

# Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They are More Influenced than Me and You

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**Abstract.** *Recent research efforts have been invested into undermining the effects of digital disinformation, both on a personal and on a societal level. However, because of the complexity of the phenomena, the actual effects of digital disinformation are still under consideration and, therefore, studies published so far focus on the perceived effects of fake news. Against this backdrop, relying on Davison's (1983) third-person effect (TPE) theory, this study aims at investigating (1) the way people perceive the effects of fake news and (2) the possible variables predicting different levels of self-other discrepancy perceptions. Based on data gathered from a national representative survey (N=1107) in Romania, main results show that people have the tendency to consider that distant others (i.e., members of the out-group) are more influenced than themselves or the in-group members (i.e., confirming a strong TPE). With reference to TPE predictors, gender and fake news frequency of exposure are the most*

*significant variables influencing of the intensity of TPE, in the sense that (a) women tend to consider that distant others are more influenced by fake news and (b) the more people perceive they are exposed to fake news, the greatest the TPE.*

**Keywords:** Digital disinformation; Fake news; Third-person effect; Predictors of third-person effect.

## Introduction

Within the new media ecosystem, widely dominated by media content easily swinging between satire and parody, fabrication and manipulation, scholars have been trying to identify the effects of digital disinformation. Although there are significant efforts in this respect, the actual effects of digital disinformation are still difficult to be measured. The difficulties consist in the multiple implications brought by the variety of forms that digital disinformation might take and the numerous possible causes leading some people to be more influenced than others.

In this context, some scholars have tried to determine and analyze if and how people perceive the effects of digital disinformation. Specifically, some recent attempts tackle the perceived effects of fake news in the US context (Calvert 2017; Jang & Kim 2018). Their approach on the perceived effects of fake news is based on Davison's (1983) third-person effect (TPE) theory, stating that people tend to perceive that others (third persons, out-group members) are more influenced by different media messages than people themselves or in-group members. This self-other discrepancy in perception might explain further aspects of people's behavior (e.g., the support for censorship).

Against this background, this article deals with the perceived effects of digital disinformation in a Romanian context, being, to our knowledge, the first attempt made so far in this direction. Relying on data gathered from a national representative survey (N=1107) in Romania, this article aims at offering some insights regarding the perceived impact of digital disinformation in Romania, representing a first step towards explaining further social attitudes and behaviors. Based on the TPE theory, the article investigates (1) the perceived effects of fake news among Romanian people and (2) the predictors leading to various levels of TPE. Particularly, we focus on analyzing people's perceptions about the effects of fake news on three levels: on the personal level (self-perception about fake news effects), on the in-group level (perception about fake news effects on close friends and family), and on the out-group level (perception about fake news effects on distant others). At the same time, we aim at identifying the main variables predicting people's tendency towards considering others to be more influenced by fake news than themselves.

### The third-person effect – causes and moderating variables

The third-person perception is based on the distinction between assessments of media effects on self and others. Davison (1983) proposed the TPE theory, stating that people overestimate the impact of media on others, while underevaluating the same effects on self. Several studies afterwards have provided empirical support for the third-person perception in contexts related to news, ads, political messages, television violence, song lyrics, pornography, alcohol or cigarette ads (Thorson & Coyle 1994; Rojas *et al.* 1996; Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997; Cohen & Davis 1991; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson 1997; Scharrer & Leone 2006; Sun, Pan & Shen 2008).

The TPE theory suggests that, because of the overestimation of media influence on others, people will try to restrict the messages that are perceived as harmful to others. Therefore, the TPE comprises a perceptual and a behavioral component (Perloff 2002). The first component refers to a difference in assessment regarding others and the self in terms of media influence, while the second one implies that people will act to restrict or censor media messages that are perceived as having a negative and extended influence on others (Davison, 1996). The behavioral component is about the reactions people have as a result of their perceptions of media influence on others (Gunther & Storey 2003). The presumed effect of media messages on others' behavior has predictive power over action, leads to measures to "what receivers think others will do" (Jensen & Hurley, 2005, 245). Several studies on the presumed negative effects of controversial media content showed there is a link between the third-person perception and advocating for restricting the respective content (Youn *et al.* 2000; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo 2002; Hoffner & Buchanan 2002).

Research shows that a series of factors pose as causes for the TPE. Among the psychological reasons that lead to the third-person perception is the self-serving bias (Gunther & Mundy 1993). People overestimate the media effects on others while underestimating the same effects on self because of a subconscious need to enhance their self-image, to maintain a positive self-esteem and a sense of control (Gunther 1995; Price, Huang & Tewksbury 1997). Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, and McLeod (1999) offer an alternative explanation and argue that rather than being a consequence of the need to enhance one's self-esteem, the TPE may just reflect the heuristic used to estimate effects on others, namely the assumption that the more someone is perceived to use a content, the greater the perceived effects. Also, when a message is perceived as being harmful, the gap regarding the effects on self versus others might increase not as a reflection of the ego-enhancement need, but in relation with the consumption of that content. Therefore, if people consume antisocial content, they might be less likely to judge the effects on others as being more harmful than for themselves (Eveland & McLeod 1999).

The way people think about themselves influences TPE as well. People who perceive themselves as being cognitively sophisticated, tend to deny the effects on self (Boyle, McLeod & Rojas 2008). Another related factor is the optimism bias, namely, individuals think they are more likely to experience positive outcomes and less likely to experience negative outcomes compared to other people (Helweg, Larsen, & Sheppard 2001). Another explanation for TPE is the causal attribution which states that people describe media effects on self in terms of situational factors, while when referring to others, in terms of dispositional ones (Gunther 1991; Shah, Faber, & Youn 1999). Price, Huang, and Tewksbury (1997) suggested that people's mental structures of preconceived ideas and stereotypes of media as significant agents of change, determine people to infer that the audience is vulnerable to influence. Recent research indicates that the difference in perception occurs due to different perceptual processes used for self and other evaluation. Thus, people use a simple schema for media effects on others, but a more complicated conditional-effects model to estimate the effects on self (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland 2001).

Besides factors that can favor the emergence of TPE, past research identified a number of moderating variables of the TPE that influence the self-other assessment difference. For example, the perceived social desirability of the message influences TPE. The TPE can be diminished if the media content is perceived as positive and increase if evaluated as negative. Among socially undesirable media, previous studies showed a greater TPE in relation with pornography, misogynistic rap lyrics, TV violence, gambling, cigarettes and alcohol ads, political ads (Gunther 1995; Eveland *et al.* 1999; Banning 2001; Golan, Banning & Lundy 2008; Lim & Golan 2011). Emotions generated by media messages are another variable as they have influences on cognition and behaviors, and therefore, they can influence the third-person perception (Kepplinger 2008). When a media stimulus is perceived to lead to socially undesirable attitudes or behaviors, respondents rate others as more vulnerable in comparison to self, while in the case of prosocial messages with desirable outcomes such as public service announcements, which predict a more positive effect on self rather than on others (Gunther & Thorson 1992; Salwen & Dupagne 1999). In the case of fake news, we argue that TPE will occur in relation with the social undesirability of being a victim of disinformation.

When people perceive a greater influence on self in relation to socially desirable messages and outcomes, the reversal is called first-person effect and is motivated by self-enhancement needs (Meirick 2002). From the self-enhancement perspective, it may seem smart and in one's self-interest to consider desirable messages (White & Dillon 2000). Neuwirth and Frederick (2002) introduced the second-person effect which states that people attribute the same amount of media influence on self and others. Usually, messages from trusted sources are seen as

more desirable (Gunther 1991), as well as those from favored political candidates (Duck *et al.* 1995), both leading to first-person effects. On the other hand, source bias is negatively perceived and leads to a greater third-person perception (Cohen *et al.* 1988). In what concerns the perceived influence of social media, the increased levels of information accessibility and control make the users of social networking sites overestimate the effects on others rather than on themselves (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Social networking platforms also play a primary role in spreading fake news, visits to fake news sites originating more from social media than from visits to real news sites (Nelson & Taneja 2018).

Another significant variable for the TPE is the social distance or the in-group – out-group positioning. The greater the social distance, the bigger the estimated effects on others (Meirick 2005; Paek *et al.* 2005). Considering the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), people tend to emphasize their similarities to in-group members and the differences from out-group members. Therefore, when making comparisons, they will favor the in-group as a way to enhance self-esteem. TPE in relation with perceived negative media influence will decrease for membership and reference groups, and increase for external groups (Duck *et al.* 1995). Thus, as the article investigates the perceived effects of fake news based on the third person theory, and considering the above stated differentiation between in-groups and out-groups, we formally hypothesize that (H1) *people's evaluation of fake news influence on their own opinions in general are lower than people's evaluation of fake news influence on close others, which in turn are lower than fake news influence on distant others.*

Also, age and gender introduce variations in the TPE in accordance with the media content. For example, along with age, adolescents' perceived effects of public health ads on self and other increases. The likelihood of the other to be an audience member of media content increases the TPE as well as the perceived vulnerability of the audience (Sun, Pan & Shen 2008). Consequently, women, compared with men, perceive the effect of Internet pornography and violence on others to be stronger, the others being more likely to be part of the audience for this type of content (Chapin 2000; Lo & Wei 2002). There is a link between perceived usage of a medium and perceived effects of the medium. The amount of perceived media exposure of others is related to bigger effects (Brosius & Engel 1996). Considering these theoretical aspects, and the gender gap in news consumption as men consume more news than women (Benesch 2012; Where Men and Women Differ in Following the News 2008), it is expected that (H2) *TPE is stronger for women than for men.*

In the context of fake news and digital disinformation, source credibility and media trust are affected. In the so called "post-truth era", information disorder associated with emerging media generated an increase in mass skepticism (McIntyre 2018). Media credibility is ensured through accuracy, measures of bias, fairness,

and completeness (Johnson & Kaye 2002). However, these criteria are missing when dealing with misinformation and satire, determining lower levels of trust in the news media (Baumgartner & Morris 2006). The more negative the perception over source bias, the greater the discrepancy between the perceived influence on others and on self (Wei, Lo, & Lu 2010). Perceived media bias and the lack of media credibility are associated with the TPE as shown before (see Cohen *et al.* 1988, Gunther 1991). It is therefore expected that (H3) *TPE is stronger for people who tend to trust media less.*

In addition to the mentioned moderating variables, cross-cultural research showed that the third-person perceptions are larger in individualistic cultures compared to collectivistic ones (Lee & Tamborini 2005). In what regards the self, people with high self-esteem tend to show a higher TPE (David & Johnson 1998). Education is another factor; participants with higher education perceive greater media effects on others (Tiedge *et al.* 1991). Knowledge of a given topic also has a moderating role, namely, as knowledge increases, the perceived effects grow (Wei & Lo 2007). In connection with the level of knowledge is the media use. If media use is higher, and the knowledge from media use increases, the TPE increases (Salwen 1998). Therefore, as knowledgeable viewers are more prone to TPE, including here being aware of a phenomenon and recognizing it more often than others, within the frame of fake news discussion, we hypothesize that (H4) *TPE is stronger for people who self-report coming across fake news more frequently.*

In sum, based on the TPE theory, this study aims at investigating the way people perceive the effects of fake news on self and others, and the possible variables of the effect as stated in the aforementioned hypotheses. In the following, we address the term of fake news and the digital disinformation phenomenon.

### **Fake news – concept delineation and effects**

Concerns regarding fake news have spread since the most recent US presidential election, and the phenomenon is perceived as a powerful force that has the potential to affect democracy (Glaser 2017). The term “fake news” implies an intentional dimension, a hoax, a deceiving aspect that delineates it from common mistakes made due to human error (Frank 2015). In order to better define the term, Wardle (2017) presents a typology that includes *the satire or the parody* for the potential to fool the audience; the *misleading content* for the deceitful use of information; the *imposter content* which implies the impersonation of genuine sources; the *fabricated content* which is entirely false and created for deceitful purposes, the *false connection* when visuals, captions or headlines are not in line with the content; the *false context* when authentic content is shared in a false setting; and the *manipulated content* when real information or imagery is transformed in order to deceive. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) developed another typology that includes news sat-

ire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising. Other authors focus on two major categories – misinformation that contains false information or misleading elements on purpose, and satire (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Bakir & McStay 2018). Although satire is not created to mislead, sharing news on social media can obscure the origin of the content, and thus, allowing satire to be mistaken for real news (Emery 2018).

While fake news became popular during the 2016 US presidential election, the usage of fake information for political purposes is an old process. Modern communication, however, can allow anyone to create and distribute fake content, as well as to transform false information into a business. Although traditional media have also been found to facilitate the spread of misinformation (Rojecki & Meraz 2016), social media constitute a perfect set-up for propagating untrue facts, and hundreds of websites were found to provide biased or false content (Zimdars 2016). Twitter allows for the spread of fake news via bots and anonymous accounts, influencing trending topics and undermining or favoring a political view (Zubiaga *et al.* 2018).

In terms of effects, the issue is not only to show if people believe fake news as truth, but to determine how disinformation influences “real news” (Guo & Vargo 2018). A recent study on fake news and intermedia agenda-setting (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018) reveals that fake news could redirect the public’s attention away from issues that might be important. President Trump popularized the term of fake news and used it, as well as part of the citizens, to delegitimize and deteriorate the credibility of well-known journalistic organizations (Albright 2016), this being a side effect caused by the inadequate use of the term. Media trust and message credibility are common issues in the context of the disinformation phenomenon. News media rely on trust to thrive so losing credibility is an important problem. In a social media context people tend to rely on their interpersonal connections in evaluating the information they encounter, and when dealing with trusted and credible sources, they invest less cognitive efforts to evaluate a message (Metzger *et al.* 2010). The generation and republication of high volumes of partisan content in the case of social media disinformation, aims to boost the visibility of certain content, to corrupt communication and create a false sense of popularity and consensus, and to disrupt free expression (Murthy *et al.* 2016; Woolley 2016). The practice of hashtag spamming renders the hashtag unusable and threatens the public discourse. Bots tactics are characterized as dishonest and offensive, and falling for automated content is perceived as negative and harmful (Svantesson & van Caenegem 2017).

Considering these aspects, another effect by association is the third-person perception which is increased by media content that is perceived as undesirable and harmful as shown before (see Perloff 2002). The spread of disinformation leads to legitimacy problems in many democracies, declining citizens’ confidence in insti-

tutions, and undermining the credibility of information sources, while exposing citizens to alternative sources that are misleading, nationalist, under foreign strategies that aim to destabilize governments and parties (Bennett & Livingston 2018). The more harmful the perceived media effects (in this case, fake news effects), and the more present the TPE gaps, the higher the support for censorship and taking actions (see Rojas, Shah, & Faber 1996). Thus, fake news could lead to a TPE both at the level of the perceptual component, and at the behavioral one.

Satire or parody programs, as a fake news genre, are included in the soft news category. Soft news programs, also called market-centered journalism, are characterized through more dramatic and sensationalist elements than hard news, human interest themes, and less information about public affairs. The term refers to daytime and late-night talk shows, entertainment, network and tabloid newsmagazine shows (Baum, 2003). Baumgartner and Morris (2006), in a research on the effects of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, argue that viewers exposed to campaign jokes tend to rate candidates more negatively irrespective of their political affiliation, display an increased political cynicism and media distrust. Thus, the viewers that were already politically nonparticipant registered a decrease in supporting political institutions and leaders. However, among the effects, the participants declared having an increased confidence in their capacity to understand politics and political stakes, which may be related with the TPE, and more specifically, with the ego enhancement need and the optimism bias that lead to TPE. People need to maintain a positive image about themselves (Tsfati & Cohen 2004) and they think they are better than the average when using social comparisons (Alicke & Govorun 2005), so they trust their abilities to understand complex political contexts (Baumgartner & Morris 2006), aspects which represent some of the basic psychological factors (Helweg-Larsen & Sheppard 2001) that lead to TPE.

Hollander (1995) found that entertainment-based talk programs augment viewers' perceptions regarding their level of political knowledge, and help viewers find out about what is going on in politics (Beavers 2011). Knowledge on a topic is also positively associated with TPE (see Wei & Lo 2007), so entertainment and satire-based programs could favor the third-person perception. However, these programs can affect the democratic process on the long run by excessively simplifying complex realities and public affairs, and by largely focusing on trivial events (Patterson 2000). Citizens can also think the ideology they support is not targeted in the jokes or they can sympathize with the politicians that are subjects in the show (Baumgartner & Morris 2008). Also, as news media often are targets in satire news, viewers present lower levels of trust in the news media (Baumgartner & Morris 2006). Distrust either due to satire programs or to misinformation, and perceived media bias reopen the discussion over the third-person perception (see Cohen *et al.* 1988; Gunther 1995).

In the context of the growing problem of disinformation, grasping the effects of the phenomenon and seeing how citizens relate to it is essential. By correlating fake news to the TPE we might have a complex understanding of the effects and of the perceived vulnerability of self and others in dealing with misleading information.

## Method

In this study we focus on identifying third-person effects in people's way of evaluating how affected they (and their peers) are by "incorrect information in the media", comparing self-evaluations with people's evaluations of "close" vs. "distant" others. We rely on data gathered from a national representative survey (N=1107) in Romania, using CATI method of data gathering, and a bistadial, stratified sampling procedure, conducted between February and March 2018 within the strategic project "State of the Nation. An innovative instrument for evidence-based policy making in Romania". Additionally, we investigate the role played by people's self-evaluations of fake news exposure and their ability to verify information in the new consumption process.

## Measures

Third-person assessments were measured using three 7-point Likert scales, measuring the potential of "incorrect information in the media" to influence "your opinion, in general" (*self-assessment*), "the opinion of friends and relatives" (*close others*), "people's opinion, in general" (*distant others*). The third-person effects for close and distant others were afterwards measured by subtracting the mean value of close others and self-assessment, on the one hand, and distant others and self-assessment on the other hand. Thus, positive values would indicate a third-person effect, whereas negative values would suggest a possible first person effect.

Fact checking was assessed using two scales built using the most frequent fact checking routines people use in their news consumption behavior. The scales referred to active checking habits ("When in doubt, I check sites specialized in detecting incorrect information" – fact checkers; "I look for the source of the information, in cases where the source is not mentioned in the first place" – source searching; "I verify what other people say online about that piece of information" – online checking – alternative media), and passive evaluation habits ("I rely on my knowledge about the subject in general, and on my intuition" – gut feeling; "I rely on the journalists' reputation" – Journalists' reputation; "I rely on the source's reputation (brand)" – source reputation (media outlet); "I check my impression about the information with friends or relatives" – verify impression with friends). A principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded two factors, with factor loadings between .773 and .869 for active checking subscale ( $\alpha = .827$ ,

$M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ), and between .661 and .851 for passive evaluation subscale ( $\alpha = .747$ ,  $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .91$ ) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Principal component factor analysis for checking information routines

	<b>Active checking</b>	<b>Passive evaluation</b>
Fact checkers	.869	
Source searching (when absent)	.842	
Online checking (alternative media)	.773	
Gut feeling		.815
Journalists' reputation		.756
Source reputation (media outlet)		.672
Verify impression with friends		.661

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Independent variables considered as predictors of TPE were gender, media trust (5-point Likert scale), fake news exposure (self evaluations of frequency of “coming across incorrect information in the media” (5-point scale), level of education (13-point scale), access to Internet (dichotomous variable), and the two subscale of fact checking habits.

## Results

Generally speaking, an observed third-person effect proved to be stronger when people compare themselves to distant others ( $T(776)=8.73$ ,  $p<.01$ ) than when they compare themselves with close others ( $T(746)=19.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ), thus validating H1 validated (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** People's evaluation of the effects of fake news on self, on close others, and on distant others  
(T test significant at  $p<.01$ )

	<b>Fake news effects on self</b>	<b>Fake news effects on close others</b>	<b>Fake news effects on distant others</b>
Mean	<b>3.06</b>	<b>3.67</b>	<b>4.50</b>
SD	2.06	1.95	2.02
N	894	777	747
T Values		8.73	19.40

As expected, when thinking about close friends and relatives, people perceived them as more affected than themselves, but not as affected as the rest of the people, as closeness means at the same time inclusion. At the same time, people place themselves and their close connections below the middle of the scale, conveniently considering themselves and their peers as not so much influenced by fake news,

whereas the other people are to a greater extent prone to being influenced (above the mean of the scale).

To discuss the possible predictors of TPE, we constructed four OLS regression models (Table 3), predicting the intensity of the TPE for close vs. distant others, taking into account the active and passive ways of fact checking routine people use in assessing the quality of news they come across in everyday life. The models show also comparatively to what extent the significant predictors explain the variance in the dependent variable (the intensity of the third person effect), in both close and distant others cases. The variables considered in the models are both socio-demographics, but also media related variables, such as trust, fake news exposure (self-reported), and patterns of people’s behavior of checking the factuality of news they consume on a daily basis. Gender proved to be a significant predictor only in models predicting TPE as compared to distant others (H2 partially validated), in the sense that TPEs are stronger for women than for men in these models (Model 3 and 4). Media trust is not a significant predictor, with the exception of Model 1 and Model 3 (TPE of people comparing themselves with close/distant others, and taking into account an active routine of checking the news), in which trust in the media is marginally significant (H3 invalidated).

**Table 3.** OLS regression models of third-person effects

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Close others			Distant others			Close others			Distant others		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Constant	.986*	.463		.015	.560		.538	.451		.365	.564	
Gender (male=1)	-.100	.161	-.030	-.449*	.199	-.107	-.036	.146	-.011	-.380*	.187	-.092
Media trust	-.125*	.066	-.097	-.018	.081	-.011	-.115*	.061	-.090	-.014	.078	-.008
Fake news exposure (self-evaluations)	.084	.064	.067	.393**	.079	.248	.031	.059	.025	.301**	.075	.191
Education	-.045	.032	-.072	.054	.040	.067	-.042	.030	-.068	.039	.038	.049
Internet connection (yes=1)	.149	.229	.033	.281	.281	.050	.189	.200	.045	.252	.249	.049
Active checking fake news	-.035	.079	-.022	-.132	.098	-.065						
Passive evaluation of fake news							.126	.083	.070	.135	.108	.058
R square		.021			.081			.019			.060	

\*\*p < .01, \*p < .05, †p < .1

Fake news frequency of exposure is the only statistically significant predictor at p < .01 level, but only in the models of TPE taking distant others as peer-group as comparison point. Thus, the more people perceive themselves as exposed to fake news, the greater the intensity of TPE (H4 partially validated). At the same time,

the robustness of the two models having distant others as point of reference for TPE is higher than for the other two models. Moreover, active vs. passive ways of checking fake news does not seem to play any role in predicting TPE.

Generally, women who come across fake news more often seem to be the category the most prone to TPE, but only when they compare themselves with distant others.

## Discussion

In what regards the perceived effects of fake news among Romanian people, main results from our study confirm that TPE is stronger when people compare with distant others than to close others. This result is in line with previous research designs referring to the perceived media effects at personal level, on in-group members, and on the out-group ones; the greater the social distance, the bigger the estimated effects on others (Meirick 2005; Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden 2005). This could be interpreted in two ways. First, when making comparisons, people in general tend to favor in-group members (closeness means inclusion) as a way to enhance self-esteem. Second, because of more or less recent debates in the public sphere (e.g., the controversies around the 2016 US presidential elections, the Cambridge Analytica scandal etc.), fake news might be considered to have exclusively negative impact, so that their perceived influence is not at all socially desirable. Therefore, people tend to consider that distant others are more influenced than their family or friends (close others). This explanation is consistent with the ideas of Duck *et al.* (1995), stating that TPE in relation to perceived negative media influence decreases for membership and reference groups, and increases for external groups.

On the other hand, referring to the possible factors predicting the TPE, our study proves that gender and media exposure (i.e., fake news frequency of exposure) determine the intensity of TPE. All the other predictors (i.e., media trust, education, internet connection and checking information routine) included in our predictive models did not prove significant in influencing the intensity of TPE.

As expected, gender is a significant predictor of TPE, but only with reference to out-group members (distant others). Particularly, main results from our study show that, when comparing with distant others, women have a greater tendency to believe that distant others are more influenced by fake news. This result is in line with previous research studies expressing that women tend to perceive others are more influenced by negative media messages such as pornography on the internet and online gaming (Lo & Wei 2002; Zhang 2013).

The most interesting result at this level is that the fake news frequency of exposure is the most significant predictor of TPE ( $p < .01$ ), but, again, only with reference to distant others. Specifically, the more people perceive they are exposed to

fake news, the greatest the TPE. One explanation could be attributed to the fact that fake news are, by excellence, socially undesirable media content, thus the exposure to fake news is perceived as having negative impact and, mainly because people want to maintain and enhance their ego, they do not want to admit (even though they might be) that they are influenced by this type of media content. This result confirms both previous research studies investigating TPE with reference to in-group and out-group members and previous analyses about the perceived influence of social media – users of social networking sites tend to overestimate the effects on others and ignore social media effects on self (Mangold & Faulds 2009).

Contrary to our expectations, media trust does not prove to be a significant predictor for the intensity of TPE. Studies so far show that media messages from trusted sources are often regarded as desirable, thus leading to lower levels of TPE, and increased levels of first-person effects. However, results from our study show that trust in the media is not a significant predictor in this model. Only for those people who have an active routine of fact checking and only when comparing themselves with close others, media trust is marginally significant, in the sense that these people consider themselves rather less influenced than close others. This result is also linked to previous studies stating that, mainly because they want to maintain a positive image about themselves, people tend to underestimate media effects on self and close others and overestimate the effects on distant others (Gunther 1995; Price, Huang & Tewksbury 1997).

### **Conclusions and implications**

This study sheds light on the perceived influence of fake news among Romanian people. The novelty of the study lies in the combination of a classic theory of media effects – third-person effect or third-person perception (Davison 1983) – and the way it applies with reference to the phenomenon of digital disinformation. Particularly, our study aimed at identifying if and how people perceive that the exposure to fake news has significant influence on themselves, on in-group, and out-group members. At the same time, we investigated the main predictors leading to the perception that either people themselves or others (close vs. distant) are more influenced by fake media content.

Our study proves that the TPE theory applies in this new and highly contested digital environment, in the sense that, generally speaking, people perceive that distant others are more influenced by fake news than themselves or people from their close groups (family or friends). This perception that distant others are more influenced could: (1) determine people to have only positive impressions about themselves and their abilities to deal with all types of information and, as a result, (2) make people develop a sense of detachment and relaxation when encountering new information (which could prove to be fake news), leading to even more

dramatic persuasion effects (i.e., fake news might be very dangerous for people who do not consider the possibility of being ever influenced). Specifically, perceiving that only distant others are more influenced by fake news could be dangerous in the long term, leading to troubling related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., offering exclusively emotional responses towards digital content, letting apart critical thinking when facing a news article, ignoring fact-checking techniques, influencing close others to have a better impression about themselves and their abilities to discover fake news). These implications might give a more profound sense to the TPE theory applied in the digital context than that which was originally created with reference to traditional media outlets. Today, when the spread of misleading information is so wide and dangerous, perceiving that only distant others might be persuaded could be the first step towards manipulation.

In what regards the main predictors of TPE, our study proves that there are some variables (i.e., gender, self-evaluations regarding fake news exposure and, marginally, media trust) that influence the intensity of TPE, thus offering some insights about the possible causes that might explain why some people are more influenced by fake news than others. Nevertheless, the fact that other included predictors (i.e., education, internet connection or fact-checking routines) did not prove significant could lead to the conclusion that, when applying to extremely new and vivid media contexts, classic theories (with their initial explanations and predictors) should be reconsidered and adapted.

In conclusion, our study confirms that there is a link between the exposure to fake news and the self-other discrepancy of perceived effects. Specifically, this study might be a step towards better understanding how people perceive the impact of digital disinformation and the vulnerability of self and others when dealing with information which is not so real, but not so false, somehow manipulated, somehow fabricated. After the completion of this step, studies like this one could be used in investigating if and how, within this extremely vivid media ecosystem, the self-other discrepancy and its possible causes further impact and explain people's social attitudes and behaviors.

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