Third-Person Perception and Facebook

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ABSTRACT

A survey of adolescents (N = 1,488) documented third-person perception (TPP) regarding Facebook use and cyber bullying. As Facebook establishes itself as the dominant social network, users expose themselves to a level of bullying not possible in the analog world. The study found that 84% of adolescents (middle school through college undergraduates) use Facebook, and that most users log on daily. While 30% of the sample reported being cyber bullied, only 12.5% quit using the site, and only 18% told a parent or school official. Despite heavy use and exposure, adolescents exhibit TPP, believing others are more likely to be negatively affected by Facebook use. The study contributes to the TPP literature, by linking the perceptual bias to self-protective behaviors. A range of self-protective behaviors from precautionary (deleting or blocking abusive users) to reactionary (quitting Facebook) were related to decreased degrees of TPP. TPP was also related to optimistic bias, experience, liking of and use of Facebook, and perceived subjective norms and age. Implications for prevention education are discussed.

Keywords: Cyber Bullying, Facebook, Risk Perception, Social Network, Third-Person Perception

INTRODUCTION

• Click “like” and share if you’re not affected:
• Adolescents, third-person perception and Facebook
• Consider the numbers:
  ◦ 800 million: Number of active Facebook users (Lyons, 2012).
  ◦ 49: Percentage of Americans using Facebook (Lyons, 2012).
  ◦ >50: Percentage of American teens who have been cyber-bullied (Bullyingstatistics.org).
  ◦ 10 to 15: Percentage of bullied teens who tell their parents (Bullyingstatistics.org).
  ◦ 4,400: Number of teen suicides in the U.S. each year (CDC, 2012).

The National Crime Prevention Council (2012) defines cyber bullying as “the process of using the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.” This may include sending cruel messages or threats to a person’s email account or cell phone, spreading rumors online or through texts, posting hurtful or

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threatening messages on social networking sites or web pages, stealing a person’s account information to break into their account and send damaging messages, pretending to be someone else online to hurt another person, taking unflattering pictures of a person and spreading them through cell phones or the Internet, and sexting or circulating sexually suggestive pictures or messages about a person.

The use of Facebook and other social media can be especially problematic, because once something is shared, it replicates and may never disappear, resurfacing at later times. Cyber bullying can be damaging to adolescents and teens. It can lead to depression, anxiety and suicide (Bullyingstatistics.org).

The purpose of the study is to document the extent of Facebook use and cyber bullying among a sample of adolescents. The study is theoretically grounded in third-person perception, the belief that media messages affect other people more than oneself. Exploring third-person perception, Facebook use and cyber bullying may shed light on the extent of the problem and may also explain why adolescents do not report cyber bullying and do not take self-protective measures online.

THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION

Third-person perception (TPP) predicts people believe others are more influenced than they are by media messages. Since the first study (Davison, 1983), nearly 30 years of research has documented TPP in a variety of contexts, including news coverage (Chapin, 2012; Wei, Lo & Lu, 2011), advertisements (Barak-Brandes, 2011; Taylor, Bell & Kravitz, 2011), and video games (Schmierbach, Boyle, Xu & McLeod, 2011). TPP usually emerges when people presume the influence of the media to be negative. Later work with positive or useful media messages (Atwood, 1994) yielded first-person perception (FPP), the belief that oneself is more influenced than are others by media messages.

While advertising, news coverage and pornography remain the most common research contexts, in recent years, scholars have begun extending TPP into new media. One recent study (Lim & Golan, 2011) documented TPP regarding political parody videos posted on YouTube. Participants believed others were more influenced than they were by the videos. Perceiving the influence to be negative, participants exhibiting TPP were more likely to support censorship of YouTube videos.

Similar findings were reported regarding Internet pornography (Lo, Wei & Wu, 2010) and online gaming (Zhong, 2009). Only one previous study has examined TPP regarding social networking sites. Zhang and Daugherty (2009) found TPP regarding “social networking sites” (none were specified, but MYSpace was the most popular site at the time of the study) among a sample of 190 college students. College students exhibiting TPP were less likely to visit new social networks, based on peers’ suggestions and were also less likely to search out and discuss gift ideas through social networking sites.

Another study (Waggoner, Smith & Collins, 2009) referenced “person perception,” but did not measure TPP. Instead, 147 pairs of college students (one active perceiver, one passive perceiver) evaluated Facebook profiles in terms of politics and religion. Passive perceivers liked the target Facebook pages more and had greater confidence in their judgments about the Facebook users than did active perceivers. The finding suggests passive viewers make snap judgments about others on Facebook, but doesn’t ground the finding in TPP. Both studies rely on convenience samples of college students drawn from a single university campus. One study (Paradise & Sullivan, 2012) documents TPP regarding Facebook among a convenience sample of college students. Students believed they were less likely than others to experience negative outcomes from their Facebook use in their personal relationships, future employment opportunities, and privacy. The current study uses a broader range of adolescents (middle
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