Asymmetrical third-person effects on the perceptions of online risk and harm among adolescents and adults

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506 UK-based Facebook users (53% male; 13–77 years)

## Implications For Educators About

STEM Education

## Implications For Stakeholders About

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# Abstract

Although research has identified a range of opportunities, risks, and harms related to online social
networking, the public debate on online risks follows a set pattern by which members of older age
groups (parents, regulators) hold a picture of members of younger age groups (teenagers, digital
natives) at a uniformly high level of risk. Perceptions of online risk, however, are prone to thirdperson effects in which individuals perceive risks to be more apparent in others than
themselves. This study investigated third-person effects across age groups to further our
understanding of the set positions found in current public debate. Multivariate analysis was used
to compare adolescent and adult users’ personal and third-person perceptions of common
psycho-social risks associated with social networking engagement in a sample of 506 UK-based
Facebook users (53% male; 13–77 years). Results indicated that rates of exposure to online
vulnerabilities were similar for both age groups. However, differences in adult and adolescent
perceptions of risk highlighted apparent mismatches between reported exposure to risk and an
individual’s perceptions, with adults demonstrating lower personal perceptions and higher thirdperson perceptions of risk than their adolescent counterparts. The research considers the
implications of risk perception on an individual’s online vulnerability.

# Outcome

Prior experience of online risks and harm is similar for adolescents and adults but older individuals
consider themselves to be less likely to experience risk. They might feel safer online due to their life
experience. "Online
risks and vulnerability do not apply to adolescent users
alone. Indeed, adolescents may have a more pragmatic
perception of online risks and vulnerabilities than their
optimistically biased adult counterparts, a divide that
needs to be bridged in order to ensure safe and enjoyable
user practices are experienced by all. " (Buglass et al., 2020: 8).