The Perceived Influence of AIDS Advertising: Third-Person Effects in the Context of Positive Media Content

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Although there is consistent evidence indicating that people perceive themselves to be less influenced than others by negative media content and persuasive communications with negative intent (viz., a third-person effect), much less is known about the perceived impact of positive media content and public service advertisements. This study investigated the perceived impact of 11 AIDS advertisements promoting a common message for safe sex, in an attempt to clarify the conditions in which people might judge themselves as more, rather than less, influenced than others. Results indicated that student respondents perceived themselves as less vulnerable than others to low-quality AIDS advertisements, but as more influenced than others by high-quality AIDS advertisements. Respondents who believed strongly that it is good to be influenced by AIDS campaigns saw themselves as relatively vulnerable to such messages, whereas other respondents did not distinguish between the level of impact on self and other. Results are consistent with motivational accounts that emphasize the ego-enhancing function of social comparisons.

According to Davison's (1983) third-person effect, people typically assume that persuasive communications and mass media in general exert a stronger impact on others (third persons) than on themselves. A review of 10 years of research (Perloff, 1993) indicated "abundant support" (p. 167) for this notion. Evidence suggests that people both overestimate communication effects on others and underestimate communication effects on themselves, but either way, "Most people appear to be willing to subscribe to the logical
inconsistency inherent in maintaining that the mass media influence others considerably more than themselves" (Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991, p. 152).

Although cognitive factors may be involved (Duck & Mullin, 1995; Perloff, 1993), motivational accounts stress the self-serving nature of this judgmental contrast. As emphasized in many social-psychological theories (e.g., social comparison theory, Festinger, 1954; self-evaluation theory, Pettigrew, 1967; social identity theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1986; and self-categorization theory, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), self-appraisals are essentially relativistic, evolving through perceptions of one's standing relative to others. Motivated by a desire to maintain and enhance a positive self-conception, people typically evaluate themselves in more favorable terms than they evaluate others, rating positive attributes as more characteristic of the self than of others, and negative attributes as less characteristic of the self than of others (e.g., Brown, 1986). Presumably, in a culture that values individual freedom and self-determination as opposed to conformity, submission, and compliance (Triandis, 1990; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990), the perception that one is less susceptible to persuasion than others helps to enhance self-esteem and preserve feelings of personal control. Moreover, the ego-defensive motivation to deny personal persuasibility may be particularly strong in the context of mass media messages, which have traditionally been credited with having powerful and largely undesirable effects on the attitudes and behaviors of a gullible and susceptible mass audience (e.g., Miller, 1987; Smith, 1986).

The admission of personal influence is particularly ego-threatening in the context of messages with negative or socially undesirable outcomes (e.g., pornography, violence, and commercial advertising)—the content that typically dominates discussion of and research on the media and third-person effects (Perloff, 1993). According to Gunther and Mundy (1993), third-person perceptions with respect to negative media content reinforce self-esteem by allowing one to think of oneself both as more resistant to persuasion and as less susceptible to negative outcomes (e.g., to have illusions of invulnerability to negative life events, Perloff & Fetzer, 1986; to be unrealistically optimistic about future life events, Weinstein, 1980).

Despite their importance, much less is known about the perceived effects of messages that make socially desirable or beneficial recommendations (e.g., public service campaigns about health and safety issues). In fact, according to Perloff (1993), "It remains an empirical question as to whether a third-person effect would emerge for positive messages" (p. 176). The third-person effect may be a universal response to influence attempts: People may be reluctant to admit personal persuasibility in general. However, it is also feasible that people may be motivated to acknowledge the personal impact of messages that advocate beneficial and intelligent
outcomes, enhancing self-esteem through the belief that they are more responsive than others to such messages. Public service campaigners would hope that people are comfortable acknowledging the personal impact of positive messages because, presumably, this makes their audience more amenable to the desired attitudinal and behavioral change. However, the relative strength of competing motivations—to deny personal persuasibility and to acknowledge personal responsiveness to prosocial messages—might be critical in determining whether perceived self–other differences in message vulnerability are reversed, eliminated, or merely reduced in this context.

In one of the few third-person studies to have taken valence of message content into account, Innes and Zeitz (1988) compared the perceived influence on self and other of media violence (a socially undesirable or negative issue), political advertising (a neutral issue), and a campaign to reduce drunk driving (a socially desirable or positive issue). Their study provided support for a general third-person effect, although the magnitude of the effect was significantly reduced for positive and neutral versus negative content. These results are consistent with an account of the third-person effect as an ego-defensive response to the issue of personal persuasibility—a response that is less pronounced when the valence of the message makes the admission of personal influence less ego-threatening. However, the inclusion of only one example of each type of media content means that results may be attributable to idiosyncratic features of one or more of the examples and not to the valence of the content (see Jackson & Jacobs, 1983).

In contrast, Gunther and his colleagues (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992) provided evidence that the third-person effect is limited to messages that have negative or harmful consequences and that self and other are judged as equally influenced by positive messages. Gunther and Thorson (1992) compared the perceived effects of product commercials designed to secure profits for the advertiser and public service announcements designed to benefit the viewer. People saw themselves as less influenced than others by product commercials (e.g., for furniture polish and for air freshener), but there were no perceived self–other differences in vulnerability to public service advertisements (e.g., for Greenpeace and against drunk driving). Similarly, Gunther and Mundy (1993) compared people’s perceptions of the impact of “harmful” commercials (e.g., advertisements for schemes to win the lottery and slimming pills) with the impact of “beneficial” commercials (e.g., advertisements for seatbelts and safe suntanning). Respondents perceived “harmful” advertisements to have a greater effect on other people than on themselves, but there was no significant self–other difference in perceptions of the effects of “beneficial” advertisements. Gunther reasoned that people tend to maxi-
mize socially acceptable attributes in themselves relative to others (see Schlenker, 1985; Tetlock, 1985), but that a general reluctance to acknowledge personal persuasibility works against a desire to acknowledge compliance with positive messages.

Gunther and Thorson (1992) provided evidence suggesting that message features other than valence of intent/outcome may be critical in actually reversing third-person perceptions. For instance, they reported that respondents perceived themselves as relatively vulnerable to product commercials judged as pleasant, emotional, and moving (e.g., an advertisement for Qantas airlines). Drawing on research linking emotion and cognitions, Gunther and Thorson suggested that positive emotions engender more positive views of the advertisement and of self and other. The perceived impact of the advertisement is, thus, seen as more socially desirable, and there is less motivation to deny personal influence. It is also possible that people may simply be more motivated to acknowledge the personal impact of “good” advertisements. Gunther and his colleagues concluded that when it is socially acceptable for people to resist persuasion, they see themselves as highly resistant and others as less so (a third-person effect), but that when it is socially acceptable to think of oneself as influenced, people see themselves as yielding and others as less so (a reverse third-person effect).

Duck and Mullin (1995) also provided evidence of reversals in the third-person effect: They suggested that third-person effects are contingent upon both the valence of the message and, particularly where positive content is concerned, upon personal assessments of the relevance and desirability of the message. In their study, subjects saw themselves as relatively invulnerable to negative media content (e.g., violence and sexism) and said it was “bad” to be influenced by such content. Perceptions of the effects of positive campaign content (e.g., ads to reduce drunk driving and to wear seatbelts) were more complex—subjects viewed themselves as more or less vulnerable than others to public service advertisements depending on whether they viewed the impact of such messages as desirable and personally relevant or as undesirable and personally irrelevant. Duck and Mullin explained their findings in terms of the motivation to engage in ego-enhancing social comparisons. However, because judgments of perceived desirability were inferred from content analysis of open-ended comments, there is a need for more systematic tests of this hypothesis.

In summary, despite the abundant support for third-person effects in the context of negative messages, the pattern with respect to positive content is less clear. It is likely that the motivation to maintain and enhance a positive

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1Presumably Gunther and Thorson (1992) are referring to more than a social desirability response set in which people give socially proper rather than truthful judgments of perceived media influence in public versus private settings.
self-conception underlies perceptions of influence in both domains, but there is a need to specify more clearly the conditions under which a motivation to acknowledge personal responsiveness to positive messages outweighs an apparently strong tendency to deny personal persuasibility. The present study was designed to test motivational accounts of perceived self–other differences in influence and to clarify some of these conditions.

Specifically, the study used a sample of Australian university students and examined the perceived impact of 11 public service advertisements with a common message encouraging safe sex. It was considered reasonable to examine the perceived impact of positive messages in this context, given the importance of the AIDS issue. AIDS is one of the most pressing current health problems, and it was estimated in 1989 that some 15,000 Australians were already infected with HIV (Owen & Mylvaganam, 1991). The AIDS/HIV issue is of particular relevance to university students because research shows that students engage in sexual practices that lead to increased exposure to HIV infection (e.g., Crawford, Turtle, & Kippax, 1990; Rosenthal, Hall, & Moore, 1992; Struckman-Johnson, Gilliland, Struckman-Johnson, & North, 1990). Although campaigns directed at HIV transmission are characterized by a variety of different methods and media (e.g., posters, kits, pamphlets, personal counseling, and groups; Owen & Mylvaganam, 1991), much emphasis has been placed on televised public service advertisements, and recent commentators in the public health field have called for wider use of television and the popular media for HIV/AIDS education (Tulloch, 1992).

We reasoned that, although students would generally approve of public service advertisements for the AIDS campaign, the magnitude and direction of perceived self–other differences in influence would vary in self-serving ways according to the perceived quality of specific advertisements and according to the strength of people’s personal beliefs in the desirability of influence. Given a general disinclination to admit personal persuasibility, we expected that students would perceive themselves as relatively invulnerable to televised AIDS advertisements (a third-person effect) unless the advertisements were seen as particularly good commercials (in an objective sense and especially in terms of the student’s own perceptions of ad quality) or unless the individual had a particularly strong personal belief that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising. In these latter conditions, we reasoned that a perception of relative vulnerability to influence (a reverse third-person effect) would represent a self-enhancing social comparison. Specifically, we hypothesized that:

1. Students would perceive themselves as relatively invulnerable to low-quality AIDS advertisements but as relatively vulnerable to high-quality advertisements when ad quality was determined by an independent
sample (H1a; a measure of objective ad quality), and especially when ad quality was determined by the subjects' own ratings of ad quality (H1b; a subjective measure of ad quality). Moreover, for any given advertisement, respondents who perceived the ad as higher in quality would perceive themselves as more influenced than others, whereas respondents who perceived the ad as lower in quality would perceive themselves as less influenced than others (H1c). We assumed that perceived ad quality would be determined by characteristics such as perceived informativeness, cleverness, effectiveness, and emotional tenor.

2. Students with strong personal beliefs that it is good to be influenced by AIDS advertising would see themselves as relatively vulnerable to influence, whereas students with weaker beliefs in the desirability of AIDS advertising would see themselves as relatively invulnerable to influence.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 90 female and 50 male first-year psychology students enrolled at a large urban Australian university. Students participated in the study for partial fulfillment of course requirements. Subjects were between 17 and 21 years old ($M = 18.54$ years, $SD = 1.09$).

Materials

The stimuli were 11 AIDS commercials produced on behalf of the Australian government by the Australian National Council on AIDS. These commercials, described below, covered the range of advertisements produced by the council since the commencement of the AIDS campaign in 1987.

1. Grim Reaper: A visually disturbing advertisement with scenes of Grim Reapers in a bowling alley bowling down men, women, and children. The message is that everyone—not just gays and intravenous drug users—can be killed by AIDS and that, if not stopped, AIDS will kill more Australians than were killed during World War II. The advertisement stresses that people should have one safe partner or always use a condom.

2. Russian Roulette: A serious advertisement likening intravenous drug use to playing Russian roulette. The visuals focus on a young male and female with a syringe hesitating over who will go first. Against an image of a revolver being readied to fire, the message is that you could overdose; die
from blood poisoning; get brain damage; or be affected by the new player in the game, AIDS. The advertisement stresses that one shot from a contaminated needle is enough to kill you.

3. Information Brochures: A humorous advertisement for the AIDS brochures *Talking to Your Children About AIDS, Discover How to Enjoy Safer Sex, AIDS: The Facts Everyone Should Know,* and *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Condoms.* The advertisement comprises four light and amusing sketches. For example, in one sketch, a young couple is watching TV. The girlfriend asks her partner, “Terry, what’s safer sex?” and he jokes, “Talking dirty on the phone?”

4. Beach Party: An advertisement showing young people having fun at a beach party. The advertisement begins with scenes of laughter, music, and sports cars. The advertisement concludes with one girl joining a group in a parked car and presumably being offered a shared needle. She leaves the car, offended, saying, “There’s no way I’d share a needle—I don’t want to get AIDS.”

5. Playing Footsie: A humorous advertisement showing the legs of a couple in bed, giggling and playing footsie. The woman asks her partner if he has the condom, but he’s forgotten it. She replies that they had agreed to use one and insists, “No condom, no sex.” He rolls away from her, ostensibly annoyed, but the “fun” is recaptured when he says he’s off to the late-night pharmacy.

6. Beds: A serious advertisement that opens with a couple in bed and romantic music. The music stops and the shot pans out to a scene of couples in multiple beds. The message is that one should always use a condom because you can never be sure just how many people you are really going to bed with. It stresses that your partner may have had previous partners, who have, in turn, had previous partners, and that any one of them could have been infected with the AIDS virus and have passed it on.

7. Everybody: An advertisement emphasizing that AIDS can affect all Australians and that AIDS prevention is everybody’s responsibility. The advertisement begins by panning across a group of Australians of different cultural backgrounds and emphasizing the cultural and religious diversity of our population. It cuts to a similar shot in which the figures are stylized and identical, stressing that AIDS sees us all as equal, regardless of color of skin, religion, or culture. The advertisement cuts again to the original shot of varied Australians, recommending the brochure *AIDS Prevention Is Everybody’s Responsibility.*

8. Beds and Syringes: A dramatic advertisement featuring a young couple about to go to bed. The bed is covered with upright syringes. The voiceover suggests, “Before you go to bed with someone, ask yourself, Who have they been to bed with? They could have slept with someone who’s been
doing drugs and has shared a needle with someone who's had the AIDS virus. If you go to bed with someone, always use a condom, because when you sleep with someone, you're sleeping with their past."

9. Sex and Condoms: Two humorous and very similar advertisements in which a popular Australian comedian, Andrew Denton, asks a series of young people on the street, at the beach, and in shops about sex and condom use. The message is that condoms can be fun and that it's okay to carry them around with you.

10. Testimonials: A series of four short emotional advertisements in which four AIDS victims (in silhouette to protect their identity) speak in turn about how they contracted the AIDS virus. For instance, one man talks about how he used to like going out to parties and having fun with friends. He says he'd only shared a needle occasionally and always thought he was being careful. He says that if, by talking about his experience, he changes the behavior of just one person, then it might save a lot of pain and heartbreak.

11. Experts: A series of three statements by experts from different backgrounds. Geraldine Doogue, a television current affairs presenter, explains that the AIDS virus is contracted through infected blood but stresses that the virus is very fragile. Shane Houston, a representative of the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organization, explains that AIDS cannot be contracted from casual everyday contact. The Reverend Dorothy McMahon, of the Uniting Church, counsels against unnecessary fear of and prejudice against those with AIDS.

Measures and Procedure

Subjects were tested in groups of 10 to 25, watching and evaluating each commercial in turn. To reduce serial order effects, the commercials were presented in one of six different orders. Five of the ad sequences were random orders and one sequence corresponded to the chronological order in which the ads were produced (as described previously). Between 21 and 26 respondents watched each ad sequence.

First, subjects rated each commercial on five 9-point bipolar scales: emotional–unemotional, pleasant–unpleasant, informative–uninformative, clever–not clever, effective–ineffective. Second, they rated how much they thought they would be influenced by the commercial and how much they thought people in general would be influenced by the commercial on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (not influenced at all) to 9 (extremely influenced). Third, subjects responded to an item asking, "Would university students in general think it is good to be influenced by this advertisement?", on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (No, definitely not) to 9 (Yes, definitely). This item was included as a measure of the perceived social acceptability of
influence. After the 11 commercials were shown, subjects made similar evaluations of AIDS advertising in general. They also responded to an item asking, "Do you think it is good to be influenced by AIDS advertising?" on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (No, definitely not) to 9 (Yes, definitely). This item was included as a measure of the perceived personal desirability of influence.

Results of preliminary factor analyses indicated that the four items measuring subjects' perceptions of how informative, effective, clever, and socially desirable each of the 11 advertisements was loaded consistently on a single factor, termed perceived quality. Hence, for each subject, a measure of perceived quality was calculated for each advertisement by averaging responses to these four items (Cronbach's αs across the 11 advertisements ranged from .78 to .84).

A measure of the perceived self–other difference in perceived influence was calculated by subtracting perceived influence on people in general from perceived influence on self. Positive scores indicated that self was perceived as more influenced than other and negative scores indicated that self was perceived as less influenced than other.

RESULTS

Perceived Self–Other Differences According to Ad Quality

Three separate analyses were conducted to examine predictions concerning the effects of ad quality on perceived self–other differences. The first two analyses explored self–other differences according to the relative quality of the 11 ads (H1a, H1b). First, predictions were tested using ratings of ad quality obtained from an independent sample. Second, predictions were tested using each subject's ratings of ad quality. The third analysis examined self–other differences on each ad according to differences between respondents in their perception of the quality of the ad (H1c).

Differences between ads using ratings of ad quality obtained from an independent sample. This analysis tested the hypothesis that differences between advertisements in the magnitude and direction of the perceived self–other difference would be associated with differences in the quality of the ads obtained from the ratings of an independent sample. Ratings of perceived ad quality obtained from 114 first-year psychology students who judged the advertisements in one fixed order—their chronological order—were used to provide an objective classification of ad quality. The measure of perceived quality was calculated for each subject by
averaging responses to four items measuring how informative, effective, clever, and socially desirable the subject perceived each of the 11 advertisements to be (Cronbach's α across advertisements ranged from .75 to .86). The ads in descending order of quality were: Beds, $M = 7.47$; Testimonials, $M = 7.44$; Beds and Syringes, $M = 7.43$; Grim Reaper, $M = 6.96$; Sex and Condoms, $M = 6.84$; Russian Roulette, $M = 6.76$; Experts, $M = 6.51$; Playing Footsie, $M = 6.43$; Everybody, $M = 6.05$; Information Brochures, $M = 5.35$; and Beach Party, $M = 4.36$.

As predicted, these independent ratings of ad quality, averaged across subjects, correlated $r = .78$ ($p < .01$, $n = 11$, two-tailed) with perceived self–other differences in influence. The bivariate scatterplot revealed a fairly even distribution of points along the joint continuum: Respondents perceived themselves to be more influenced than others by the highest quality ads, to be equally influenced by the average- or medium-quality ads, and to be less influenced than others by the lowest quality ads.

Using a median split on perceived ad quality, averaged across subjects, Advertisements 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, and 10 were classified as high-quality commercials and Advertisements 3, 4, 5, 7, and 11 as low-quality commercials. The effects of target (self, people in general) and ad quality (low, high) on ratings of perceived influence were then examined in a $2 \times 2$ mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA). As expected, a significant main effect for ad quality, $F(1, 139) = 558.14$, $p < .001$, indicated that respondents perceived the high-quality commercials to have more influence overall than the low-quality commercials. There was no main effect for target, $F(1, 139) = 0.51$; however, a significant Ad Quality × Target interaction, $F(1, 139) = 47.34$, $p < .001$, indicated that perceived self–other differences in influence varied with the quality of the commercial (see Figure 1). As predicted, tests for simple effects indicated that respondents perceived themselves as more influenced than people in general by high-quality AIDS commercials (6.93 vs. 6.67, $p < .001$), but as less influenced than people in general by low-quality AIDS commercials (4.99 vs. 5.17, $p < .01$).

It should be noted that the ratings of ad quality obtained from the independent sample correlated $r = .90$ ($p < .001$, $n = 11$, two-tailed) with ratings of perceived ad quality obtained in the present study, and a classification of ads as low and high quality on the basis of ratings of ad quality obtained in the present sample revealed only one minor modification: Ad 5 was classified as a high-quality commercial and Ad 9 as a low-quality commercial. Hence, similar results were obtained when the above analyses were repeated using ratings of ad quality obtained in the present study.²

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²The ads in descending order of quality were: Grim Reaper, $M = 7.58$; Beds and Syringes, $M = 7.40$; Beds, $M = 7.31$; Russian Roulette, $M = 7.08$; Testimonials, $M = 6.90$; Playing
Differences between ads using each respondent's ratings of perceived ad quality. As predicted (H1b), stronger support for the first hypothesis was found when the ads were classified as high and low quality using a median split on each respondent's ratings of the 11 ads. The effects of target (self, people in general) and perceived ad quality (low, high) were tested in a 2 X 2 within-subjects ANOVA. A significant main effect for ad quality, $F(1, 139) = 656.54, p < .001$, indicated that respondents perceived the high-quality commercials to have more influence overall than the low-quality commercials. There was no main effect for target, $F(1, 139) = 0.44$; however, a significant Ad Quality $\times$ Target interaction, $F(1, 139) = 68.67, p < .001$, indicated that perceived self–other differences in influence varied with the perceived quality of the commercial (see Figure 2). As predicted, respondents saw themselves as more influenced than others by AIDS commercials they perceived to be high in quality (7.14 vs. 6.80, $p < .001$).

Footsie, $M = 6.34$; Sex and Condoms, $M = 6.23$; Experts, $M = 5.80$; Everybody, $M = 5.72$; Information Brochures, $M = 5.61$; and Beach Party, $M = 4.48$. There was a strong positive correlation between perceived ad quality and perceived self–other differences ($r = .86, p < .001, n = 11$, two-tailed). Results of a 2 X 2 mixed ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for ad quality, $F(1, 139) = 470.13, p < .001$; no main effect for target, $F(1, 139) = 0.49$; and a significant Ad Quality $\times$ Target interaction, $F(1, 139) = 47.80, p < .001$. Respondents perceived themselves as more influenced than people in general by the better AIDS commercials (6.94 vs. 6.66, $p < .001$) but as less influenced than people in general by the poorer AIDS commercials (4.98 vs. 5.18, $p < .01$).
.001), but as less influenced than others by AIDS commercials they perceived to be low in quality (4.75 vs. 5.01, \( p < .001 \)).

**Differences on each ad using respondents' ratings of the quality of the ad.** The third analysis examined the hypothesis that, for any given advertisement, respondents who perceived the ad as higher in quality would be more likely to perceive themselves as more influenced than others, whereas respondents who perceived the ad as lower in quality would be more likely to perceive themselves as less influenced than others (H1c).

In line with this prediction, preliminary analyses revealed significant positive correlations (.22 \( \leq r \leq .35 \), \( p < .01 \)) between perceived ad quality and magnitude of the perceived self–other difference on 9 of the 11 ads, with weaker positive correlations on Ad 1 \( (r = .10) \) and 8 \( (r = .14) \). These results suggested that perceived self–other differences in influence were more positive in subjects who perceived the ad as higher in quality.

To examine this suggestion more fully, respondents were categorized with respect to each advertisement (using a median split) into those who regarded the advertisement as high or low in quality. Respondents' ratings of the influence of the 11 AIDS advertisements on self and on people in general according to their perception of each advertisement as high or low quality are presented in Table 1. For each advertisement, the effects of target (self, people in general) and perceived quality (low, high) were tested in a \( 2 \times 2 \) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor.

There were strong effects of perceived ad quality for each of the 11 ads,
TABLE 1
Mean Perceived Influence of 11 AIDS Commercials on Self and on People in General (Other) According to a Classification of Subjects Into Those Who Saw the Ad as Low Versus High in Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commercial</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Quality × Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Grim Reaper</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td>8.17*</td>
<td>76.13***</td>
<td>4.78*</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Russian Roulette</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>7.27***</td>
<td>142.08***</td>
<td>9.66**</td>
<td>9.66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Information</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>4.16***</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>127.70***</td>
<td>15.23***</td>
<td>29.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Beach Party</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>3.18*</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>130.88***</td>
<td>4.03*</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Playing Footsie</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>5.18°</td>
<td>7.03</td>
<td>6.62**</td>
<td>81.67***</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>9.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Beds</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>7.40***</td>
<td>92.18***</td>
<td>16.47***</td>
<td>9.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Everybody</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>4.44***</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>68.58***</td>
<td>10.59**</td>
<td>6.98**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Beds and Syringes</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>5.88**</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>7.51***</td>
<td>107.90***</td>
<td>27.17***</td>
<td>0.57</td>
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<td>9. Sex and Condoms</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.93°</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>6.85°</td>
<td>121.62***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>6.21*</td>
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<td>10. Testimonials</td>
<td>6.98</td>
<td>6.82</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>8.03</td>
<td>7.60**</td>
<td>89.21***</td>
<td>3.17°</td>
<td>7.92**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Experts</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.41**</td>
<td>6.68</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>97.55***</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>7.99**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 9-point scale ranged from 1 (not influenced at all) to 9 (extremely influenced). Table includes the results of 2 × 2 mixed ANOVAs testing the effects of target (self, other) and perceived ad quality (low, high), as well as tests for the simple effects of target at each level of ad quality.

* p < .10. ** p < .05. *** p < .01. **** p < .001.
all $F$s $\geq 68.58, p < .001$. Subjects who perceived the ad as higher in quality perceived the ad to have more influence overall. There were also significant target effects on eight advertisements: Respondents judged themselves to be less influenced than people in general by Ads 3, 4, and 7, $F$s $\geq 4.03, p < .05$ (the lower quality ads) and to be more influenced than people in general by Advertisements 1, 2, 6, 8, $F$s $\geq 4.78, p < .05$, and, to a lesser extent, by Ad 10, $F = 3.17, p < .10$ (the higher quality ads). As predicted, there was also evidence of a significant interaction between target and perceived quality for eight of the 11 advertisements. Results of tests for simple effects of target at the two levels of perceived ad quality indicated that respondents who judged Ads 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 to be high-quality ads perceived themselves as more influenced than others, whereas respondents who judged Ads 3, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 11 to be low-quality ads perceived themselves as less influenced than others. The only exception to the predicted pattern was that all respondents perceived themselves as more influenced than others by Advertisement 8, one of the highest quality ads, according to the means obtained in both the independent and the present sample.

Perceived Self–Other Differences According to Variations Between Respondents in the Perceived Personal Acceptability of Influence

As expected, respondents generally believed that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising ($M = 8.23, SD = 1.06$). Using a median split, respondents were classified as high ($n = 81$) or low ($n = 51$) in terms of the perceived desirability of influence. Two analyses were then conducted to test the hypothesis that the strength of this belief would be associated with variations in the perceived self–other difference (H2). In particular, it was expected that respondents who believed most strongly that it is good to be influenced by AIDS advertising would be most likely to perceive themselves as influenced relative to others. The first analysis was based on mean perceived influence for the 11 AIDS ads and the second was based on ratings of the influence of AIDS advertising in general.  

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3Preliminary analyses indicated that ad quality and belief in the desirability of personal influence had independent effects on perceived self–other differences. Results of a three-way ANOVA testing the effects of perceived desirability of influence (low, high) and ad quality (low, high) on ratings of the perceived influence on self and people in general (target) indicated significant two-way interactions between target and ad quality and between target and perceived desirability, but no significant three-way interaction between ad quality, perceived desirability, and target. The use of separate analyses to explore the effects of ad quality and perceived desirability of influence facilitated direct comparison between the two analyses examining the effects of perceived desirability of influence on perceived influence from the 11 AIDS advertisements and from AIDS advertising in general (H2).
PERCEIVED EFFECTS OF AIDS ADVERTISING

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Perceived desirability of influence

FIGURE 3 Mean perceived influence of 11 AIDS advertisements on self and people in general for respondents low and high on perceived desirability of influence.

Using mean responses to the 11 AIDS advertisements. The effects of perceived desirability of influence (low, high) on the level of perceived influence on self and people in general (target) were examined in a $2 \times 2$ mixed ANOVA. A significant main effect for perceived desirability of influence, $F(1, 138) = 9.49, p < .01$, indicated that respondents who believed strongly that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising perceived the 11 advertisements to have more influence overall. There was no main effect for target, $F(1, 138) = .59$, but there was a marginally significant interaction between perceived desirability and target, $F(1, 138) = 3.49, p < .07$ (see Figure 3), which suggested that perceived self–other differences in influence varied with the perceived desirability of influence. As predicted, simple effects indicated that respondents who believed strongly that it is good to be influenced by AIDS advertising saw themselves as being more influenced than people in general ($6.30$ vs. $6.15, p < .05$). In contrast, respondents who believed less strongly in the desirability of influence perceived themselves and others as being equally influenced ($5.71$ vs. $5.78$).

Using ratings of the influence of AIDS advertising in general. A similar $2 \times 2$ ANOVA was performed using the perceived influence of AIDS advertising in general as the dependent measure. A significant main effect for the perceived desirability of influence, $F(1, 138) = 10.06, p < .01$, indicated that those respondents who believed strongly that it was
FIGURE 4 Mean perceived influence of AIDS advertising in general on self and people in general for respondents low and high on perceived desirability of influence.

good to be influenced by AIDS advertising perceived such advertising, in general, to have more influence overall. There was a significant main effect for target, $F(1, 138) = 9.98$, $p < .01$: In general, respondents perceived themselves ($M = 6.69$) to be more influenced than others ($M = 6.25$). A marginally significant interaction between perceived desirability of influence and target qualified this finding, $F(1, 138) = 3.38$, $p < .07$. As shown in Figure 4, perceptions of influence on self and people in general varied according to the perceived desirability of influence. Once again, the predicted simple effect was significant. Respondents who believed strongly that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising saw themselves as being more influenced than people in general (7.07 vs. 6.43, $p < .001$). However, respondents who believed less strongly that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising did not differentiate between the level of influence on self and other (6.17 vs. 6.00).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of our study provided further evidence for motivational accounts of perceived self–other differences in influence and clarified the conditions under which a pervasive tendency to deny personal persuasibility, even in the context of beneficial messages, is reversed. Results suggested that, where public service advertisements for safe sex are con-
cerned, perceptions of message influence on self and other vary in self-

serving ways according to specific characteristics of the advertisement and

the perceiver, and cannot be predicted by the valence of the content alone.

To this extent, our study demonstrates that third-person effects are not a

universal response to the issue of message influence. Rather, results are

consistent with findings from an ongoing research project (e.g., Duck,

Hogg, & Terry, 1993, 1995a, 1995b; Duck & Mullin, 1995) that seeks to
demonstrate that perceived self–other differences in media influence, like

other social perceptions, are sensitive to variations in social context.

When the 11 AIDS advertisements were classified in terms of quality, not

only were the better ads judged to have more influence overall (i.e., on self

and on people in general), but also subjects judged themselves as being

more influenced than others by the high-quality advertisements and as

being less influenced than others by the low-quality advertisements. This

was the case whether the classification was based on the ratings of an

independent sample of university students, on the mean ratings of the

present sample, or on the subject's own ratings—although, as predicted,

stronger support was found using subjective rather than objective ratings of

ad quality. When responses to the 11 AIDS advertisements were examined

separately, the lower quality advertisements produced perceptions of rela-
tive invulnerability to influence (a third-person effect), whereas the higher
quality advertisements produced perceptions of relative vulnerability to
influence (a reverse third-person effect). More important, on any given
advertisement, the tendency to perceive the self as more influenced than
others was more pronounced in respondents who perceived the ad as high in
quality, whereas the tendency to perceive self as less influenced than others
was more pronounced in respondents who perceived the ad as low in
quality. Taken together, these results suggest that perceptions of message
influence on self and others vary in self-serving ways according to both
differences between ads in ad quality and to differences between respon-
dents in perceptions of the quality of any given ad.

Results lend support to Gunther and Thorson's (1992) suggestion that the
nature of perceived self–other differences in media influence is dependent
upon features of the specific media message or advertisement. However,
our results focus attention on the perceived quality of television advertise-
ments, rather than the emotional tenor of the advertisement, as the critical
factor mediating perceptions of relative vulnerability versus invulnerability
to influence. The findings of our study suggest that people are willing to
admit relative vulnerability to AIDS commercials to the extent that such
commercials are viewed as “good” advertisements—advertisements for
which the admission of influence is seen as more socially acceptable. In
contrast, where AIDS commercials are viewed as lower in quality, typical
third-person perceptions prevail.
It is notable that the AIDS advertisements classified as high quality in this study were the more dramatic fear appeals that tried to motivate recipients to change their behavior by inducing fear of negative consequences (e.g., Grim Reaper, Russian Roulette, Beds, and Beds and Syringes) as well as the humorous ad on sex and condoms (featuring Andrew Denton). In contrast, the lower quality commercials were the more bland and informative ads (e.g., Experts, Everybody) or the more lighthearted and humorous ads (e.g., Playing Footsie and Information). In this respect, these results contradict Gunther and Thorson's (1992) suggestion that advertisements with positive emotional content will necessarily produce perceptions of greater media influence on self. Overall, it seems that students are more willing to acknowledge the personal impact of advertisements that reflect the serious and life-threatening nature of the AIDS issue and are less enamored of commercials that adopt a more lighthearted and humorous approach to the AIDS issue. The Andrew Denton sex and condoms ad may be an exception because it is a clever ad that specifically targets young adults to whom university students can relate.

Presumably, advertisements to which people are willing to admit relative vulnerability have the best potential for bringing about the intended attitudinal and behavioral change, and, on this basis, our results may be taken to provide support for the use of fear appeals. For instance, according to Rogers' (1975, 1983) protection motivation theory, in order to persuade recipients to change a specific health-related behavior, recipients must be induced to realize that the severity and probability of the condition are higher than they thought and that the recommendation made in the communication constitutes an effective remedy against these dangerous consequences. Of course, it is also possible that students have been more influenced by fear appeals than other types of AIDS advertisements and that the acknowledgment of personal influence reflects recognition of this fact. Yet recent research suggests that high-fear advertisements for condom use are no more effective than low-fear advertisements, and the effectiveness of fear arousal in communications is still the subject of much debate (e.g., Struckman-Johnson et al., 1990). Moreover, the perception that the self is more influenced than others by such ads is suggestive of a self-enhancing rather than purely veridical perception.

Consistent with predictions, perceptions of media influence on self and other were also affected by individual differences in the perceived desirability of influence from AIDS campaigns. Students generally thought that it was good to be influenced by AIDS advertising; however, students who held this belief most strongly perceived themselves as being relatively vulnerable to influence, whereas students who held this belief less strongly did not distinguish between the level of message impact on the self and others. This pattern was apparent whether perceptions of the influence were
based on the 11 AIDS commercials or on perceptions of AIDS advertising in general. These findings are consistent with the notion of self-enhancing social comparisons, especially given that most students saw it as personally desirable to be influenced. Although other commentators have speculated on the potential importance of individual differences in the perceived desirability of influence (e.g., Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992), these findings provide a simple demonstration of the fact that personal beliefs about the value of media campaigns for a given issue can influence in important ways perceived self–other differences in campaign influence. Moreover, these individual differences may be particularly important in the context of positive content, concerning which there is often less consensus about the perceived desirability of influence (see Duck & Mullin, 1995).

Taken together, our results are consistent with a motivational account that stresses the ego-enhancing function of social comparisons. People make comparisons with others in ways that put themselves in the best light, thus reinforcing and maintaining their self-esteem. When it is deemed preferable to resist persuasion, people see themselves as highly resistant and others as less so. In contrast, when it is acceptable to think of oneself as influenced, people see themselves as quite yielding and others as less so. In contrast, when it is acceptable to think of oneself as influenced, people see themselves as quite yielding and others as less so (see Gunther & Thorson, 1992). However, findings suggest that it is naive to assume that people will necessarily believe it is socially and personally acceptable to acknowledge the influence of all public service advertisements. Even when mass media messages advocate beneficial and intelligent outcomes, it seems that people are often reluctant to admit personal influence, perhaps preferring to think that the change is generated internally, rather than resulting from outside influence (Gunther & Mundy, 1993). Evidence of modest behavior modifications in response to mass-mediated educational campaigns suggests that “the mass media have a legitimate and important role in promoting better health at the community level” (Maibach & Flora, 1993, p. 518). However, as noted earlier, the ego-defensive motivation to deny personal persuasibility may be particularly strong in the context of mass media messages given the traditional bias toward thinking negatively about television and its effects on gullible audiences (e.g., Gunter & McAleer, 1990). Indeed, according to Rosenthal et al. (1992), although TV and other media are the most common sources of information about HIV/AIDS, they are also considered by adolescents to be the least trustworthy. Public health campaigners should be aware of this negative view of the media and of people's disinclination to acknowledge personal-level influence even by positive messages.

Research on the perceived impact of persuasive media messages has applied as well as theoretical implications and complements work that assesses actual attitudinal and behavioral change. Future studies might
explore the perceived impact on self and other of other types of public service advertisements in an effort both to confirm the self-enhancing nature of perceived self–other differences in media influence and to clarify features of the social context that affect people's willingness to acknowledge personal persuasibility.

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