

Third-Person Effect and the
Children's Advertising Review Unit

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Obesity is increasingly mentioned in the media as a growing national health problem. The severity of the problem and its long-term implications for public health have led to a wealth of scholarly research into many facets of obesity. One subset of the problem is the issue of childhood obesity. This analysis will look at one study, Hoy and Morrison (2006), which deals with the advertising self-regulation agency known as the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU), in relation to the regulation of advertising seen as possibly adding to the problem of childhood obesity. The study was not conducted or written with overt references to a specific communications theory, but this analysis will endeavor to use the "third-person effect" theory to perhaps gain some insight into the philosophical and intellectual underpinnings of the study.

First, a brief summary of third-person effect theory. The theory was promulgated in 1983 by W. Phillips Davison (Davison, 1983) after a series of observations he had regarding the effects of communications on groups of people. He learned of a case during World War II when Japanese pilots dropped leaflets over Allied troops on the Pacific island of Iwo Jima. The U.S. forces included a unit of black troops who had fought with unusual skill and tenacity against the Japanese. The leaflets contained exhortations to the black troops to surrender or desert. Shortly after the leaflets were dropped, the all-white officer corps on the island moved the black troops elsewhere. Davison spoke with a sociologist about it, who was concerned that the ultimate audience for the propaganda leaflets was not the black soldiers, but their white commanders, sowing the seeds of doubt in their heads and ultimately convincing them to reassign capable fighters, a move that was a strategic help to the Japanese.

Over the years, Davison refined his theory and named it the third-person effect theory. One operational definition of the theory (Severin and Tankard, 2001) says it "proposes that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communication messages have on the attitudes and behavior of others." The theory refers to the "third person" because it deals with perceptions about vulnerability to media messages not on the part of "you" or "me" but on the part of undefined others, "them" -- the third person.

The theory has two main elements, a perceptual hypothesis and a behavioral hypothesis. The perceptual hypothesis says that as people are exposed to mass media communications, they will perceive the effects of that communication as having a greater impact on others than on themselves. The behavioral hypothesis says that this perception will lead to changes in behavior. It is the notion that the third-person effect theory is able to explain some of the assumptions and actions behind the Hoy and Morrison study that will be explored further in this analysis, especially the interactions and assumptions that pass between adults and children.

In their study, Hoy and Morrison (2006) state that the advertising industry, and especially that portion that advertises and markets to children, looks to CARU for guidance and leadership in self-regulation of the industry. CARU is a division of the National Advertising Division (NAD), which is affiliated with the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB). CARU collects complaints about misleading or incorrect advertising that is aimed at children, conducts investigations, asks for responses from advertisers, and makes final announcements about those cases. Advertisers are not bound to follow CARU recommendations, since this is self-regulation, but their study shows that the vast majority of advertisers do take at least some corrective action, and many of

them follow all the recommendations of CARU. Advertisers report that they are generally satisfied with CARU's efforts on behalf of the industry. However, the study states that some elements of the general public, including those who are not in favor of marketing snack food to children, are not convinced that self-regulation of the industry produces the best results and most effective protection for children.

The study makes recommendations about how CARU can offer "more proactive leadership" (Hoy and Morrison, 2006) and model itself more fully on the NAD model of investigation and decision rendering. The central problem highlighted by the study is the set of opposing forces, with strong industry desire for self-regulation facing off against public desire for more formal federal regulation. The central goals of the study's inquiry are to learn more about which complaint cases CARU chose to investigate, what were the outcomes of those investigations, and to consider some suggestions for improving the quality of CARU's self-regulatory function.

Looking at the Hoy and Morrison study reveals some parallels with elements of other studies that investigate and expand upon third-person effect theory as it relates to children and adults. One study looked at the impact of how parents in Israel perceived the influence of an adolescent-oriented dramatic television series on their own children, and on other children (Tsfati, Ribak, and Cohen, 2005). The study concluded that the third-person effect extends to parents' beliefs about the vulnerability of their own children and other children to media communications, and that the category "children" in general is seen as quite vulnerable. It would seem that CARU owes its existence, to a degree, to a similar feeling on the part of the advertising industry that everyone can be vulnerable to marketing messages, but that children are particularly susceptible and in need of

protection from marketers perhaps more concerned with the bottom line than with the welfare of their young potential customers.

The Hoy and Morrison study refers to CARU's principles, which are their overall guiding philosophical assumptions. The study identified one that seemed to be the most-violated by advertisers marketing to children, and it was the principle that stated that advertisers should pay attention to their audience's maturity, knowledge and sophistication levels, and should take special care to protect children. This principle is also echoed in third-person effect research. To adults, children represent something weak and helpless, and in need of protection and supervision. Parents are therefore particularly attentive to and concerned about potential dangers that may threaten their children (Tsfati et al., 2005).

The Hoy and Morrison study also notes the important role played by parents in the receptiveness of their children to advertising for food products, especially high calorie and high fat snack foods. The study also notes other research indicating that eliminating advertisements for such foods may prevent or reverse preferences for them among children. One study (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2002) that looked at violent programming on television found that parental mediation of children's television viewing is a behavioral response that might be related to the third-person effect. The study indicated that parents want assistance in protecting their children, and this may extend to censorship. The willingness on the part of people to censor content aimed at other people is one of the highlights of third-person effect theory (Davison, 1983; Youn, Faber, and Shah, 2000), along with the perception that these bans will help reduce undesirable consumption and protect vulnerable groups such as children, women or minors (Youn et

al.). Thinking about "children" in an unspecific way may lead to confusion between younger children, who are more naïve about advertising, and older children or adolescents, who may be more worldly about it (Youn et al.). This is a line of argument that food marketers may perhaps use when their critics say that the media are to blame for youth obesity (Hoy and Morrison, 2006).

It may be curious to see strong calls for censorship of certain advertisements rather than an increased amount of positive health communications messages. CARU's database, however, was geared toward collecting complaints about advertisements, rather than making positive suggestions about countervailing communications (Hoy and Morrison, 2006). A study of marketing by pharmaceutical companies utilizing direct-to-consumer advertising (Huh, DeLorme, and Reid, 2004) indicated that third-person effects among viewers of the advertisements operated through four factors, two of which had a negative aspect (actual negative effects of the ads such as confusion and ambiguity on the part of viewers and subsequent distrust by viewers of information in the ads), one factor with neutral aspect (patient/provider interaction), and one factor with a positive aspect (patient learning and involvement in their care and treatment options). The study showed that negative content-based third person effects were greater than positive effects. Direct-to-consumer marketing of medications to adults is obviously not the same as advertising snack foods to children. The underlying connection is that the desire to censor snack food ads can be seen as a negative third-person effect that is more prevalent and forceful than any corollary push by consumers or the advertising industry to require CARU or any other regulatory entity to take a pro-active stand in promoting positive messages.

Atwood (1994) looked at third-person effects following media reports of a predicted impending earthquake in the New Madrid fault zone to see how people's perceived knowledge about events interacted with the general societal opinion on those events to produce third-person effects. The study showed that people carried "illusions," or preconceived notions not in keeping with reality, and that these illusions led them to have a false sense of their invulnerability to third-person effect. Illusions provide unrealistically positive views of the self, they provide enhanced beliefs of the person's control over the environment, and they are a source of unrealistic optimism (Atwood). These illusions have direct corollaries to those of parents and advocates working against snack food advertisers as described in Hoy and Morrison's study. The parents and advocates may believe they are superior when it comes to determining the effects of snack food ads on kids, they may feel that if they could just push CARU or the FTC hard enough, they can establish federal regulation of children's advertising, and they may be optimistic that such federal regulation would solve the entire problem of childhood obesity on a nationwide level.

Some studies of third-person effect show that the effect exists not only among parents, but also among children themselves. These studies could support an argument that children really are in need of additional protection, since their level of sophistication regarding media messages would leave them more vulnerable to persuasion. A study of tobacco advertising and children (Henrikson and Flora, 1999) surveyed youth attitudes toward tobacco advertising and their impressions of their own and others' "vulnerability" to persuasive message from tobacco companies. The results showed that children also exhibit third-person effects. The children in the study consistently judged themselves as

less vulnerable to mass media communications, their friends as a little bit more vulnerable, and "other children" in general as much more vulnerable. The study said that these third-person effects come from tendencies on the part of both children and adults to indulge in self-flattery. The study also said that children are more skeptical of cigarette ads' ability to influence them, and so are more vulnerable to tobacco marketing and more resistant to public health campaigns.

Another study dealing with children and tobacco advertisements (Borzekowski, Flora, Feighery and Schooler, 1999) reported that children with less exposure to pro-smoking environments (parents, relatives and friends who smoke) showed greater third-person effects regarding tobacco ads than did children with more exposure to pro-smoking environments. The study authors suggested that all children be taught that anyone is vulnerable to tobacco ads and be given skills to resist those ads. These studies can be used as a strong argument by children's advocacy groups that there is a greater societal good to be had by restricting or banning the advertisements of high calorie/high fat snack foods to children, particularly younger children. The connection between the two is that third-person effects among children can lead them to be especially vulnerable to persuasive messages, be they from snack food manufacturers or tobacco companies.

One element of third-person effects among children that Borzekowski et al. (1999) hinted at was the effect of social distance on third-person effects. Children were most likely to judge themselves immune to third-person effects, they felt that their friends were rather similar to themselves and so were relatively immune to third-person effects, but that "children" as a vague category were the most vulnerable. This was further refined by Meirick (2004) in a study of the effects of political advertisements on adults. Meirick's

research on viewers of ads for Al Gore and George W. Bush during the 2000 primary races showed that the greater the social distance the viewers felt between themselves and an imagined group of "others," both in their political party and in the other party, the greater the gap in perceived impact. This gap was specifically related to the topic of politics. In Hoy and Morrison's study (2006), the actions of those who complained about snack food ads aimed at kids may have been also feeling the social distance element of third-person effect, insofar as adults are "socially distant" from children, not really being their peers in terms of current popular culture, music, films, television programs, etc.

DeLorme, Huh, and Reid (2006) examine direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical ads to explore third-person effect by looking at self-reports of DTC ad viewers and their behaviors after viewing the ads. Their study showed that advertising messages are associated with a strong third-person effect because of the explicitly persuasive nature of advertisements. Their study also showed that third-party effects are not uniform, but vary as a function of situational or conditional factors, which can be used as additional support for the position of parents and advocates that tighter regulation or control of snack food advertisements is both desirable and necessary.

Following the results of their analysis of disputes in the CARU database, Hoy and Morrison (2006) discuss the three main groups that are stakeholders in the current system of self-regulation of children's advertising. These groups are CARU, the media, and food marketers and industry associations. Their recommendations were that CARU spend more of its resources in studying the nutritional claims by food advertisers marketing to children, and that it adopt a more rigid structure for evaluating claims against advertisers. For the media, the authors said there is an opportunity to act as experts on the topic,

giving advice to self-regulatory agencies such as CARU and federal agencies such as the FTC, and an opportunity to educate the public and especially parents about how to make their children more media-savvy and resistant to persuasive messages. And for food advertisers, the authors recommended that they be of more assistance to CARU through detailed comments on complaints lodged against them, rather than being passively resistant to the process and holding back on possibly helpful information. Another suggestion is to give feedback to CARU itself in how it manages its regulatory function.

As mentioned in the outset of this analysis, Hoy and Morrison did not overtly use or refer to any communications theory when conducting their study of CARU and its effectiveness in promoting high-quality advertising toward children and protecting them from false or misleading advertising. However, a careful reading of the study with the elements of third-person effects theory in mind has shown some interesting parallels. On the surface, everyone can likely agree with the statement "children need protection." This is not such an unusual statement. But when one questions why they need to be protected, a common response is something on the order of "because they're more vulnerable to misleading messages than us, the adults." This presence of an "us" implies a "them," which is a telltale sign that third-person effects are present.

Examples of research into third-person effects regarding other media messages including advertising of tobacco products and direct-to-consumer pharmaceuticals, and the airing of controversial adult-themed dramatic programming, relate to snack food advertising through what Tsfaty et al. (2005) call "the influence of presumed media influence." The exact nature of the products being advertised does not matter as much as the fact that in each case, there are people who believe that others are more negatively

affected by the advertising than they are, and that this belief causes them to take action. In the case of snack food advertising toward children, those actions take the form of CARU launching investigations on behalf of "the children," and the public and media advocates calling for more formal federal regulation of children's food and beverage advertising.

Hoy and Morrison (2006) conclude their study of CARU self-regulation of food ads for children by indicating that the agency should get more involved in examining and investigating cases involving food and beverages, that CARU should be more proactive in improving its regulatory processes, and that parents, regulators and researchers should learn more about how children process nutrition messages, to make the marketing process more factually accurate as well as effective. It is this author's belief that usage of the third-person effects theory is an effective tool with which to gain a deeper understanding of the sociocultural context behind what motivates CARU, the advertising industry, parents, their children, the public and advocates for better and more factual advertising claims and practices.

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