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TELEVISION ADDICTION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE THIRD PERSON EFFECT THEORY

Vedat ÇAKIR*, Vesile ÇAKIR** and Birol GÜLNAR***

*Uşak University, Communication Faculty, Department of Radio Television and Cinema Uşak/Turkey

**Uşak University, Communication Faculty, Department of Public Relation and Advertising Uşak/Turkey

***Şelçuk University, Communication Faculty, Department of Radio Television and Cinema Konya/Turkey

Abstract

The Third Person Effect Theory is one of the most popular theories on the lists of communication studies in 21th century. The theory conceptualized by Davison (1983) can become effective on the basis of assumptions about media and media effects. According to this theory, people believe that media is more influential on the other persons than themselves. This study is a descriptive study testing whether third person effect is applicable for television addiction or not. According to results of the study conducted on 556 adults, participants believe that addictive effects of television is more applicable for others than participants. If educational level of participants increases, this perception about third person effect increases too.

Keywords: Television Addiction, The Third Person Effect Theory

1. Introduction

Researchers have discovered the importance of people's perceptions about other people in the surveys on media effects in 1980s and 1990s. This was an important discover because people believed that they could not be affected by harmful content of media and media itself but these harmful contents were generally more effective on other people. In fact, this did not mean that media was not effective on people. However, people were behaving to others as suitable with their predictions about others' being influenced levels. When they think that they are affected, they are influenced with convenience of this thought. In fact, this thought forms the basis of the third person theory. Third Person Theory is one of the most popular theories in communication researches in 21th century.

Basically, this study aims to show whether there is third person effect as regard addictive effects of television. Beside this, first and third person's perceptions about addictive effects of television are compared and the relations of differences among these perceptions with personal features of participants are taken in hand carefully.

2. Literature Review

Third Person Effects Theory is one of the most popular theories among communication studies in 21st century. The theory was conceptualized by Davison in 1983 with a lecture which's title is "Third Person Effects Theory". The theory defends that media can be effective with some

predictions about media effects. Davison (1983: 3) explains this situation like this “This hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed too persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves”.

The third person effect hypothesis has two parts. The perceptual hypothesis asserts that people assume that communications influence others more than the self. The behavioral component suggests that people’s expectations of media impact on others lead them to take action, perhaps because they want to thwart the predicted effects (Perloff, 2008: 490). Effects on “others” are thought as very much. This subjective evaluation represents the perceptual components of the theory. According to Davison (1983) (1) people subjected to a persuasive communication process think that this process is more effective on others than themselves (perceptual components); (2) then these perceptions about media effects cause people to embrace some specific attitudes or to behave in specific manners. This is behavioral components of the theory.

Things caused to behavior are expectations or perceptions of person about media effects on others. Media effect mentioned in this situation is an indirect and two-stage. Although the theory uncovers some behavioral results, basically theory is perceptual distortion. In his lecture published in 1983, Davison defined the theory as a perceptual distortion but later he developed his ideas about the theory with his other lecture published in 1996. According to Davison (1996:114) “the third person effect was not a manifestation of a single psychological tendency, but was a complex reaction that varied with the type of communication, the characteristics of the individual, and the situation. It can be predicted to a certain extent by demographic characteristics, such as age and education and the fact that a reverse third-person effect has been observed under some conditions suggests that the tendency to see others as being more influenced than the self is merely one of several possible reaction patterns”.

According to the third person effect theory, people think that others are influenced by media more than themselves. If media effects on person are perceived as much higher than others, this is called “reverse third person effect”. This situation is also defined as “first person effect” in literature (Connors, 2005: 4). People think that violence in television, news or advertisements affects other but they do not accept themselves in the same situation. This is commonly embraced for negative contents of media. That is; when media represents a suitable content with social norms and they find beneficial details in these contents; they voluntarily accept to be affected by media. This is called “reverse third person effect” or “first person effect”.

Third person effects can not form for every situation or everybody. When the content of message is not perceived as beneficial and important by person and recourse of the message is perceived as unreliable and biased, third person effect can likely form (Perloff, 1993: 167). Third person effect is also resulted from some other conditions. Although third-person biases undoubtedly operated throughout human history, they are of greater consequence today than in the pre-mass society era. When people’s experiences of the world were limited by the contours of their communities and their life-space was restricted to the little towns in which they grew up, there was no possibility for opinions to spiral out and influence the world at large (Perloff, 2008: 489).

According to Perloff (2008: 489)

- a) When the messages are perceived as inconvenient or messages which show people as inconvenient,
- b) When “others”, compared with “I”, are seen as vulnerable,
- c) When it is accepted that audiences are unidentified persons,
- d) When messages are delivered to wide audiences groups by effective media organizations; the formation of third person effect theory can become more possible.

In so many studies, third person effect theory is defined as “perceptual gap” but the reasons of this perceptual gap have not been defined yet. However, Perloff (1999: 356) has released a model about third person effect theory by using finding of his investigations on studies conducted for analyzing perceptual gap.

Beside perceived knowledge, attributions, self-enhancement processes, some extraneous variants such as age, gender and interest take a part in order to form perceptual gap in this model. That is why, it can easily said that some demographic factors such as age, gender, education etc. can be effective on differences among people’s perceptions about media effects on “I” and “others”. For example, Willnat’s (1996: 187) important study which found that third person effect affects to formation of public opinion directly and formation of spirit of silence indirectly. At the same time, same study showed that people with high education level have more third person effect perception. According to Rucincki and Salmon (1990: 363) education increases person’s superiority feelings; education also moves away person from other people with using disparagement and this affects the perception of third person effect indirectly.

When “others” are defined in terms of gender, stereotypes set in. Men are traditionally defined as competitive, successful and person making living; women are defined as people who are generally emotional, supportive, dependent and consumer. These stereotypes taking their places in the minds of women and men are reflected to the perception way of people while perceiving others’ situation against media effects. In a study about effects of commercial advertisements shows that men perceive women as more open and unprotected against effects of these advertisements (Duck, vd., 2000: 288).

Beside demographic factors, ego involvement is one another important variant for the formation of third person effect. When people feel themselves ad interested with a subject taking place in media, they look at events with a problematic perceptual approach and ambition. People, who have powerful attitudes and being the property of groups, believe that media has a tendency to broadcast negative news about them and because of this they realize hostile attitudes against media (Perloff, 2009: 261). Researches show that defenders with ego-involvement have different perceptions about effects of media on themselves compared with the same effects of media on others. Ego involvement constitutes two problematic and opposite perceptions: (1) Ethnocentric believe in which people think that others perceive the world like themselves, (2) time and place of news in media cause people to embrace a perception that news affects others to change their side and also news makes others enemy (Perloff, 2009:261-262).

According to Davison (1938: 11) the concept of reference groups which is related with ego involvement can be helpful for the explanation of perceptions of third person effects. The perceived effect of persuasive communication on a normative reference group is not so powerful. For example, people who have feeling of belonging against political groups think that the

members of these political groups are less affected than others (Duck vd., 2000:272). The same prejudices can be seen in gender groups which are accepted as social identities.

According to Paul and et al. (2000: 79) the effects of mass media can differ according to kinds and types of media. For example, television is accepted as more effective and persuasive on people because of generality and availability in everywhere and anytime. When this topic is looked from a perceptual point of view in the context of third person effect theory, the consumer of printed media perceive themselves as more clever and conscious than other media consumers and because of this they represent much more third person effects. Perloff (2009: 261) defends that if messages are transferred to a wide group of audiences by media, third person effect can be formed so easily.

In some academic studies about television addiction proved that so many people do not accept themselves as addictive but they accept that television has addictive effects on others. For example, although Smith (1986) detected the ratio of television addicts as % 2.2, in the same study the ration of people who believe that television cause addiction was found as % 64. Similarly McIlwraith and et al. (1991) detected the ration of television addicts as % 12.5, in the same study the ration of people who believe that television cause addiction was found as % 70. In the another study of McIlwraith (1998) it was found that the ratio of television addicts as % 10.1, in the same study the ration of people who believe that television cause addiction was found as % 59. Accordingly, although people believe that television can cause addiction, these people did not define themselves as television addicts and they explained that addiction is valid for other people.

Third person effect model exhibits a two-stage persuasion process contrary to direct effect models embracing a direct powerful relation with attitudes and behaviors. This hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves (Davison, 1983: 3).

Although Davison's (1983) lecture has so many interesting anecdotes and examples, it is a limited lecture in terms of empirical details. This lecture focused on only perceptual components of third person effect with using a small student sampling. Then, perceptual differences among person's personal features about media effects were analyzed empirically in terms of personal attitudes and behaviors. However, later studies tried to research the behavioral results of third person effects on different subjects in terms of empirical details. Studies conducted to analyze to behavioral results have generally focused on negative media stimulants and limitation of different media contents, that is, censorship (Perloff, 1999; Golan & Banning, 2008). For example, Rojas and et al. found that third person effect is one of the determinants for censorship on topics of television advertisement and violence in media. Gunther and hwa (1996: 248) found that people support censorship in media because of media's tendency for exaggerating negative effects on others. However, although so many studies have found meaningful relations among the perceptions of third persons and some behavioral situations, it should not be forgotten that these studies generally try to measure virtual behaviors . Because of this, behavioral results are not going to be taken in the content of this study.

In this part of the study, answers are tried to be given to the questions listed below with using literature screening.

RQ1: Is the third person effect theory valid for television addiction?

RQ2: Is there any relations among potential third person effect about television addiction and television watching behaviors?

3. Method

This is a descriptive study which was conducted to determine the perceptions of audiences about television addiction and third person effect. Data in the study was collected in downtown of Konya with using 556 people who was up to 18 and was selected according to random sample.

A question form designed for the study was used and it consists of three main parts. These are questions about television watching behaviors of participants, questions for participant's perceptions about others and socio-demographic questions. Participants' perceptions about television addiction for others and themselves were asked with using five point likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).

Obtained data were processed in electronic environment with using Pasw 18 packet software. Descriptive statistical techniques like arithmetical mean and frequency distribution were used to show demographic variants of participants, television watching behaviors and perceptions about television addictions in analyze processes. In order to measure the differences among participants' television watching behaviors and perceptions about television addiction with personal features, two different analyze techniques which are Independent Samples T-Test and Bivariate Correlations were used.

4. Findings and Evaluation

Some personal features of participants joined the study can be seen on Table 1.

Table 1: Some Personal Features of Participants.

		F	%		
Gender	Female	274	49,3		
	Male	282	50.7		
Education	Primary School	118	21.2		
	Secondary School	74	13.3		
	High School	254	45.7		
	University	104	18.7		
	Master	6	1.1		
	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Age	556	18	75	32.68	12.026
Income (TL)	556	250	8000	1593	926.302
Daily Average Television Watching Time (Hour)	556	0.5	14	3.71	1.8ş6775

When participants' daily average television watching hour and their socio-demographic features are compared, it was found that there are statistical meaningful differences. According to these differences, females ($\bar{x}=4.90$) watch television more than males ($\bar{x}=3.47$) ($t=7.78$, $df=578$, $p<.001$). According to results of Bivariate Correlation Analysis, which was developed between other variants except gender and television watching time, if the age of participants rises, their television watching time also rises ($r=.10$, $p<.05$). Similarly if participants' education ($r=-.30$, $p<.01$) and income ($r=-.21$, $p<.01$) levels rise, their television watching time decrease.

In order to learn to the perceptions of participants about television addiction, some questions were asked to participants such as whether television cause addiction or not, whether they believe television addiction or not etc. with using five point likert scale. By coding the answers again, they were demoted to two main categories like "Yes" and "No". Descriptive statistical findings about the answers can be seen on Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. The Perceptions of Participants about Television Addiction

		F	%
Watching television causes addiction	Yes	357	64,2
	No	199	35,8
Total		556	100,0

According to findings on Table 2, % 64.2 of the participants believe that television causes addiction. This result has coherence with the results of former studies like % 64 (Smith, 1986), % 70 (McIlwraith et al., 1991) and % 59 (McIlwraith, 1998). At the same time, these results are the evidence of third person effect theory.

When general perceptions of the participants about television addiction and their personal features are compared, some statistical meaningful relations draw attentions. For example, there is a positive and meaningful relation between education level of the participants and their perceptions about addiction ($r=.09$, $p<.05$). According to this relations; if participants' education levels rise, their believes about addiction because of television also rise. This result supports the ideas of Rucincki and Salmon (1990) and Willnat (1996) which were mentioned in the theoretical part of this study. Similarly, it was detected that there is a positive and meaningful relation between daily television watching time of the participant and their perceptions about television addiction ($r=.13$, $p<.01$). That is, if participants' television watching time rises, their addiction level for television also increase. From starting to the point of their own television watching time, people think that television is a vehicle causing addiction. A meaningful and statistical relation between participants' perceptions about addiction and their personal features like gender ($t=.208$, $df=554$, $p>.05$), age ($r=-.02$, $p>.05$) and income ($r=.06$, $p>.05$) etc. Thus, age and income level of participants are not determining factors in terms of third person effect. Females and males from every age and income levels can believe that television causes addiction.

Table 3. The Perceptions of Participants about Television Addiction for Themselves

		F	%
I am a television addict	Yes	60	10.8
	No	496	89.2
TOTAL		556	100,0

According to Table 3, % 10.8 of the participants define themselves as television addict but % 89.2 of participants do not define themselves as television addict. These results show coherence with the results of former studies %12.5 (McIlwraith vd., 1991) ve % 10.1 (McIlwraith, 1998). Beside this, % 16.5 of the participants accepting that television cause addiction declared that they are television addicts; however, % 83.5 of participants think that television addiction is valid for others.

When the perceptions of participants about television addiction for themselves and their other personal features are compared, some meaningful relations draw attentions. For example, there is a positive and meaningful relation between daily television watching time of participants and the perceptions of participants about television addiction for themselves ($r=.48$, $p<.001$). Thus, when the average television watching time of participants increases, the perceptions of participants about television addiction for themselves also increases. On the other hand, there is a negative and meaningful relation between the perceptions of participants about television

addiction for themselves and their education levels ($r=-.11$, $p<.05$). This situation can be interpreted like that when participants' education level is low, they have a tendency to define themselves as television addict. There is not a meaningful relation between the perceptions of participants about television addiction for themselves and gender ($t=.994$, $df=554$, $p>.05$), age ($r=.03$, $p>.05$), income ($r=-.03$, $p>.05$) of participants. In other words, female or male from every age and income groups can believe that they are television addicts.

5. Conclusion

Third person effect theory conceptualized by Davison (1983) defends that people accept the effects of media on others as more effective than themselves. This study searched whether the theory is valid for television audiences or not and hypothesis of the theory were analyzed in the content of the study. The survey was conducted with the participation of 556 people who live in the centre of Konya and they were selected with using random sampling technique.

According to the results of the study, participants watch 3.71 hours television for a day. % 64.2 of the participants believe that television cause addiction. % 10.8 of the participants define themselves as television addicts. However, 16.5 of the participants who accepting that television is a vehicle causing addiction define themselves as addicts but % 83.5 of the participants believe that addiction is valid for other not for themselves. This results show that third person effect is also valid for television addiction. Beside this, when the participants' television watching time and education levels increase, the perception about third person effect also increase. This supports that education cause people to perceive superior on others and because of this people with high education level accept others as affected by media so much. In addition to this, people defining themselves as television addicts have more television watching times and their education level is so low.

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