negative messages. When designing a public relations message, especially in a crisis situation, people's

perception about the crisis and the victims of the crisis should be taken into account so as not to ignore people's co-orientation with the victims, thus not evoke public resentment about the crisis and towards the company.

The magnitude of the third-person perception depending on social comparison referents was examined; however, social distance corollary was not found in this study. That is, the estimate of the third-person perception was not found to be greater according to the psychological distance between social comparison referent increases along the line from family members to the general public. Little research, however, attempted to measure the psychological distance which was assumed to enlarge along that line, which was the case in this study. The result implies that the social distance corollary may not be justified to exist yet until the perceived psychological distance among the social comparison referents is measured and compared with the difference in message impact perception.

Third-Person Perception and Its Behavioral Consequences

The association between the difference in perception of message impacts on self and others, and individuals' behavioral intention was examined. In previous research, behavioral consequences caused by the third-person perception generally were found to exist in negative message topics, but not much in positive and desirable message topics.

However, this study found that in the positive message condition, the more subjects perceive the message effect on themselves than on others (i.e., the less the third-person perception), the more they have the behavioral intention to do something favorable toward the company. Specifically, the more people perceive that they are influenced by the message, the more they tend to support the company, prefer the

company's products to competitors, volunteer to help the company, donate money to help the issue, and register to donate bone marrow. In other words, people's perception that they are more affected than others by positive news releases may lead to positive behavioral intention.

Meanwhile, in the negative message condition, two items, "boycott the company" and "join the lawsuit," showed significant negative relationship with the third-person perception. That is, if subjects perceive more message impact on others than on themselves, the less they tend to boycott the company and join the lawsuit against the company.

Predictors of the behavioral intention were estimated by regression analysis. In the positive message condition, issue-involvement, perceived desirability of the message, estimate of message impact on the self, and the third-person perception, were found to be significant explanatory variables for the behavioral intention. Specifically, the more subjects are involved with the issue, perceive the message as desirable, and perceive more message impact on the self, the more they tend to do something to support the company. The greater the third-person perception, the less behavioral intention to support the company. The result suggests that to get public support for, and participation in, public relations campaigns, communication messages should be designed sufficiently persuasively to cause the public to perceive the message as socially desirable as possible to be affected by, in order not to elicit unintended communication effect such as the third-person perception.

Meanwhile, in the negative message condition, issue-involvement was the only significant predictor for the behavioral intention to do something against the company.

That is, the more subjects perceive they are involved with the issue represented in the news releases, the more likely they are to do something against the company.

Implications

This study tried to further the third-person literature by investigating the third-person effect in the context of public relations news releases. Furthermore, this study adopts the social comparison framework to further the understanding of the third-person effect.

This study strengthened the third-person effect literature by providing additional empirical evidence of the prevalence of the third-person effect in the context of positive and negative news releases. It is notable that the third-person perception was found for the positive news releases with respect to a corporate philanthropy. The result implies that public relations professionals should take the unintended message impact perception seriously, and should be careful in designing communication messages.

Under the social comparison framework, several situational factors were examined and verified as playing important roles in estimating message impact perception. Not merely being assumed to exist, the perceived desirability of the message was measured and tested in regard to the third-person effect. The perceived desirability of the message was found to play an important role in perception of message effect on the self and on others. No matter how good or bad are the topics of public relations messages, the perceived desirability of the message decides the direction and magnitude of the message impact difference between themselves and others.

This study provides some helpful information to public relations practice. The third-person effect was chosen as one of the unintended communication effects that

should be considered in public relations message design. In creating messages for both crisis and non-crisis situations, public relations practitioners should take into account what readers think about the message and the issue dealt with in the message. Specifically, they should consider the following: how and what they perceive about the message in terms of desirability of influence, with whom they identify or compare when they read the message - thus any possibility to cause public sympathy with the victims or public resentment against the company, what are the positive or negative behavioral consequences the perception of message impacts can elicit, and so forth.

As examined in the study, beyond message topics (i.e., positive and negative), perceived desirability of the message was found to play an important role in message impact perception. The result implied that a communicator's perception about the message valence, and that of the public, are not identical. Public relations practitioners should not regard the positive message itself as a sufficient condition to elicit favorable public attitude toward the company or issues.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it attempted to explain the third-person effect based on the social comparison framework, especially focusing on motivational mechanisms such as self-esteem enhancement or ego-defensiveness. However, other theoretical frameworks such as learning theory or non-motivational mechanism (i.e., cognitive error, egocentric tendency, or heuristics, etc.) could be applied to the study of this phenomenon as well.

Second, the selection of message topic in public relations has an inherent limitation. There are so many different kinds of topics and issues involved in the public

relations arena, that the results of this study may be applicable to a limited area. The third-person perception and its behavioral consequences should be examined further in a variety of contexts within public relations.

Third, in addition to the perceived desirability of the message, other situational variables, such as perceived persuasive intent of message source, should be considered in future research. Individuals tend to have cognitive bias such as better-than-average perception or illusion of superiority, and thus may tend to think they are better than others in recognizing persuasive intent of the message source. This, in turn, may magnify perceptions of message impact on others compared with themselves. For example, even for a positive message concerning an organization's good deeds, ostensibly performed to fulfill its social responsibility, the public may interpret the persuasive intent of the organization as social cause exploitation for its brand recognition, tax reduction, or ultimate sales increase. This, in turn, may trigger resistance to the impact of the message, and a concern that others will be affected by it. Similarly, if a message in a crisis situation is perceived as a genuine attempt to inform the public and sincerely resolve a negative situation, rather than to conceal the facts or to deceive the public, it may engender less concern regarding presumed effects on others.

Fourth, future research should measure psychological distance between subjects and their referents, in order to more fully understand the function of the social distance corollary in the context of the third-person effect.

Finally, most third-person effect research has been examined using student subjects, thus raising a concern of external validity of generalization, and this study is no exception. Future research would benefit from studies of natural groupings of citizens in

which such factors as age, education, self esteem, issue involvement, and issue knowledge could be more fully explored as potential mediators of the third-person effect. In summary, while this study sheds light on several aspects of the third-person phenomenon, it simultaneously raises several new questions that can serve as the springboard for subsequent research efforts in this area.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A1

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

This survey will seek your opinion regarding **a message from a company**. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your anonymity will be guaranteed. Your identity will be kept confidential, and your response will be reported only in the aggregate so that you will not be identified or associated with the answer you provided. The survey results will be used only for research purposes. It will take about 10 minutes to complete the survey. You have the right to participate or not to participate in this survey. If you are not willing to participate in this survey, you can stop immediately or withdraw participation at any time during conducting the survey. Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. If you agree to participate in this survey, please fill in the following blanks.

I, _____ (name) agree to voluntarily participate in the survey regarding mass media messages.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop.

Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____ Date_____

If you have any question or concerns regarding the survey, please contact:

Hyun Soon Park	**Ashir Kumar**
Project Coordinator	**UCRIHS Chair**
517-353-0939	517-355-2180
parkhyu5@msu.edu	ucrihs@msu.edu

University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

APPENDIX A2

Stimulus: Positive Message

ALLIED TOY 

CONTACT:
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610-971-5823

Audrey@alliedtoy.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Allied Toy Launches "Racing To Save Children's Lives"
And Commits To Helping Youngsters With Life-Threatening Diseases

MADISON, N.J., June 25, 2002 — Allied Toy Company announced today it will launch a new program, Racing To Save Children's Lives, a program that is designed to facilitate bone marrow transplants for children with life-threatening blood diseases such as leukemia and lymphoma.

"We are committed to helping children who suffer from leukemia and lymphoma to live healthy and happy," said Robert Davis, President of Allied Toy. "We believe the program will enable us to give back to our customers and communities," Mr. Davis adds.

Allied Toy pledged to donate $2 million to financially support children in need of bone marrow transplants. Allied employees volunteered to donate their marrow and pledged to transfer their airline frequent flier miles to facilitate emergency bone marrow delivery and patient assistance. Allied will host bone marrow drives in Detroit, Chicago, and Indianapolis to recruit volunteers and potential donors. Allied will also operate a patient resource center where children with leukemia and their families can obtain medical information and receive emotional support.

Allied Toy is the world's leading supplier of quality products designed to stimulate children's creativity, imagination, and learning.

###

APPENDIX A3

Stimulus: Negative Message

ALLIED TOY 

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610-971-5823

Audrey@alliedtoy.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ill-Conceived Lawsuit Makes False Claims About Allied Toy Safety

MADISON, N.J., June 25, 2002 — Allied Toy Company adamantly opposes efforts to certify a national class action lawsuit concerning 200 children reportedly injured in connection with possible fires in battery-powered Power Wheels® ride-on cars and trucks.

"Allied has always believed its products to be safe," says Robert Davis, President of Allied Toy Company. "Our products are designed for use with specific battery types, and some parents improperly installed over-sized batteries. Our research has proven what we've always known, that when product specifications and safe-use instructions are followed, Power Wheels® will not overheat and burn children's legs," Mr. Davis adds.

Allied will vigorously defend the products in this lawsuit against the exaggerated and unscientific claims that unnecessarily alarm consumers and generate negative headlines.

Allied Toy was founded in 1970 and has a rich tradition of providing quality toys that are safe for children of all ages. Allied always puts customer safety first. Allied is the world's leading supplier of quality products designed to stimulate children's creativity, imagination, and learning.

###

APPENDIX B

Measures

1. Have you heard about a company named "**Allied Toy**" before?

(1) Yes _____ (2) No _____

2. What do you think about the company in general? Below is a set of word pairs. Please mark an 'X' in the space closest to the word which best reflects your feelings about the company. (For example, Bad ____:____:____:__X__:____:____:____ Good)

THE COMPANY seems .....

(1) Positive	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Negative
(2) Good	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Bad
(3) Favorable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Unfavorable
(4) Not beneficial	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Beneficial
(5) Valuable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Worthless
(6) Credible	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Not credible
(7) Disagreeable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Agreeable
(8) Pleasant	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Unpleasant
(9) Responsible	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Irresponsible

3. Is there any particular company that comes to your mind when you heard the company name, Allied Toy?

(1) Yes _____

(*if yes, please specify* _____)

(2) No_____

(OVER)

Instructions: The following questions are about your opinions of the message you've just read. Please read the questions carefully and answer them.

4. After reading the message, what do you think about the message in general? Below is a set of word pairs. Please mark an 'X' in the space closest to the word which best reflects your feelings about the message. (please indicate only ONE mark for each question)
(For example, Bad ____:____:____:__X__:____:____:____ Good)

The message in general is .....

(1) Positive	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Negative
(2) Undesirable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Desirable
(3) Legitimate	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Illegitimate

* Please mark an 'X' in the space closest to the word which best reflects your thought.
(For example, Bad ____:____:____:__X__:____:____:____ Good)

5. **It is ..... for (of) ME to be influenced by the message:**

(1) Good	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Bad
(2) Undesirable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Desirable
(3) Harmful	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Harmless
(4) Helpful	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Helpless
(5) Not beneficial	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Beneficial
(6) Valuable	____:____:____:____:____:____:____	Worthless

6. After reading the message, how much do you think YOU are influenced by the message?

Not influenced at all Extremely influenced

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. How much do you think OTHER PEOPLE would be influenced by the message?

Not influenced at all Extremely influenced

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

* Below is a set of word pairs. Please mark an 'X' in the space closest to the word which best reflects **YOUR** feelings about **"the issue"** addressed by the company.
(For example, Bad___:___:___:_X_:___:___:___ Good)

8. **The issue addressed by the company in the message is .....**

(1) Unimportant ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Important
(2) Significant ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Insignificant
(3) Of no concern to me ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Of concern to me
(4) Irrelevant ____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Relevant
(5) Means nothing to me____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Means a lot to me
(6) Doesn't matter to me____:____:____:____:____:____:____ Matters to me

(For the Positive Message)

9. **After reading the message,** how likely are YOU to .....?:

	Very Unlikely						Very Likely
(1) support the company?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(2) prefer the company's products to competitors'?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(3) volunteer to help the company?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(4) donate money to help the issue?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(5) register to donate bone marrow?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

(For the Negative Message)

9. **After reading the message,** how likely are YOU to .....?:

	Very Unlikely						Very Likely
(1) tell other people not to buy the company's products?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(2) support enforcement of product safety regulation?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(3) avoid purchasing the company's products?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(4) boycott the company?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(5) join the lawsuit?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

10. **WHO** did you have in your mind when you were asked to think about the message impact on **OTHER PEOPLE**? Choose only **ONE** _____

(1) family members (2) closest friends (3) close friends

(4) students your age on campus (5) students your age at other universities in the U.S.

(6) the general public

(7) other (***please specify here***:_____)

11. The following questions are about yourself. Please read the questions carefully and answer them. Please circle the appropriate number (please indicate only one for each question). (1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 means "strongly agree")

	Strongly Disagree						Strongly Agree
(1) On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(2) At times I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(3) I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(4) I am able to do things as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(5) I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(6) I certainly feel useless at times.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(7) I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(8) I wish I could have more respect for myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(9) All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(10) I take a positive attitude toward myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

12. These are a few personal questions. Please mark an 'X' in the appropriate blank or fill in the blank with your answer.

1) What is your gender? (1) Male_____ (2) Female_____

2) What is your age? _____

3) What is your major? _____

4) What is your year in college?

(1) Freshman _____ (2) Sophomore _____

(3) Junior _____ (4) Senior _____

(5) Other (*please specify*) _____

5) What is your current marital status?

(1) Single_____ (2) Married_____ (3) Divorced _____

(4) Living with partner_____ (5) Widowed_____

(6) Other (*please specify*) _____

6) How do you describe your ethnic origin?

(1) Caucasian_____ (2) African-American_____ (3) Asian_____

(4) Hispanic_____ (5) Native American_____

(6) Other (*please specify*)_____

THIS IS THE END OF THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS SURVEY!

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