

TO BROWSE, OR NOT TO BROWSE? THIRD-PERSON EFFECT AMONG ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN, IN REGARDS TO THE PERCEIVED DANGER OF THE INTERNET

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Abstract The study looks at Jewish ultra-Orthodox women who use modern technologies, for purposes that are illegitimate in their community. Subjects' perceived impacts of the Internet on self and others are analyzed, demonstrating a "third-person effect" in regards to the perceived dangers originating from the Internet. The correlations and possible implications of the "third-person effect" are discussed.

1. The Ultra-Orthodox Community

The ultra-Orthodox community constitutes about 6.7% of the adult (age 20 and up) Jewish population in Israel (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The Jewish religion and all its principles, instructions, and limitations form the private and public life of community members. The all-encompassing religiosity and obligation to study the *Torah* differentiate the ultra-Orthodoxy, and ultra-Orthodox people, from other religious sectors in the Jewish society (Friedman, 1991; Liebman 1992). Haredi Jews consider themselves a singular and distinctive part of the Jewish world. They strictly adhere to the dictates of the *halakha* (Jewish law) that developed over the centuries by Jewish rabbinical authorities (Friedman, 1991). This stands in sharp contrast to Conservative and Reform Jews, who recognize the conflicts between the traditional and modern worlds, and make a conscious effort to adapt the Jewish lifestyle to the values and norms of the modern western world (Heilman, 2000).

The ultra-Orthodox are a minority in the Israeli society, that maintains a complicated relationship with the majority (Efron, 2003). Scholars point at three central models that characterize minority-majority relationships over time: assimilation, integration, and segregation (Lee & Tse, 1994; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). Most ultra-Orthodox choose the segregation model, zealously preserving their traditional ways of life and distancing themselves from the surrounding society (Orbe, 1998).

The segregation from the majority society turns the ultra-Orthodox community into an "enclave culture" (Sivan, 1991), i.e. a minority that concerns itself with

preserving its unique characteristics, and is disinterested in nurturing relationships with the surrounding majority for fear of external influences (Berry, 1990). The ultra-Orthodox use a few strategies to buffer between the secular society and their "enclave culture". Such strategies include geographical segregation (living in separate neighborhoods and areas), educational segregation (maintaining a separate educational system), judicial segregation (manifest by a separate system of courts that include arbitration and judicial proceedings), and dietary segregation (consumption of food that passes the strictest guidelines of Jewish law).

The ultra-Orthodox community preserves the key positions in society for males, and leaves women in the periphery (El-Or, 1995; 1997; Friedman, 1998). The traditionalist worldview emphasizes, as an ideal, the place of the ultra-Orthodox woman in the private sphere. All household functions, such as child-rearing and the constant upkeep of the house, are considered, primarily, the obligation of women. One of outstanding characteristics of the ultra-Orthodox domestic sphere is the abundance of children; the average ultra-Orthodox woman has 7.7 children, as opposed to 2.6 children that Jewish women in Israel have on average (Gurovich & Cohen-Kastro, 2004).

And yet, ultra-Orthodox women are no longer found exclusively in the private sphere. The key reason is the transformation of the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel into a "society of learners," in which the majority of men do not work to provide for their families, but exclusively study the Torah (Friedman, 1991; 1995). In order to further provide for their families, women can be found in growing numbers in the public domain, learning and working. According to Central Bureau of Statistics data from 2005, 55% of ultra-Orthodox women were employed outside their homes, compared to only 44% of ultra-Orthodox men (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

In recent years, new routes are developing to channel ultra-Orthodox women to "new" professions. Institutions of higher education (seminars for women) offer technical training, in addition to educational training, in an Orthodox "Kosher" environment, devoid of masculine or secular presence. In addition, Centers for the Development of Occupations for the Ultra-Orthodox have been opening up since 2006. These centers provide job placement and guidance for ultra-Orthodox, by ultra-Orthodox. After their first few months of activity, it became apparent that 71% of the applicants were women, with some level of professional or post-high-school training (Schwartz, 2008). In recent years, a few "technological hotbeds" have been established, which function as protected habitats for ultra-Orthodox women: they staff exclusively ultra-Orthodox women, and meet the wider needs of an ultra-Orthodox family. Some of the data gathered for this research was collected in such environments.

The ultra-Orthodox women who go out to work in these "technological hotbeds" are situated in a delicate position. While being educated that their proper place is in the private sphere, the existence of the "society of learners" forces them to work and function in the public sphere. Experiences in the workplace may alter women's conceptions, for example, of their role in the household, and the proper scope of authority of rabbinical and community leaders; they may decide to develop a career—which may come at the expense of traditional obligations to spouse and family; and they may become better acquainted with the legal system, their rights and the functioning of the institutions of the modern welfare state. Thus, women's employment in such technological environments may result in multiple challenges to family and community life.

2. The Internet and the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel

The self-isolation of the ultra-Orthodox community manifests, among other things, in the mass media. The "secular" media are generally banned; it is forbidden to own a television set, a device which is called "the device of impurity" or "that device." The radio is nicknamed "the device" and is considered illegitimate.

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The admission of modern technologies into traditional communities is oftentimes accompanied by wariness and suspicion, and all the more so in regards to the Internet. For some, the Internet is perceived as a tool that allows new religious and spiritual experiences, and provides for believers' religious and social needs (Campbell, 2005a, 2005b; Cobb, 1998; Ess, Kawabata & Kurosaki, 2007). In the eyes of many among the ultra-Orthodox, the Internet is not viewed as means for entertainment or leisure, but rather as an efficient way to access information and services. Additionally, through the Internet families can keep in touch and communicate with ultra-Orthodox groups in Israel and abroad. Likewise, through the Internet one can access an enormous wealth of religious knowledge, online classes, and rabbinical questions and answers.

On the other hand, a few studies report opposition from religious and traditional communities to Internet usage (Campbell, 2004; Dawson, 2004; Marty & Appleby, 1991). Among other things, the leaders of these communities are concerned from novel challenges to their authority, and to the hierarchal communal system. The Internet, which enables access to infinite worlds of content as well as anonymous communication, can quite easily expose the ultra-Orthodox to works of heresy, sexual or violent content, and other materials that desecrate the name of God and threaten traditional values (Livio & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2007).

The objection to Internet access and usage led to the establishment of a special rabbinical committee regarding "the issue of breaches in computers" that on January 7th, 2000 publicized a *Torah opinion* that "every man of Israel should know, that the connection to Internet or television places, God forbid, the continuation of the generations of Israel in grave danger, and it is a terrible breach in the holiness of Israel." As opposed to television, the Internet is presented as a device whose danger "is a thousand times more severe, and is liable to bring destruction, God forbid, to the nation of Israel" (Zarfati and Blais 2002, p. 50). As a result of this concern, all Internet usage was forbidden, even for assistance in providing a livelihood.

However, the prohibition was one that the public could not uphold. For example, a number of groups in the ultra-Orthodox community, such as the Chasidic sects of Breslov and Rachlin (Zarfati and Blais, 2002), continued to use the Internet. It appears that although the voices calling for the total rejection of this new technology are heard aloud, one must check the measure to which they are actually applied. For example, a survey by the Shiluv research center (2007) shows that 60% of the ultra-Orthodox use computers, and among them 57% (approximately one third of the ultra-Orthodox public) use the Internet.

Faced with all this, and also taking into consideration the growth of the ultra-Orthodox business sector and with it the growing pressure for computerized communications, another Rabbinic Committee for Matters of Communications was established in 2006. In December 2007, the committee permitted, for the first time in the ultra-Orthodox sector, to use the Internet, but the permission was only granted for supervised access to a small number of websites, for business purposes. Up until the writing of this paper, the "Kosher Internet" project is still at its infancy.

A popular activity among ultra-Orthodox Internet users is surfing on dedicated forums (Rose, 2007; Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2009). The leading ultra-Orthodox Israeli portal for forums is *BeChadrei Charedim*, receiving some 250,000 unique visitors every month. Rose (2007) claims that ultra-Orthodox forums are the only means of communication that succeed in "peeking, without being harmed, into the cloud of hidden secrets that surrounds the controversies within the ultra-Orthodox circles."

In addition to the "mixed" forums (open to both men and women), special forums were created that are designated for women only, and are only open to women. Even though there are fewer forums for women than for men, they arouse great interest, since they constitute a unique platform for ultra-Orthodox women to express themselves and discuss the topics that interest them, alongside other ultra-Orthodox women (Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, 2009).

Elsewhere, we conducted two related studies that analyze the perceptions of ultra-Orthodox women of the Internet, as well as their Internet usage patterns. The first study targeted women who are members of closed online forums, while the second targeted women working in technological hotbeds (see above). We found these two sites to be fascinating study arenas about the intersection of gender, orthodoxy and new media (see Lev-On & Neriya Ben-Shahar, 2009; Neriya Ben-Shahar & Lev-On, forthcoming). For example, in technological hotbeds ultra-Orthodox women are present in the public sphere, and employed in technological occupations, while their education clarifies that their natural place is in the private sphere; they belong to a closed and conservative community, whose perception of the new technology that they are exposed to is complex; the hotbeds are owned by secular employers, and yet adjusted to the needs of the ultra-Orthodox population.

In this paper, we focus on the existence of a *third-person effect* (Davison, 1983), among the study populations. A third-party effect occurs when people perceive media messages to be significantly more influential on others, than on themselves. Third person studies examined, among other things, the perception of influence of mass media messages regarding pornography and violence, and show that individuals perceive themselves as more resilient to the "negative" influences of the media, relative to others (for a meta-analysis of third person research see Sun, Pan & Shen, 2008).

Studies have demonstrated that the third-person effect exists on the Internet, in a variety of domains and contexts. It exists, for example, in reference to the perceived effect of exposure to pornographic content online (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2002; Zhao & Cai, 2008; Wu & Koo, 2001), the perception of potential harm resulting from exchange in Internet auction sites (Yang, 2005), and the perceived impact of playing online games (Zhong, 2009). Li (2008) found a third-person effect in reference to perceived online threats-- a cluster composed of six items: virus attacks, hacker attacks, identification theft, credit card theft, privacy intrusion, and online insult.

Lastly, two additional studies demonstrate that people also perceive greater influence of online media stories on others than on themselves (Banning & Sweetser, 2007), and similarly, perceive a greater impact of the interactions in online social networks on others than on themselves (Zhang & Daugherty, 2009). All these findings add up to a robust picture of the existence of third-party effects in a variety of spheres on the Internet.

Another significant and consistent finding is that in a variety of contexts, the "third-person effect" has behavioral implications. It turns that the more one is concerned for the adverse consequences of media content on third parties, the more one would support limiting access to this technology; less so for the fear of weakness of self, but mainly for shielding vulnerable others (see Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008). This effect was found online as well (see Yang, 2005).

Following up on the abovementioned studies, we ask if among the ultra-Orthodox women, who were the subjects in our studies, one can trace the tendency to attribute greater vulnerability to third parties from the "negative" impact of the Internet. It is interesting to learn if the subjects, exposed to new technology in their workplaces or while browsing online forums, perceive themselves to be more or less resilient to the impact of the Internet, than their reference group: members of the ultra-Orthodox community.

3. Methodology

To study the "third-person effect" among the study population, we used a questionnaire composed of two main parts: first, a list of statements where subjects were asked to rate a number of items on a scale of five options, ranging between "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree"; and second, a few socio-economic and demographic questions.

The first section of the questionnaire was broken into four subsections addressing conceptions of the place of the Internet in the ultra-Orthodox community; conceptions

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of the place of the Internet in the lives of ultra-Orthodox women; connections formed online, with ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox women and men; and the extent to which information on one's online pursuits is shared with one's spouse and friends.

The second part of the questionnaire included questions addressing: employment outside home (of both the woman and her spouse); occupation; availability of a computer at home; availability of Internet connection at home; browsing women's forums; level of education (number of formal years of study, and academic degree); personal status; number of children; age; birth country of the woman and of her father; level of religious observance; political stance; and income level.

3.1 RESEARCH PROCEDURE

As explained before, the study targeted ultra-Orthodox women on two sites: women who browse closed online forums, and women working in technological hotbeds.

Regarding the first study site, closed forums online dedicated to ultra-Orthodox women, we started by mapping and choosing the relevant forums. After filtering out forums for religious but non-ultra-Orthodox women, as well as open forums for the ultra-Orthodox population, we were left with four closed forums for ultra-Orthodox women. The relevant population is ultra-Orthodox women that browse in closed forums online. We cannot know how many women belong to this population, and what their characteristics are, and hence a probabilistic sample is irrelevant. Instead it was decided to perform a non-probabilistic volunteer sampling, along the lines described above. The online survey, placed in *Survey Monkey*, was filled by fifty three women (N=53).

Regarding the second study site, women working in technological hotbeds, we started by identifying and mapping sites from which data could be collected, contacted the managements to receive permission to hand out the questionnaires; and then collected the data, by handing out questionnaires at five such hotbeds. The survey was filled by one hundred and fifty six women (N=156).

Despite the differences between the two populations, we found it appropriate to look at both of them in a single paper, in light of their common significance as unique spaces that allow exposure of ultra-Orthodox women to technologically-oriented public spaces. Still, due to the differences between the populations, we present the relevant results from both studies side by side, and not in aggregate.

In the following, "agreement" to a certain statement is calculated by the percentage of the answers "very much agree", "agree" and "somewhat agree" (answers 3-5); the "agreement level" is the average of answers (between 1 and 5). It was decided not to label one of choices as "undetermined," in order to place subjects in a position of agreement or disagreement. The mean level of agreement with each statement is also presented.

4. Findings

4.1 THE INTERNET AS HARMFUL AND DANGEROUS TO THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX COMMUNITY

The term "danger" was chosen as it is a part of the ultra-Orthodox view towards modern technology, which threatens the borders of its "enclave culture" (Sivan, 1991).

In population 1 (forums), the majority of women view the Internet as dangerous to the ultra-Orthodox community. Indeed, 74% (39) of the women agreed with the statement "I think the Internet is a danger to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle" (mean= 3.5). Furthermore, 64% (34) agreed with the statement "I think the Internet is as dangerous as the television since it enables hearing and seeing forbidden content" (mean= 3.91) and 62% (33) agreed to the statement "In my opinion, the Internet is dangerous like the cell phone since it enables contacting other people" (mean= 3.12). Let us recall that

"agreement" means checking one of these options: "very much agree", "agree" or "somewhat agree" to the corresponding statement.

Among population 2 (hotbeds), 90% (137) agreed with the statement "I think that the Internet is a danger to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle," 95.5% (149) of the women agreed with the statement "I see the Internet as dangerous just like television because it enables hearing and seeing forbidden content", and 75% (116) agreed to the statement "In my opinion, the internet is dangerous like the cellular phone since it enables contacting other people."

4.2 THIRD-PERSON EFFECT

Among population 1 (forums), 88% (46) of the women agreed with the statement "I think that the Internet can weaken *people* in terms of religion" (an average agreement level of 4.15), but only 48% (26) agreed with the statement "I feel that the Internet weakens *me* in terms of religion" (an average agreement level of 2.6).

Among population 2 (hotbeds), 92% (141) agreed with the statement "I think that the Internet can weaken *people* in terms of religion" (average level of agreement: 4.36). In contrast, 56% (86) agreed with the statement "I feel that the Internet weakens *me* in terms of religion" (average level of agreement: 3.02).

Next, the existence and character of a "third-person effect" among individual subjects was analyzed. For each subject *i*, we define TPE (*i*) as the perceived danger of the Internet to others according to person *i*, minus perceived danger to self (*i*). Table 1 shows the distribution of TPEs among the two study populations. Note that a small number of subjects attribute more vulnerability to themselves than to others, in which case their TPE value is negative. In the table, MEAN refers to the mean TPEs in the two populations, whereas MEANTPE refers to the mean of the population for which TPE(*i*) had a positive or zero value, i.e. that attributes greater or equal vulnerability to others than to themselves.

Table 1. Distribution of individual Third-Person Effect (TPE) values, among both study populations

TPE	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	MEAN	MEANTPE
Population 1 (Forums)			1	4	23	12	12		1.58	1.63
Population 2 (Hotbeds)	1	1	3	42	40	28	22	12	1.36	1.46

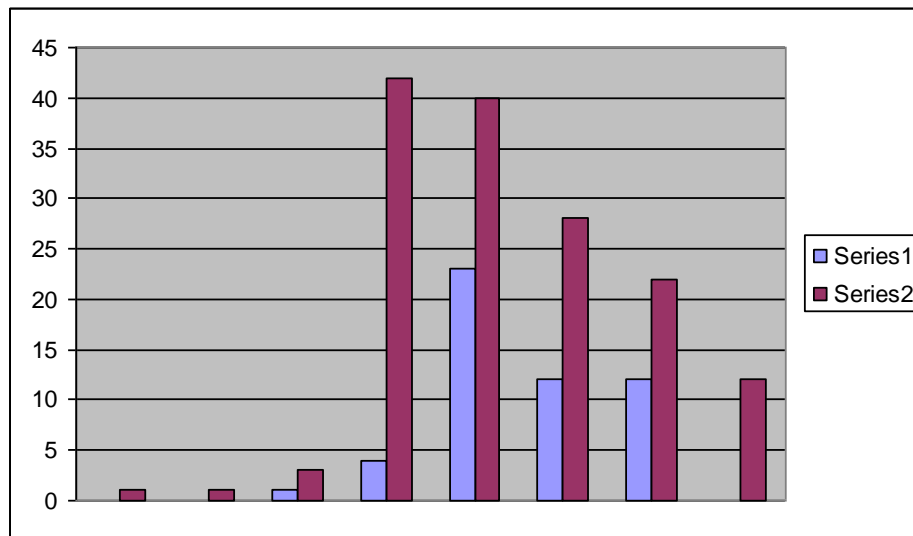


Figure 1. Distribution of individual Third-Person Effect (TPE) values, among both study populations

T-tests demonstrate no significant differences between the means of populations 1 and 2. We also used T-tests to look for differences of means of individual TPEs between various groups. No significant differences were found, in either population, between women whose husbands are employed, and those whose husband study; between those who have a computer at home, and those who do not; between women who have Internet at home, and those who do not; between those who were born in Israel, and those who were not; between those who have an academic degree from a university or a college, and those who do not have it. We tested for differences across a host of other variables, but found no significant differences. Thus, it can be confidently argued that the third-person effect which was observed was not unique to certain clusters of the study population.

Lastly, Pearson correlation tests were used to check for correlations between TPE and various statements. Among population 1, negative correlations were found between TPE and the statements that "I use the Internet as a tool to meet new friends" ($r=-.33$, $P<.05$), and that "my husband knows about some of the sites that I browse" ($r=-.32$, $P<.05$). Among the second study population, composed of women employed in computerized environments, a positive correlation was found between TPE and the statements that "I think that Internet access is allowed in workplaces only" ($r=.2$, $P<.05$), and that "Rabbis in my circle allow to use the internet for work-related purposes only" ($r=.2$, $P<.05$). Among this population, negative correlations were found between TPE and the statements that "Rabbis in my circle do not allow to use the Internet for just any purpose" ($r=-.16$, $P<.05$), and that "the Internet enables me rest and relaxation" ($r=-.24$, $P<.01$). Note that there was no overlap between the correlations found in the two populations.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The paper focuses on the encounter between orthodoxy, new media and gender, through the study of ultra-Orthodox women that browse Internet forums, or work in technological hotbeds. Special emphasis was given to the existence of a third-person effect.

The Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews), like other fundamentalist communities, adopt and use technological innovations, while remaining suspicious and reserved about the

modern and scientific processes involved in their creation, and relentlessly trying to mitigate and control the possible adverse effects of new technologies on their communities. Our findings indeed demonstrate that participants perceive the Internet as harmful and dangerous to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. The women pointed out that the Internet can weaken the ultra-Orthodox community and themselves in terms of their religiosity, among other things, through exposure (willing or unintentional) to dangerous content.

The study also suggests the importance of the third-person effect in understanding the slow processes of penetration of new technologies into conservative communities. While the Internet is perceived by community members as a danger for self, it is perceived as an even greater danger for other community members. According to the findings, 74.1% of subjects perceived other community members to be more vulnerable than themselves to the negative impact of the Internet; the mean TPE - perceived danger of the Internet to others minus perceived danger to self, was around 1.5 in both study populations, in a scale of 0 to 5. The differences between perceived impact of the Internet on self and others, are not mediated by any of the demographic variables that were measured.

The findings are interesting since participants in the current study are placed in an advantageous position relative to other community members, where they can use, observe and reflect upon the possible impact of the Internet for their community. Unlike the majority of the ultra-Orthodox community that still do not use the Internet, participants in our study are positioned in the crossroads between modernity and Orthodoxy. But in spite of their positive personal experiences with the new media (Lev-On & Neriya Ben-Shahar, 2009; Neriya Ben-Shahar and Lev-On, forthcoming), they are well aware of their uses as well as potential abuses.

The third-person effect is manifest by the perception of the ultra-Orthodox individual of self and community. The communal fears from the hazardous potential of the Internet are reflected in the answers provided by participants. But personal acquaintance with new technology also generates perceptions of self as less vulnerable than others. Keep in mind that the women who participated in the study live in a demanding environment. Unlike men, who by and large take part in the “society of learners” and spend many hours each day in the “divide city”, women appropriate the “earthly city,” face first-hand the complexities of daily life, and may recognize the advantages of technologies portrayed as the “ultimate evil” by rabbinical and community leaders, who do not use them. Women may be more aware of the tensions between ideological obligations and pragmatic demands, and the need to accommodate them. Thus as they use the Internet, they continue to quote the rabbinical authorities that denounce it. The third-person effect may be an outcome of rationalization of the dissonance between rabbinical decrees and technologies opportunities. This suggests that the “third-party effect” may be a route for accommodating the technological and communicative arena of the 21st century with its porous and open borders, with enclaves that continue to fence themselves from it, and nonetheless contain individuals who can see “behind the fences”.

Ours is the first study to learn the third-person effect in regards to new media, in a small group whose views of technology are especially complex. While our findings are telling, they are by no means comprehensive. Future studies can sample the ultra-Orthodox community at large, to see if our findings can be extrapolated to the entire community, particularly to those parts of the community less familiar with new media, whose judgments of its potentials and perils may not be based on first-hand experiences. Studies found that third-person perceptions may be affected by the perceived likelihood of exposure to the relevant content (Sun, Pan & Shen, 2008), so it is interesting to study the perception of the Internet and the presence and magnitude of the third-person effect also among parts of the community less familiar with new technology.

Future studies can also explore possible behavioral implications of third-person effects in conservative communities, to learn if the members of closed communities

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who are exposed to new media, still justify limitations and censorship, due to the perceived fragility of third parties.

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