The WAGER Vol. 5(48) – The Third-Person Effect

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With the holiday season in full tilt, so too is the traveling season. This year as the holiday drive wears on, look carefully at the billboard advertisements you are passing and consider their impact on you and your passengers.

Research conducted by Youn, Faber and Shah (2000) examined a model of mass communication called the Third-Person Effect and its possible connection to gambling advertising. In particular, they studied pro-censorship attitudes toward gambling. The Third-Person Effect contends that people perceive the power of a media message as having less effect on themselves and greater impact on others (Davison, 1983). In addition, the theory argues that this effect discrepancy between self and others might lead those not affected by media messages to support speech censorship (Gunther 1995; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996).

In applying the Third-Person Effect to gambling, Youn et al. hypothesized that some adults (i.e., 18 years of age and older) believe they are unaffected by advertising campaigns for casinos and lotteries while simultaneously believing that this same advertising has an adverse effect on other adults.[1] As such, those contending they are unaffected might support censorship of gambling advertising (Youn et al., 2000).

To test these hypotheses, Youn et al. conducted a survey in a large midwestern city where both casino and lottery gambling are legal. Investigators interviewed adult respondents (n=194) to determine both their casino and lottery gambling behavior. In addition, participants completed a self-administered questionnaire with a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” that rated casino and lottery gambling advertising’s power over themselves and other adults. The survey included the same Likert-type scale to determine censorship attitudes derived from two questions: one concerning attitude toward restricting advertising, and the other addressing attitude toward a complete ban on advertising.

Youn et al. (2000) found that the study participants were ordinary gamblers,

defined as those whose median casino and lottery gambling was 3.0 and 2.0 times per month respectively. Moreover, the results of paired t tests on these means revealed a statistically significant relationship between the Third-Person perception and both casino and lottery advertising. Table 1 indicates that people perceive the power of media messages about casino and lottery gambling as having less effect on themselves and greater impact on others.

Table 1

Paired t tests of perceived effects of gambling advertising—self vs. other adults

	Casino Advertising	Lottery Advertising
Self	2.31	2.09
Other adults	3.83	3.78
Mean Difference	1.52	1.69
t-value	13.89*	14.55*
df	189	191

*p<.001; Scores ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

With regard to the Third-Person Effect and its hypothesized connection to advertising censorship, Youn et al. (2000) found that, for both casino and lottery advertising, the perceived effects of gambling advertisements on other adults seemingly predicted people's desire to censor these adds (b=0.30, p <.001 for casinos; b=0.23, p<.001 for lotteries).

While these findings are statistically significant, the impact of this research remains limited. For example, the research fails to address potentially important differences in advertising power among various forms of advertising (e.g., radio, television, and billboards). In terms of casino and lottery gambling, the prevalence of the Third-Person Effect arguably might be more powerful for television advertising compared with billboard advertising. In addition, the sample population of "ordinary gamblers" might not be representative of the rest of the population. Indeed, the Third-Person Effect's influence over non and compulsive gamblers remains unclear. Finally, the study's results might reflect only the attitudes of the particular Midwestern city within which the research was conducted. It is likely that there are important regional differences regarding the influence and prevalence of casino and lottery advertisements throughout the United States.

Despite these concerns, Youn et al. (2000) provide an important foundation upon which future scientists and public policy makers can build a better understanding

of the influence of gambling advertisements and censorship. Future research in this area needs to focus specifically on the relationship between the Third-Person Effect and both problem and pathological gamblers.

[1] The reader should note that Youn et al. (2000) also examined the relationship between the Third-Person Effect, gambling, and children. For the purposes of this WAGER, however, only data on the Third-Person Effect, gambling, and adults is presented.

References

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