



# Social categorization and cross-cultural exploration of the third-person effect: Perceived impact of North Korea's nuclear test on the self and comparison targets

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## ABSTRACT

This experimental study explored the perceived media impact of North Korea's nuclear test on South Koreans and Americans to investigate whether a social categorization moderator affects a tendency to think that others will be more affected by the media. The results showed that the third-person perception was not found among South Koreans when in-group and out-group members were compared. We discussed how cultural factors might play a role in the third-person perception between two cultures: collectivistic culture (South Korea) and individualistic culture (America).

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## 1. Introduction

Based on the social categorization for the third-person effect, this study attempts to explore the perceived media impact of North Korea's nuclear test on both Americans and South Koreans and to investigate whether the comparison targets in two different countries affect the tendency to think that others will be more affected by the media. The third-person effect hypothesis utilized here predicts that people believe that others will be more affected by mass media than themselves (Davison, 1983). North Korea recently conducted its third nuclear test since 2006, presenting a threat to the Korean peninsula's safety and drawing an outrage from the United States and the international community. Through this study, it is expected that the coverage about North Korea will have a third-person impact on the perceptions of Americans and South Koreans such that each subject will believe that others will be more influenced than themselves by news coverage of North Korea's threats of a nuclear test.

The aim of this study is to incorporate social categorization explanations and cross-cultural aspects into previous third-person effect research. By using the news coverage of North Korea's threats of a nuclear test, this study investigates the effects of social categorization using in-group versus out-group comparisons, and examines the size of the third-person effect between South Koreans and Americans in terms of cross-cultural characteristics.

Several studies have found that estimates of media impacts on others increased when the comparison groups are more geographically distant (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1988; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997). However, little attention has been paid to exploring the third-person effect based on social categorization using one country as an in-group member and another country as an out-group member. Therefore, this study is designed to fill in the gaps of the third-person effect studies by comparing the perceived impact of two distant groups in two different countries based on the social categorization moderator and cross-cultural factors.

By conducting an experiment, this study explores whether the third-person effect will be greater when a comparison target is socially categorized as out-group members compared to in-group members. From a cross-cultural perspective, this study also examines whether Americans in an individualistic culture have a greater third-person effect than South Koreans in collectivistic culture.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The third-person effect

Davison (1983) first coined the third-person effect hypothesis as the tendency to presume that others will be more susceptible to negative media effects than themselves. People are likely to expect that exposure to mass media produces a greater effect on others than on themselves. As Davison (1983) noted, individuals exposed to a media message typically believe that "its greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them' – the third persons" (p. 3). Additionally, Davison (1983) also maintained that this belief of

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the media impact on others may motivate them to act or respond. He suggested that whatever effects persuasive messages have on behaviors are not due to the direct persuasive impacts of the messages themselves. Instead, he asserts that the effects are due to the actions of those who anticipate different responses from others.

Previous third-person effect studies have shown consistent findings on the greater perceived media impact on others (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1996, 1999; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). Perloff (1996) reviewed 16 studies of the third-person effect. All but one finds that people perceive greater media effects on others than on themselves. Only Glynn and Ostman (1988) failed to support the third-person effect. Glynn and Ostman (1988) found that respondents in general reported that both themselves and others were influenced by public opinion, and that others were not necessarily more susceptible to being influenced by public opinion. However, Glynn and Ostman (1988) specifically examined the influence of public opinion, not the specific influence of mass media as conducted in most third-person effect studies. Researchers have also examined third-person effects from various media contents, such as libelous newspaper articles (Cohen et al., 1988), pornography (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Wei, 2002; Lo, Wei, & Wu, 2010), the television movie “Amerika” (Lasorsa, 1989), product advertisements (Schmidt, 2011; Taylor, Bell, & Kravitz, 2011; Thorson & Coyle, 1994), negative political advertisements (Cohen & Davis, 1991), public service announcements (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Thorson & Coyle, 1994), rap music (McLeod et al., 1997), various forms of political communication (Lim & Golan, 2011; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), and social networking sites and blogs (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Paradise & Sullivan, 2012).

The mechanism behind the third-person effect has been heavily explained with the overestimation of the media effects on others. For example, Davison (1983) suggested that the third-person effect is caused by the overestimation of effects on others with relatively accurate estimates of effects on self. For the most part, the previous studies concurred with Davison’s (1983) argument that overestimation of effects on others is responsible for the third-person effect (Cohen et al., 1988; Gunther, 1991; Perloff, Neuendorf, Giles, Chang, & Jeffres, 1992; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1988). However, the evidence on whether people can accurately assess media effects on themselves is mixed. Cohen et al. (1988) found that individuals underestimate media effects on themselves. Gunther and Thorson (1992) reported that individuals also overestimate media effects on themselves. However, Gunther (1991) and Perloff et al. (1992) found that estimates of media effects on the self are relatively accurate. In either case of accurate estimate or underestimate of media effects on the self, most people have a tendency to perceive that the mass media influence others considerably more than themselves.

## 2.2. Social undesirability and the third-person effect

The majority of messages examined in the third-person effect are focused on a negative message (Perloff, 1996). Gunther and Mundy (1993) argued that the third-person effect only exists for undesirable media messages. Messages such as defamatory news coverage, negative political ads, and pornography are apt to allow people to believe “the effect of that message may not be so good for me” or “it is not smart to be influenced by” that message (Gunther & Mundy, 1993). In a similar way, Gunther and Thorson (1992) tested product advertisements as well as public service announcements and found the third-person effect in the product advertisements, but not in public service announcements, which had more desirable effects. Otherwise, they found the reverse third-person effect in which people answered they would be more influenced by the public service announcement than others would be.

Social undesirability is an important condition for the third-person effect because it supports assertions (e.g., Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992) that the third-person effect can be explained as an “optimistic bias” phenomenon – the tendency to presume the greater effects of undesirable outcomes on others. This biased optimism assumes the existence of a self-serving bias. People tend to judge themselves more favorably than they judge others, and that they believe they are less likely than others to experience negative events (Weinstein & Klein, 1996). According to Gunther and Mundy (1993), “The concept of harmful vs. beneficial outcome is a central one in theoretical research on the ‘optimistic bias’ phenomenon – the tendency for people to think they are less likely to have negative or undesirable experiences than others” (p. 60). People perceive that media content with negative consequences have more effect on others; however, people consider themselves just as influenced as others and may even anticipate less effect on themselves (Gunther & Mundy, 1993).

Following previous third-person effect studies, this study also employs socially undesirable messages of North Korea’s nuclear threat relevant to both individuals and the countries where those individuals are. President Obama called North Korea’s latest nuclear test a “highly provocative act” that threatens U.S. national security and international peace and security (Rampton, 2013). Based on previous third-person effect findings, the present study anticipates that both South Koreans and Americans will perceive a greater media effect from the news coverage of North Korea’s nuclear test on others than themselves. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1.** South Koreans will perceive the news coverage of North Korea’s nuclear threat to have a greater impact on others than themselves.
- H2.** Americans will perceive the news coverage of North Korea’s nuclear threat to have a greater impact on others than themselves.

## 2.3. Social categorization

Does a third-person effect vary according to various degrees of otherness? Addressing this question helps to understand individuals’ perceived media impact on comparison targets. Investigating degrees of “otherness” in terms of comparison targets should be rooted in social categorization moderator rather than social distance (Huge, Glynn, & Jeong, 2006).

The social distance corollary typically has been demonstrated by showing a pattern of increasing effects of undesirable messages as comparison groups grow more general or more geographically distant from the self. Cohen et al. (1988) manipulated experimentally who the “others” are and concluded that the perceived effect on others are exaggerated as “others” are defined more broadly, such as “other Stanford students”, “other Californians”, and “public opinion at large.” When Stanford students are asked about perceived media effects on opinions, they indicate that impact on self is less than the impact on other Stanford students, which is less than the impact on other Californians, which is less than the impact on public opinion at large. In sum, the third-person effects are greater as the “other” become more broadly defined (Cohen et al., 1988).

A number of the third-person effect studies also have found that the third-person effect varies by level of social distance of “others.” For example, Gibbon and Durkin (1995) found the third-person effect increases as others are defined more broadly: from self, to family, to neighbors, to other state residents, to other Australian citizen, to others in general. Brosius and Engel (1996) also found that the third-person effect is greater when others are defined as more psychologically remote from self than when others are described as psychologically close to self, such as friends and acquaintances. Duck and Mullin (1995) explored the third-person effect based on

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