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## 14. Person-Specific Media Effects

*Patti M. Valkenburg, Ine Beyens, Nadia Bij de Vaate, Loes Janssen, and Amber van der Wal*

### Abstract

We recently introduced a new approach to study (social) media effects. Our approach challenges the findings of nomothetic media effects studies, which assume that the average effect sizes that they report generalise to all individuals in a (sub-)population. However, using idiographic methods of analysis ( $N = 1$  time series analyses), we found striking differences in the person-specific effects of social media use on well-being, ranging from strongly negative ( $\beta = -.30$ ) to strongly positive ( $\beta = .35$ ). Moreover, for only a small minority of respondents, their effect sizes matched with the average effect size of social media use on well-being. Our results show that individuals react and develop in unique ways, and this uniqueness is not captured by approaches that rely on averages.

**Keywords:** idiographic methods, differential susceptibility, within person changes, experience sampling method (ESM), intensive longitudinal studies

### Introduction: From universal to person-specific media effects

Interviewer: What is the influence of social media on you?

Teen 1 (14): Social media helped me discover who I am, what I like and dislike, that way I learn about myself.

Teen 2 (16): Social media changed me in a positive way because now I am more open-minded and down to earth.

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Teen 3 (14): On social media you should not compare yourself to others. But that is easier said than done. It has been a difficult time for me. I have been seeing a psychologist for a while now. (van der Wal et al., 2023)

These quotes from Dutch adolescents reflect what media theorists have emphasised for decades: individuals differ strongly in their susceptibility to the effects of (social) media. As early as 1933, the landmark Payne Fund Studies concluded that

“the movies exert an influence, there can be no doubt. But it is our opinion that this influence is specific for a given child and a given movie. The same picture may influence different children in distinctly opposite directions. Thus in a general survey such as we have made, the net effect appears small” (Charters, 1933, p. 16).

Likewise, in 1948, Berelson, reflecting on what was then known about media effects, concluded that “some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effect” (Berelson, 1948, p. 172).

These sophisticated conclusions in the earliest days of communication research about the boundary conditions of media effects were in part based on case-by-case observations and qualitative interviews. This held for the conclusions of the Payne Fund Studies, but also, for example, for those concerning the effects of radio “daytime serials” on women’s perceptions, emotions, and behaviours (Herzog, 1941) and for the analysis of audience reactions to the infamous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in 1938 (Cantril, 1952). Studies relying on case-by-case observations or qualitative interviews to uncover differences and communalities in people’s responses to their environment are said to employ an idiographic approach. Idiographic studies stem from the idea that each person has unique characteristics that guide their selection of and responses to environmental stimuli, including media (Lerner & Lerner, 2019).

Despite the nuanced conclusions about the effects of media reported in the first half of the 20th century, communication research in the second half of this century has predominantly established universal, across-the-board effects of media that are assumed to hold for all individuals. Such “one effect size fits all” research, which focuses on averages obtained from large samples with the aim to generalise to target populations, is said to employ a nomothetic approach. This historical turn from idiographic conclusions

to nomothetic approaches may be due to an increasing use of nomothetic statistics (means, standard deviations, correlations) in the social sciences (Robinson, 2011). Such statistics and their focus on averages have not only dominated empirical research but also meta-analyses, which typically also report only one pooled (and typically small) effect size to summarise certain media effects literatures (Valkenburg et al., 2016).

Media effects theories that appeared in the second half of the 20th century proposed that media effects are conditional, meaning that they differ for individual users. But it was not until the new millennium that attention to differential susceptibility to media effects became the norm in media effects research. As of that time, more comprehensive theories were developed that focused on the cognitive processes that underlie media effects (Lang, 2000), as well as on the dynamic and conditional nature of such effects (Slater, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a). From then on, moderator analyses (e.g., multi-group analysis and Hayes' moderated mediation model) rapidly became the standard in the communication discipline. The idea behind this "group-differential approach" is that some characteristics of humans are not shared by all but only by some people (Lerner & Lerner, 2019, p. 27). A group-differential approach allows researchers to investigate which subgroups (e.g., in terms of age or gender) are more (or less) susceptible to the effects of media and technologies.

Despite this undeniable progress in the field, the effect sizes yielded by group-differential approaches are typically also small to moderate at best. Although small effect sizes are common in many disciplines, they are inconsistent with the fine-grained results found in early and recent idiographic studies, which show strong individual differences in responses to (social) media (e.g., van der Wal et al., 2023; Weinstein, 2018). Moreover, small average media effects also defy common sense, because everyday experience offers ample evidence of strong effects for some individuals. A viable explanation for this discrepancy in results between the two approaches may be that group-differential approaches rely on group-level moderators (e.g., gender, age, personality type). Such moderators may invariably gloss over more subtle individual differences in susceptibilities to media effects. As Lerner and Lerner (2019, p. 27) observe, "in addition to their nomothetic and group-differential characteristics, every person has idiographic characteristics that define him or her as unique."

In the past decade, a growing group of methodologists have proposed to unite the subtlety and specificity of idiographic studies with the primary goal of nomothetic studies: drawing conclusions about an underlying population based on samples (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009). Inspired

by this methodological work and the new technological opportunities (e.g., phone-based experience sampling tools), our team within ASCoR saw possibilities to introduce such a unified approach to study the idiographic (or  $N = 1$ ) effects of social media use on adolescent well-being. Our new approach, which is currently adopted by several other research teams across the world, combines the strengths of a nomothetic approach (representative samples, generalisation to target populations) with those of an idiographic approach (focus on unique processes within single persons).

### How to study $N = 1$ : Media effects and what we found

Interviewer: Hi ChatGPT, can you explain what  $N = 1$  media effects research entails?

ChatGPT: Certainly!  $N = 1$  or person-specific research is an approach to studying media effects that focuses on understanding how media content affects individuals on a case-by-case basis. Rather than conducting studies with large samples and looking for overall patterns or effects,  $N = 1$  researchers collect data from a single individual over an extended period of time, often using methods such as experience sampling.

This information from ChatGPT is remarkably correct. Although not referenced, it must be partly inspired by our work, because until 2021, we were the only research group focusing on person-specific media effects. ChatGPT is right: A person-specific approach relies on data from single persons over an extended period and investigates these persons on a case-by-case basis. In doing so, a person-specific approach acknowledges recent dynamic media effects theories, which consider a media effect as an intra-individual change in cognitions, emotions, or behaviour due to media use, which differs from person to person (Slater, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a).

At first sight, the new emphasis on the conceptualisation and investigation of media effects as within-person changes may seem incremental rather than innovative. But one should realise that, until recently, nearly all media effects research has investigated between-person associations of media use with certain outcomes. Between-person and within-person methods of analyses differ fundamentally from each other. Between-person methods try to establish, for example, whether individuals who use more social media are worse off compared to others who use them less. Within-person

methods try to uncover whether and how the well-being of persons change when they use more social media than they usually do.

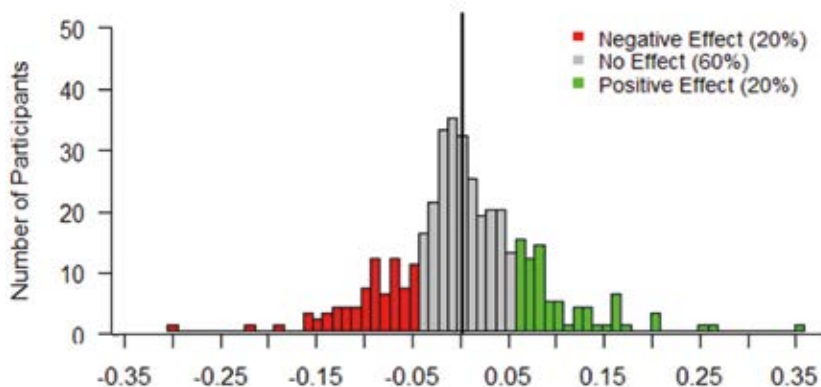
In our and other disciplines, it has long been assumed that between-person results are generalizable to within-person results. But as has been convincingly demonstrated mathematically by Molenaar and Campbell (2009), this assumption is untenable in the social sciences. Our recent experience sampling method (ESM) studies with 126 within-person assessments per adolescent allowed us to investigate to what extent the between-person associations of social media use with well-being differ from the average within-person effects (i.e., the within-person effect across all participants). In addition, our studies allowed us to investigate to what extent the person-specific effects (i.e., the within-person effects for each single person) are consistent with the average within-person effect. In other words, to what extent can we translate the average within-person effect of social media use on well-being to each person in the sample?

We used dynamic structural equation modelling (DSEM) (McNeish & Hamaker, 2020) to examine and compare the between-person, within-person, and person-specific media effects. DSEM is a Bayesian modelling technique that combines the strengths of multilevel analysis and structural equation modelling with  $N = 1$  time series analysis.  $N = 1$  time series analysis enables researchers to establish the longitudinal effects of media use within a single person. The remaining components of DSEM enables researchers to model the longitudinal effects of multiple persons, while at the same time allowing for group-differential and person-specific differences in media effects.

We indeed found considerable differences in the between-person and the average within-person results. For example, Beyens et al. (2021) found a significant negative between-person association of social media scrolling with well-being ( $\beta = -.12$ ), but no average within-person effect ( $\beta = .00$ ). Sometimes the between- and within-person effects were even opposite to each other, a phenomenon that has been called a Simpson's paradox (Kievit et al., 2013). In our studies, we indeed found support for this paradox. For example, Valkenburg, Beyens, et al. (2022) found a positive between-person association of scrolling with inspiration ( $\beta = .08$ ), but a negative within-person effect ( $\beta = -.04$ ). Likewise, Pouwels et al. (2021) found a positive between-person effect of Instagram use with friends on friendship closeness ( $\beta = .17$ ) but a negative within-person effect ( $\beta = -.07$ ).

We also found significant discrepancies between the average within-person effects and the person-specific effects. The histogram in Figure 14.1 shows the distribution of the person-specific effect sizes of the effect of

**Figure 14.1. Distribution of the Person-Specific Effect Sizes of the Effect of Social-Media Scrolling on Well-being**



Adapted from Beyens et al., 2021. Results are based on an ESM study among 387 adolescent with 126 within-person assessments across three weeks.

scrolling on well-being found in Beyens et al. (2021). The X-axis of the histogram shows the different person-specific effects sizes of scrolling on well-being, which ranged from moderately negative ( $\beta = -.30$ ) to moderately positive ( $\beta = +.35$ ). The Y-axis shows the number of participants experiencing specific effect sizes listed on the X-axis. The vertical black line represents the average within-person effect of scrolling on well-being (i.e.,  $\beta = .00$ ). We found that only 10% of the person-specific effect sizes fell within the credible intervals of the average within-person effect size ( $\beta = .00$ ) found in Beyens et al. (2021).

In sum, as demonstrated by Molenaar and Campbell (2009), the average within-person effects indeed systematically differed from the between-person effects of social media use on well-being or related outcomes. In addition, the person-specific effects of only a small minority of respondents were consistent with the average within-person effects. One could argue that variance around an average effect is common and that such variance is, in fact, the basis of stochastic statistics. Indeed, to date most media effect studies, both experimental and correlational, have considered variance around media effects as noise (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013b).

Our unified method allowed us to demonstrate whether the variance around our average within-person effects should be considered as noise or whether individuals truly differ in their responsiveness to media. To do so, we used several accepted methods. For example, in some of our studies we

preregistered the smallest effect size of interest (SESOI) (Anvari & Lakens, 2021). In others, we calculated the Bayesian credible intervals for each of the person-specific effects. But while employing these strict methods, we still found that some participants experienced meaningful negative, others meaningful positive, and yet others no effects of social media use on well-being as shown, for example, in Figure 14.1.

We have tried to explain the vast differences in person-specific effects of social media use on well-being and self-esteem. To that end, we have investigated the moderating influences of trait self-esteem, trait self-esteem instability, as well as trait envy, inspiration, and enjoyment in these effects. We have also studied the influence of three time-varying moderators: social media-induced envy, inspiration, and enjoyment (Valkenburg, Beyens, et al., 2022; Valkenburg et al., 2021). The results of these moderating analyses were mixed. We only found that adolescents with an unstable self-esteem and social media-induced envy were more susceptible to negative effects of social media than their peers. But none of these moderators yielded a strong effect, which strengthens us in our notion that each individual has numerous idiosyncratic characteristics that define him/her/them as unique, and that such uniqueness cannot be fully captured by a group-differential approach. To really understand the unique susceptibility factors of individuals, we may need a mixed-mode approach, in which  $N = 1$  time series are combined with in-depth interviews with participants.

## Contributions to theory and practice

An important contribution of our person-specific media effects approach is that it introduces a new way to investigate the validity of hypotheses about media effects in populations or sub-populations. More specifically, our approach allows us to reveal for how many participants a media effects hypothesis is confirmed and for how many not. For Karl Popper (1959), the observation of a single case that did not conform to the hypothesis would be enough to falsify a hypothesis. In our work, we argue that a media effects hypothesis is valid only if it applies to the vast majority of participants (i.e., >75%).

Recently, we investigated a recurrent hypothesis in the literature, the “passive social media use hypothesis” (Verduyn et al., 2017). This hypothesis states that passive social media use (i.e., browsing/scrolling) results in lower well-being, because it leads to upward social comparison and envy,



which in turn negatively affects one's well-being. Despite its appeal, a recent systematic review on the passive social media use hypothesis yielded large inconsistency in the included studies, meaning that some studies found support for the hypothesis, while others did not (Valkenburg, van Driel, et al., 2022).

We believe that these inconsistencies can be explained by two factors: person-specific susceptibilities and sampling procedures. Our studies showed that individuals differ strongly in their responses to social media. We found that the passive social media use hypothesis was confirmed for only 20% of participants, while it was not supported for 80% of participants (the red bars on the left of Figure 14.1). We also found that 20% of participants even experienced an effect opposite to the hypothesis (the green bars on the right in Figure 14.1) (Beyens et al., 2021). Thus, to speak in Popperian terms, our approach enabled us to falsify the passive social media use hypothesis.

Our approach not only has theoretical relevance, but also great societal implications. For example, take a moment to think about prevention and intervention programmes. Our knowledge could be of vital importance for the development of such programmes. After all, if practitioners would base such programmes on average results, they may conclude that such programmes are not necessary, because most studies, including our own, report only very small average effects of social media. But a considerable minority of adolescents did experience meaningful negative effects of social media use. Based on our results, it may be safe to assume that 10% of young people experience negative effects of social media use. And knowing that the Netherlands has 1 million and the US 75 million young people, these negative effects may generalise to 100,000 Dutch and 7.5 million US minors. These young people may run the risk of experiencing mental health problems due to their social media use. We cannot deny that we need to take such percentages seriously.

Our research may have a wide range of implications in various fields, ranging from social media-induced mental health to advertising and political communication. Person-specific studies could be used to develop personalised interventions, for example, to identify specific triggers of mental health problems in participants or patients. It can be used to study the effectiveness of entertainment or advertising campaigns to understand what content or messages are most effective for specific individuals or subgroups. Finally, it can be used to investigate the effect of political communication and campaigns on a case-by-case basis. Researchers could track individual responses to different types of political messages and identify which messages are most influential among specific individuals or subgroups.

## Next steps

In this chapter, we made a case for a person-specific approach to study the effects of media, that is, a focus on within-person processes that differ from person to person. We do not deny that between-person methods of analysis are important, for example, to compare subgroups or generations in terms of their preferences for political parties, their well-being, or their consumer behaviour. But based on our findings, we do believe that between-person methods of analysis are sub-optimal to study media effects. Cross-sectional correlational studies are inherently unable to establish within-person changes, but many early longitudinal studies have not been able to do so either. It is only as of 2017, when Random-Intercept and multi-level models gradually became the norm in our discipline, that we are able to investigate over-time within-person media effects. Even though cross-sectional “effect studies” still appear in communication journals, the time is ripe to agree that such studies are not suited to investigate media effects. Cross-sectional and other between-person designs overlook a principal proposition of media effects theories, namely that a media effect is a within-person change process that differs across persons.

Although our team was the first to introduce a person-specific approach into the communication discipline, we must acknowledge that as academics we are greatly lagging behind when we compare our knowledge to that of tech companies and social media platforms. Without exception, these companies and platforms conduct  $N = 1$  research on the preferences of each single user, which are used to improve their recommendation systems, to keep each of us glued to our personalised screens, and to sell their person-specific preferences to advertisers. And we all give them our consent to do so.

Whereas the experiences of Facebook and Instagram users were mainly driven by social interactions, newer platforms such as TikTok offer their users algorithmically driven experiences at the  $N = 1$  level, meaning that each single user can create their own experiences, and thereby possibly their own effects (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Until now, knowledge of such idiographic user experiences is limited to these tech companies. An important step for future academic research is to combine our  $N = 1$  research methods with these algorithmically based user experiences. There are various methods to capture such experiences. A discussion of these methods is beyond the scope of this chapter, but an up-to-date and comprehensive review of such methods can be found in Ohme et al. (2023).

In this chapter, we have attempted to disconfirm the fallacy of the “one effect size fits all” approach that has characterised the communication research

tradition for too long. Our results show that small average media effects can have important implications for some media users. Our results imply that the small average statistics that have been reported for decades in both empirical research and meta-analyses do not do justice to the minorities of individuals who benefit from media use and to other minorities who suffer from media use. We agree with Rose et al. (2013) that individuals think, behave, and develop in distinctive ways, thereby showing variability that is not captured by statistics that solely rely on averages. We communication scholars “have a bright future before us, and it begins where the average ends” (Rose, 2016, p. 191).

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