

## **Third Person Effect of ISIS’s Recruitment Propaganda: Online Political Self-Efficacy and Social Media Activism**

GUY J. GOLAN

JOON SOO LIM

Syracuse University, USA

The global rise of ISIS has been attributed by many experts to the extremist group’s successful recruiting efforts online. Recognizing the need to curb the terror organization’s social media engagement, Western governments have called for greater content restrictions on social media platforms as well as the cooperation of individual citizens in countermessaging ISIS online. This study examines the third-person effect regarding ISIS online recruiting and the potential behavioral outcomes that may result from perceived self-other gaps. A survey of 1,035 U.S. adults provided support for significant relationships between third-person perceptions and support for both restrictive action and social media activism. Study results are discussed in the context of theory building and policy recommendations.

*Keywords: third-person effect, terrorism, propaganda, social media, recruitment, militant Islamism, social distance*

The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—also known as Islamic State in Syria and Levant (ISIL)—as a regional power came as a surprise to many Western terrorism and foreign policy experts. Once an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS has emerged into a global leader of the Sunni jihadist movement. Despite meaningful battleground losses, ISIS continuously recruits thousands of enthusiastic fighters from many corners of the world. While the international news media focused on Europe and the Middle East as recruiting centers, the terrorist group is drawing large numbers of soldiers from South Asia, the former republics of the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

The key to the organization’s success in global recruiting is its use of social media platforms. American government officials have described the extreme terrorist group’s use of social media platforms as unprecedented in its sophistication and high quality (Weimann, 2015). In what can be described as a three-prong social media strategy, ISIS uses social media to raise its international profile, recruit members, and inspire lone actor attacks (Berger & Morgan, 2015). Recognizing that the global war against terrorism now takes place not only in the battlefield but also on the Internet, Western governments are actively combating the organization of ISIS across various online platforms (Bouzis, 2015). Additionally,

---

Guy J. Golan: [gjgolan@syr.edu](mailto:gjgolan@syr.edu)

Joon Soo Lim: [jlim01@syr.edu](mailto:jlim01@syr.edu)

Date submitted: 2016–03–07

Copyright © 2016 (Guy J. Golan & Joon Soo Lim). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

although independent from government interference, companies such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook have been reducing ISIS's social media footprint through the deletion of organization-related accounts and content (Liebelson, 2015).

Yet government and industry cooperation cannot entirely undermine ISIS's online recruitment. Because of the interpersonal nature of social media communications, government officials, specifically in the United States, have called upon ordinary citizens to take an active part in the information warfare against ISIS (Warrick, 2015). As suggested by Vidino and Hughes (2015), counter-ISIS online messaging delivered by individuals and nongovernment organizations can at times be more effective than government-sponsored communications.

This study examines the relationship between the perceived influence of ISIS's online recruiting and individual support for content regulation as well as users' willingness to engage in online anti-ISIS behaviors. The study tests this relationship through the theoretical framework of the third-person effect (TPE).

### **The Third-Person Effect**

For more than three decades, mass communication scholars have provided ample empirical support for the TPE theory that predicts that individuals will perceive others to be more influenced by socially undesirable media content than themselves (Perloff, 1999). These perceptual gaps, often referred to as third-person perceptions (TPP), are especially important when considering that their behavioral consequences often manifest in the form of restrictive, corrective, or promotional behavioral outcomes (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008).

The perceptual component of the third-person effect has been tested and supported by dozens of studies (, Pan, et al., 2008b). An underlying mechanism identified by scholars to explain TPP gaps is optimistic bias, or one's belief that he or she is less susceptible to negative experiences than others (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Paul et al., 2000; Perloff, 1993). As such, TPP gaps are directly related to the perceived social desirability of media messages (Eveland & McLeod, 1999). Gunther and Storey (2003) explained that media messages vary along a negative influence corollary based on their perceived harm on audiences. As such, perceptual differences are diminished or reversed when the media content is perceived as socially desirable (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Jensen & Hurley, 2005) and augmented when perceived as undesirable (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Zhong, 2009).

TPP has been observed in socially undesirable contents of mainstream media such as newspaper articles that harm one's reputation (Lambe & McLeod, 2005), news coverage of election poll results (Kim, 2016), defamatory newspaper reports (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunter, 1988), television violence (Hoffner et al., 1999), negative political ads (Cohen & Davis, 1991), product commercials (Gunther & Thorson, 1992), health news (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2008), and so on.

Several researchers have also revealed the TPP of socially marginalized communications using the media that circumvent mainstream channels of diffusion, such as antisocial messages (Eveland & McLeod, 1999), pamphlets advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government (Lambe & McLeod, 2005), and hate speech (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998). Most studies have supported the perceptual disparity of the influence of socially undesirable content regardless of the degree of prevalence of such content in a society. Researchers (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999) have argued that the dominant factors in determining the magnitude of TPP are the social undesirability, perceived reach, and susceptibility of the social groups in question. We note that the emergence of social media has provided extreme groups with means to spread their messages in a more convenient and effective way. In this changing media landscape, it is important to understand how socially marginalized extreme messages or content (e.g., revenge porn, terrorist messages) are perceived by individuals in different social groups and what will be effective ways to deal with such socially undesirable extreme messages.

This study examines perceived self-other disparities in the perception regarding online recruitment by an international terrorist organization. Such content would surely be placed at the very extreme of what Gunther and Storey (2003) referred to as the "the negative influence corollary" (p. 201). Based on the consistent support for the perceptual component of the third-person effect we predict that:

*H1: People will perceive others to be more influenced by ISIS online recruiting than they are.*

### **Social Distance and TPP**

Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, and McLeod (1999) explained that social distance is an important concept that may partially account for variations in TPP gaps. TPE scholars have often argued that one's definition of the other and that person's perceived similarity or difference to one's own in-group may augment or reduce self-other perceptual disparities (Cohen et al., 1988; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Yet support for the relationship between the social distance corollary and TPP has been inconsistent within TPE literature. As argued by Meirick (2005), this may result from the conceptualization of other people in terms of geographic differences as opposed to more topic specific definitions of in-groups and out-groups. Meirick (2005) further explained that contextualizing the out-group to issue related content might better predict the relationship between social distance and TPP. For example, in a study by Lo and Wei (2002), females perceived men as more susceptible to pornography than other women. Perceived exposure by others to undesirable media content has been identified by scholars as one of the most important predictors of TPP (Eveland & McLeod, 1999; Lambe & McLeod, 2005).

Looking beyond mere perceived exposure, we postulate that TPP gaps may also result from self-enhancement motives for one's own in-group. Drawing on individual tendencies to project positive attributes on other members of their in-group as predicted by social identity theory, communication scholars have identified group enhancement as a significant psychological mechanism underlying TPP gaps that lead to overestimation of media influence of out-group members (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Despite their diversity in the ethnic compositions and cultures, American Muslims are often perceived in a stereotypic manner; generally, they are perceived as violent and untrustworthy (Sides & Gross, 2013) as well as usual suspects of potential terrorism by law enforcement authorities in the United States (Malik, 2016). Sides and Gross (2013) noted that group-centric attitudes are originated from a growing concern regarding global terrorism.

In perceiving the potential social influence of jihad recruitment messages, one's religious affiliation can be used as a heuristic cue to determine who is more susceptible to the radical group's appeal for several reasons. First, as noted by Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2003) and Bowe and Makki (2015), the framing of Islam and Muslim Americans by American news media often focuses on issues of terrorism, controversies regarding Islamic prayer spaces, and the presentation of Muslims as "the other." Second, the jihadi ideology is rooted in the perceived superiority of its own in-group religious members. At the same time, some non-Muslim counterparts in Western societies perceive Islam as ideologically misaligned with fundamental Western values, which therefore leads to perceptions of Western-Muslim as members of an out-group (Doosje, Loseman, & van den Bos, 2013)

In the context of this study, we predict that the overwhelmingly non-Muslim, U.S.-based survey participants will perceive Muslim Americans to be more susceptible to both exposure and influence of ISIS online propaganda due to the religious context of the jihadist movement. Although ISIS's ideology is deeply rooted in a religious denominational Sunni identity, much of the organization's recruitment materials focus on political and social narratives not directly related to Islam. In spite of this fact, assessments of young Muslim Americans' potential exposure and susceptibility of influence by ISIS recruitment may be the result of out-group stereotyping (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Scharrer, 2002) rather than informed decision making. As noted by Scharrer and Leone (2008), respondents tend to rate younger *others* as more susceptible to socially undesirable media content than those of the same age or older. This assessment was supported by their own study focused on video gaming as well as other TPE studies (Eveland et al., 1999; Scharrer, 2002). Consideration of media stereotyping of American Muslims as "others," along with the body of research supporting perceptions of younger people as more susceptible to negative media influence, leads to the following predictions:

*H2a: People will perceive ISIS propaganda on social media to have a greater influence on young Muslim Americans than on themselves.*

*H2b: People will perceive ISIS propaganda on social media to have a greater influence on Muslim Americans than on themselves.*

### **Exposure and TPP**

The perceptual gap in TPP derives not only from motivational factors but also from differential estimates of one's versus others' exposure to the socially undesirable content. Many researchers assumed that there would be a gap in the estimates of self- versus-other exposure to the harmful content such that individuals often underestimate their own exposure while overestimating the exposure of others.

Key to assessments of perceived media influence on others are perceptions regarding others' exposure to socially undesirable content. For example, McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland (2001) argued that perceived exposure provides individuals with a "simple heuristic: exposure equals influence" (p. 692). Lambe and McLeod (2005) further argued that perceived exposure could be a better predictor of TPP than the social desirability of media messages. The relationship between perceived exposure and TPP may be best explained in relation to assessments of social desirability in the case of ideological or controversial issues. As noted by Gunther and Schmitt (2004), the higher the perceived exposure of a message by partisans, the higher their assessment of its social undesirability. Indeed, numerous scholars found perceived media exposure to be a key predictor of perceived media influence on others (Eveland et al., 1999; Paek & Gunther, 2007; Shen, Palmer, Mercer Kollar, & Comer, 2015). In the context of the perceived influence of ISIS online recruitment, we predict that perceived exposure gaps as related to ISIS recruitment will directly predict TPP:

*H3: The greater the self-other perceived exposure gap regarding ISIS social media propaganda, the greater the TPP.*

### ***The Behavior Component of TPE***

*Support for censorship.* Although TPE scholars found consistent support for the theory's perceptual component, research on TPE's behavioral component is comparably limited and its findings inconsistent. Recognizing the potential real-life consequences of TPP gaps, scholars linked perceived media influence to an array of intentional outcomes (Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998). Yet each of these represents scant and inconsistent behavioral linkages to TPP.

As described in a meta-analysis by Sun, Pan, et al. (2008), the majority of TPE studies related perceived influence gaps to such behavioral outcomes as promotional, corrective, and restrictive actions. The results of their study point to the perceived social desirability of media content as the key predictor of behavior outcomes with socially desirable content leading to promotional behaviors, undesirable content leading to restrictive behaviors, and ambiguous content leading to corrective behaviors. Although behaviors linked to such restrictive outcomes as support for censorship or government restriction of content have been widely and consistently documented by scholars (Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1997; Paul et al., 2000; Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008), fewer studies (Rojas, 2010; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011) have examined the promotional and corrective consequences of TPP.

Recognizing the perceived susceptibility and the inherent threat posed to others by socially undesirable media content (Shah et al., 1999), scholars often point to paternalism or to the theory of protection motivation in accounting for the relationship between TPP and the likelihood to support restrictive action such as support for censorship or government regulation of media content (Chia, Lu, & McLeod, 2004; McLeod et al., 1997; Nathanson, Eveland, Park, & Paul, 2002; Schmierbach, Boyle, Xu, & McLeod, 2011). Viewing others as more susceptible to media influence, one's sense of moral superiority and paternalism can lead people to believe that they know what is best for others and that the subscribed

behavior will protect others from undesirable media influence (Cohen & Weimann, 2008; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001).

Based on the wide body of scholarly literature linking TPP to one's likelihood to support restrictive action (Sun, Shen, & Pan, 2008; Wei et al., 2011), this study predicts:

*H4: The greater the TPP, the greater the support for regulation of ISIS online recruiting content.*

### **Social Media Activism**

Perceiving others as susceptible to negative media influence, individuals attempt to restrict socially undesirable content and, at the same time, also attempt to engage in corrective behaviors. Rojas (2010) defined corrective action as "political behaviors that are reactive, based on perceptions of media and media effects, and seek to influence the public sphere" (p. 347). A growing body of literature points to a significant relationship between the perceived media influences on others and the likelihood of engagement of political discourse and behaviors aimed at counterbalancing undesirable media influence (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheaffer, 2008). By empowering ordinary citizens to engage in political action, oftentimes bypassing elites (see Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015), social media platforms provide individuals with platforms for direct corrective action.

As explained by Lim and Golan (2011), individuals are empowered to directly engage in corrective action via online activism in social media platforms and no longer exclusively depend on elites to protect others from negative media influence.

Based on the growing body of literature linking perceived media influence to corrective political behaviors, we predict the following:

*H5: The greater the TPP, the greater one's likelihood to engage in social media activism.*

### **Efficacy and the Behavioral Component of TPE**

In a recent study, Rosenthal, Detenber, and Rojas (in press) identified a significant relationship between the perceived message threat and its perceived efficacy. Drawing upon the theory of protection motivation as related to TPE research (Shah et al., 1999) and Witte's (1994) extended parallel processing model (EPPM), the authors argued that individual efficacy assessments can serve as key predictors of behavioral outcomes of TPE. They provided Witte's (1994) definition that "efficacy pertains to the effectiveness, feasibility, and ease with which a recommended response impedes or averts a threat" (p. 114). People are more likely to engage in either supporting restrictive action or in social media activism if they believe that these efforts will make a difference in protecting others from the persuasion of socially undesirable media influence.

Velasquez and LaRose (2015) operationalized online political self-efficacy (OPSE) using such measures as one's beliefs that he or she can use social media to obtain political objectives and influence others regarding political issues. In a 2015 study, the same authors renamed OPSE as social media political efficacy (SMPE), highlighting individual assessments of efficacy regarding social media activism, such as using a variety of social media platform activities to attain political outcomes. Based on a variety of recent studies relating efficacy to offline and online corrective action, we predict:

*H6: The greater the online efficacy, the higher the intent to engage in social media activism.*

### **Method**

The survey was undertaken on April 7, 2015. A job request called a HIT, or human intelligence task, was created with a brief description "A short survey about ISIS online recruiting" and the keywords *survey, ISIS, terror, and social media*. The HIT was linked to a survey with an online informed consent form and questionnaire on Qualtrics software.

We filtered survey participants by location at a country level—that is, the United States, and a HIT approval rate, which reflects the typical quality of the worker's submission as indicated by previous requesters. The reward for the work was \$1 per complete response. After the questionnaire was completed, a completion code was presented to the participant. The approved code was accepted in the system, and the reward was then automatically sent to the participant's account.

We collected a sample of 1,035 adults from the United States (male: 60.6%. female: 39.4%) for the survey. The survey participants' mean age was 32.36 years ( $SD = 10.17$ ). Participants identified their religious affiliation as Atheist/Agnostic (50%), Protestant (21.2%), Catholic (14.4%), Buddhist (2.4%), Jewish (1.3%), Muslim (0.6%), Hindu (0.5%), and Other (8.4%). The highest level of education among participants was college graduate (40.5%), some college (30.7%), high school diploma/GED (10.5%), postgraduate degree (7.5%), Trade, Technical, or Vocational Training (5.8%), some postgraduate work (2.8%), and some high school (1%). Despite the limitations inherent in convenience samples, an increasing number of recent studies in communication have employed MTurk, the microtask management site, for the recruitment of adult samples for data collection for two important reasons. Samples obtained from MTurk are known as more diverse and representative than traditional college student samples (Behrend, Sharek, Meade, & Wiebe, 2011).

MTurk samples have been argued to have lower susceptibility for coverage error, risk of multiple responses by one person, and lower nonresponse errors than found in traditional Web surveys (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Hauser and Schwarz (2016) found that MTurk participants performed far better for a measure of attentiveness to instructions than subject poolers in two unsupervised online surveys. According to a recent study (Smith, Roster, Golden, & Albaum, 2016) that compared the data quality of a U.S. MTurk sample, a non-U.S. MTurk sample, and a regular U.S. panel sample, found that both the U.S. MTurk sample and the regular sample performed better than the non-U.S. MTurk sample. The results of the study imply that a MTurk sample can be used effectively when a survey sample is obtained in the United States. Following suggestions from MTurk researchers (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014),

some measures including the use of attention filters were employed to increase data quality by avoiding inattentive participants.

### Measures

*Other-exposure.* Eveland et al. (1999) operationalized perceived other-exposure by asking respondents to estimate how frequently others listened to socially undesirable content (i.e., rap music). Following Eveland et al.'s operationalization, the perceived other-exposure was measured by asking participants to estimate how often they think that other people are exposed to ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans. The mean of estimated other-exposure was 2.76 ( $SD = 1.27$ ).

*Self-exposure.* Participants were asked to indicate how often they were exposed to ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*all the time*). The mean of self-exposure to ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans was 1.53 ( $SD = 1.16$ ).

*The influence of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans on self versus other in general.* The influence of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans was measured for self and others respectively using a 7-point rating scale (1 = *not influenced* to 7 = *greatly influenced*). The mean for impact was 1.26 ( $SD = .85$ ) for self and 2.89 ( $SD = 1.18$ ) for others in general.

*Social distance.* We used items derived from Eveland et al. (1999) to measure the perceived impact of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans within the social distance corollary. These items (e.g., "How much do you think that each of the following is influenced by ISIS's messages to recruit foreigners through social media?") were measured on a 7-point rating scale (1 = *not influenced* to 7 = *greatly influenced*). The target reference groups included "young Americans," "Muslim Americans," and "young Muslim Americans."

*Third-person perception (TPP).* The TPP was obtained by subtracting the mean for perceived influence on others from the mean of perceived influence on oneself.

*Online political self-efficacy (OPSE).* We used four items of the OPSE scale derived from Velasquez and LaRose (1999). These items (e.g., "How much do you disagree or agree with the following statements about political activities on social media?") were operationalized through a 5-point rating scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and measured the participant's assurance that they can exert a certain influence in attaining a political objective by using social media and online platforms. For the measure of online political self-efficacy, item reliability for the present sample was .874 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) with the mean of 3.62 and standard deviation of 0.81.

*Support for restrictive action (SR).* Support for restrictive action of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans was measured using four items on a 7-point rating scale anchored by 1 = *very unlikely* and 7 = *very likely* for a question of how likely respondents are to perform listed activities in order to support restrictions of ISIS'S social media message to recruit young Americans. The listed items

for restrictive action were composed of support for government censorship, as well as for restrictive action by social media platforms. The four statements were selected and adapted from Lambe's (2002) willingness to censor inventory (e.g., "I would support government censorship of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans."). The mean and standard deviation are 4.61 and 1.88, respectively. A higher score reflected a higher degree of supports for the censorship of ISIS messages on social media. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for these four items is .94.

*Corrective action (CA)*. The likeliness to engage in corrective action in the form of social media activism was measured using three statements (e.g., "I would share anti-ISIS content on my social media pages.") adapted from previous research (Lim & Golan, 2011; Rojas, 2010; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015) on a question of how likely respondents are to perform certain activities to counter ISIS's messages for recruiting foreigners using social media. These questions were measured on a 7-point rating scale anchored by 1 = *very unlikely* and 7 = *very likely*. The item reliability by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the three items yielded a high score of .91, while the mean and standard deviation for the summed index were 3.22 and 1.73, respectively.

## Results

Table 1 displays the self-other perceptual disparity regarding the influence of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans based on the social distance corollary. The impact of ISIS's social media message to recruit young Americans was perceived as greater for others in different referential groups than for self. The results demonstrated that the self-other perceptual disparity tended to increase as the social distance of others varied from close distance (e.g., people like you) to remote distance (e.g., young Muslims in the United States). In other words, the perceptual disparity was the greatest for young Muslims in the U.S. ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) than for people like you ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ).

**Table 1. Mean Estimates of Perceived Influence of ISIS's Social Media Propaganda on Self and Others with Target Comparison Groups.**

Perceived influence on	$M$ ( $SD$ )	Perceived influence on	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$t$ ( $df, = 1039$ )
Self	1.26 (.85)	People like you	1.55 (1.08)	12.09***
		Young people in the U.S.	2.38 (1.37)	28.72***
		Muslim in the U.S.	3.54 (1.61)	44.77***
		Young Muslim in the U.S.	4.07 (1.74)	49.85***

*Note.* Figures in parentheses are standard deviations. The means are based on a 7-point rating scales anchored by 1 = *no impact at all* and 7 = *a great deal of impact*.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The results of paired *t* tests were significant for every comparison of means between self and others in different social distances. The closest social distance (i.e., people like you) measured in this study resulted in a significant self-other perceptual disparity. The results in Table 1 not only corroborated the hypothesis on TPP but also supported the social distance corollary in TPP as predicted by H2. It is noteworthy that the self-other perceptual gap was greater for young Muslims in the U.S. than for Muslims in the U.S.

To test the hypotheses, a path analysis was employed regarding the effects of TPP on support for restrictive action (SR) and intent to engage in social media activism (SMA) in terms of corrective action (CA). Table 2 displays the bivariate correlations among the exogenous and endogenous variables in this study.

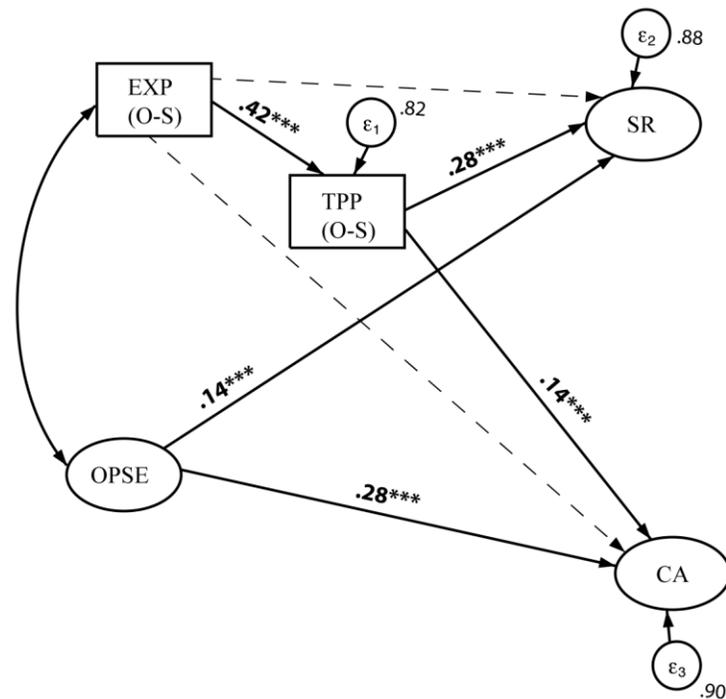
**Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Among Exogenous and Endogenous Variables.**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	SE	OE	OPSE	Others	Self	SR
SE	1.53	1.17						
OE	2.76	1.27	.60**					
OPSE	3.62	.82	.00	.06				
Others	2.89	1.83	.35**	.53**	.08*			
Self	1.26	.85	.56**	.32**	-.04	.42**		
SR	4.62	1.89	-.00	.12**	.18**	.25**	-.05	
CA	3.51	1.73	.13**	.15**	.34**	.20**	.06	.39**

*Note.* SE = Self-exposure; OE = other-exposure; OPSE = online political self-efficacy; Others = influence on others; Self = influence on self; SR = support for regulation; CA = corrective action.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Figure 1 reports the results of testing the proposed path model, which proved to be a good fit to the data. The normalized chi-square ( $\chi^2/df = 3.22$ ) is within the acceptable range. All the fit indexes (SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .99, TLI = .98) recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999) were within the cutoff ranges (SRMR  $\leq$  .10, RMSEA  $\leq$  .08, CFI  $\geq$  .90, and TLI  $\geq$  .90) indicating an overall fit of the proposed model to the data.



**Figure 1. A recursive path model of third-person effect.**

Paths represented with dashed lines were not statistically significant. Numbers on paths are standardized path coefficients.  $\chi^2(42) = 136.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 3.26$ , RMSEA = .05, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, SRMR = .03.  $N = 1,047$  for both CA and SR. EXP = exposure; O-S = other-exposure – self-exposure; OPSE = online political self-efficacy; TPP = third-person perception; SR = support for regulation; CA = corrective action.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The path analysis first revealed that the exposure (O-S) had a positive impact on TPP, which corroborates H3. The TPP also had a positive impact on both support for regulation (SR) and corrective action (CA). The standardized path coefficient was greater for SR ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and for CA ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results also supported both H4 and H5. In testing the indirect effects of TPP on social media activism, we assumed that OPSE, independent of EXP, would affect social media activism. As predicted, OPSE was positively correlated with social media activism ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although there was no theoretical reason to predict a relationship between OPSE and support for restrictive action, the results of the path model highlighted a significant relationship between the two variables ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The standardized path coefficients displayed in Figure 1 proved the conventional TPE model, in which the exposure to negative communication increased the perceptual disparity for the influence of such negative communication. This, in turn, increased individuals' support for restrictive action (SR) and potentially increased their intent to participate in social media activism (SMA). Another component of the

tested path model demonstrated the positive effect of OPSE on SMA ( $\beta = .28, p < .001$ ), which is independent of EXP or TPP.

Table 3 displays the direct, indirect and total effects of exogenous variables of EXP, TPP, and OPSE on the endogenous variables of SR and SMA.

**Table 3. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Exogenous Variables on Endogenous Variables of the Third-Person Effect.**

Exogenous variable	Endogenous variables									
	TPP			SR			CA			
	Unst.	SE	St.	Unst.	SE	St.	Unst.	SE	St.	
<b>EXP</b>										
Direct effect	.433***	.034	.422***	.046	.059	.027	-.097	.056	-.061	
Total Indirect effects	--	--	--	.213***	.033	.127***	.126***	.030	.080***	
Total effect	.433***	.034	.422	.259***	.051	.154***	.029	.051	.018	
<b>TPP</b>										
Direct effect	--	--	--	.451***	.065	.276***	.210***	.055	.137***	
Total Indirect effects	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
Total effect	--	--	--	.451***	.065	.276***	.210***	.055	.137***	
<b>OPSE</b>										
Direct effect	--	--	--	.316***	.083	.138***	.608***	.070	.283***	
Total Indirect effects	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	
Total effect	--	--	--	.316***	.083	.138***	.608***	.070	.283***	

Note. 5,000 bootstrap samples; EXP = exposure gap (other-self); SR = support for regulation; CA = corrective action.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

We assumed that two endogenous variables of support for restrictive action and intent to engage in social media activism would be affected by the exposure gap (EXP) mediated by third-person perception. In other words, we predicted a full mediation model of EXP→TPP→SR based on the literature review. As predicted, a full mediation was proved given that the previously significant correlation between EXP and SR disappeared ( $\beta = .027, p = ns$ ) in the presence of mediating variable of TPP.

In the case of effect of EXP on corrective action (CA), we could not assume a mediation effect of TPP since the EXP and CA was not statistically correlated. Nonetheless, a meager indirect effect of EXP on CA was found ( $\beta = .080, p < .001$ ).

### Discussion

This study offers a unique contribution to both theory and practice through the examination of the relationship between individuals' perceived influence of ISIS online recruiting on other people and their willingness to support online content restriction, as well as engage in online political behavior.

Consistent with the wide body of knowledge regarding self-other perceptual gaps, the results of our study supported the perceptual component of the TPE. Recognizing the unique nature of our case study, we hypothesized that social distance would play a significant role in predicting participants' biased perceptions regarding the influence of ISIS propaganda on specific targets. Consistent with previous studies, our results pointed to increased TPP gaps along the social distance corollary (Andsager & White, 2007; Eveland et al., 1999;; Gunther, 1991). Findings of this research lend support for the theoretical rationale that postulates that the fallacy in social judgment is driven by perceived vulnerability of each of the target others based on cognitive shortcut using real-world heuristics. In other words, individuals are more likely to perceive young people as more susceptible to ISIS propaganda than older people facing the judgment under varying degrees of uncertainty due to a lack of factual and reliable data.

Although the media sounds the alarm on the potential impact of ISIS propaganda, most Americans are not sure about how so many individuals could be affected by such jihadist propaganda. Therefore, individual's estimates of the impact are mostly driven by the cases covered in the media such that their judgment might be partially influenced by the prominence of each case. Thus, the criteria, such as age, and Muslims of the comparison group can serve real-world heuristics to gauge the perceived impact of ISIS's propaganda on others. While previous scholarships on TPE and social distance found inconsistent evidence of a link between the two concepts, our study provides support for a target corollary (Eveland et al. 1999), measuring the contextualized group membership assessments with perceived media influence. The framing of Muslim Americans as an out-group has been identified by numerous studies (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2003; Sides & Gross, 2013). The findings in the current study suggest that in-group-out-group stereotypes regarding Muslim Americans may lead to perceptual errors regarding socially undesirable media influence.

As supported by the results of this study, perceived exposure is a key predictor of TPP. Furthermore, the results of our path analysis indicated that TPP mediates the relationship between perceived exposure and support for restrictive action. In other words, those who perceived others to be

more exposed to ISIS online recruiting were more likely to identify others as more influenced by the content. While exposure alone did not predict support for content restriction, exposure along with TPP led to greater levels of support for content restrictions. Such findings are consistent with previous research that identifies TPP as the theoretical linkage between perceived exposure to socially undesirable media content and support for content restriction and regulation (Meirick, 2005).

This study aims to advance TPE scholarship through the investigation of corrective action as a behavioral consequence of TPP. Our study investigated both the relationship between TPP, OPSE, and social media activism by identifying an empowered public that is able to directly respond to what it may regard as socially undesirable media content via social media platforms. Consistent with previous studies (Lim & Golan, 2011), our path analysis identified a statistically significant relationship between TPP and social media activism. In other words, the more one viewed others as susceptible to ISIS online recruitment, the more likely he or she was to engage in social media corrective actions. These results provide further evidence to the growing body that expands beyond restrictive consequences of TPP and towards corrective behavioral outcomes (Davison, 1983; Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1997; Rojas et al., 1996). Consistent with previous scholarship on the central role of efficacy in predicting behavioral consequences of perceived risk (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Rojas, 2010; Rosenthal et al., in press), our results point to a significant relationship between OPSE and the likelihood to engage in social media activism.

It should be noted that our results indicate that support for restriction was more significantly related to TPP than was social media activism. Such findings make sense when considering the nature of the case study, which examined online recruiting by a terror organization. As argued by Rosenthal et al. (in press), people are likely to look for institutional remedies for societal problems that one cannot mitigate on their own.

We also note that the effects of OPSE and TPP on both endogenous variables are robust even after controlling for demographic variables. In a separate analysis of the full model including control variables, we confirmed the robust effects of OPSE and TPP on both endogenous variables.

The results of our study provide important lessons for those who design counterterrorism messaging. Public affairs and counterterrorism professionals, along with policy makers, should consider the following. First, messages that highlight the prevalence and potential influence of online terrorist recruiting are more likely to yield support for online content restriction by both government and social media companies. Second, counterterrorism campaigns highlighting the efficacy of social media activism may yield higher online user participation in counterterrorism messaging in the form of social media countermessaging by ordinary users. Finally, antiterrorist communication should consider the potential impact of cultural cues along with out-group stereotyping in audience engagement.

### ***Limitations***

The results of this study are undermined by several limitations. First, the study dealt with socially undesirable content that is delivered to global audiences via nonmainstream platforms. Such delivery

mechanisms presented theoretical challenges to the study due to the fact that the majority of TPE literature is focused on traditional, mainstream channels. Another limitation of the study was that the data was collected via the MTurk service that provides non-probability samples. The use of the MTurk service may undermine the external validity of our data and thus the generalizability of our findings. For instance, males in our sample are 10 percent more than those in 2010 census data. The skewed gender sampling should be considered when interpreting the results of our analysis and when considering the ability to generalize towards the general population. Religious identity also included more Atheist/Agnostic than recent national survey data by Pew Research Center.

As for religious identity, we also noted that the current data had a slightly smaller percentage of Muslims (0.6%) compared to about one percent of the total U.S. population (Mohamed, 2016). Although the main purpose of this study was not to compare the difference of TPP across different religious groups, future research needs to examine the perceptual difference between Christian groups and Muslim groups. This is one of the ways to validate the social identification view of TPP. Should researchers pursue this research goal, they need to consider employing the stratified random sampling to overrepresent the Muslim groups.

Furthermore, this study was limited by political-cultural consideration. The data was collected from participants in the United States. A replication of our study in those parts of the world where ISIS recruitment is more salient to the general public is likely to produce different findings. Future studies can support or undermine our findings by using probability sampling in various parts of the world.

### References

- Andsager, J. L., & White, A. H. (2007). *Self versus others. Media, messages, and the third-person effect*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Barnidge, M., & Rojas, H. (2014). Hostile media perceptions, presumed media influence, and political talk: Expanding the corrective action hypothesis. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 26(2), 135–156.
- Behrend, T. S., Sharek, D. J., Meade, A. W., & Wiebe, E. N. (2011). The viability of crowdsourcing for survey research. *Behavior Research Methods*, 43(3), 800–813.
- Berger, J. M., & Morgan, J. (2015). *The ISIS Twitter census*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf)
- Bouzis, K. (2015). Countering the Islamic State: U.S. counterterrorism measures. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(10), 885–897.

- Bowe, B. J., & Makki, T. W. (2015). Muslim neighbors or an Islamic threat? A constructionist framing analysis of newspaper coverage of mosque controversies. *Media, Culture & Society, 38*(4), 540–558.
- Chia, S. C., Lu, K.-H., & McLeod, D. M. (2004). Sex, lies, and video compact disc: A case study on third-person perception and motivations for media censorship. *Communication Research, 31*(1), 109–130.
- Cohen, J., & Davis, R. G. (1991). Third-person effects and the differential impact in negative political advertising. *Journalism Quarterly, 68*(4), 680–688.
- Cohen, J., Mutz, D. C., Price, V., & Gunter, A. C. (1988). Perceived impact of defamation: An experiment on third-person effects. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 52*(2), 161–173.
- Cohen, J., Tsfati, Y., & Sheafer, T. (2008). The influence of presumed media influence in politics: Do politicians' perceptions of media power matter? *Public Opinion Quarterly, 72*(2), 331–344.
- Cohen, J., & Weimann, G. (2008). Who's afraid of reality shows?: Exploring the effects of perceived influence of reality shows and the concern over their social effects on willingness to censor. *Communication Research, 35*(3), 382–397.
- Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 47*(1), 1–15.
- Doosje, B., Loseman, A., & van den Bos, K. (2013). Determinants of radicalization of Islamic youth in the Netherlands: Personal uncertainty, perceived injustice, and perceived group threat. *Journal of Social Issues, 69*(3), 586–604.
- Duck, J. M., Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. J. (1995). Me, us and them: Political identification and the third-person effect in the 1993 Australian federal election. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 25*(2), 195–215.
- Eveland, W. P., Jr., & McLeod, D. M. (1999). The effect of social desirability on perceived media impact: Implications for third-person perceptions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 11*(4), 315–333.
- Eveland, W. P., Jr., Nathanson, A. I., Detenber, B. H., & McLeod, D. M. (1999). Rethinking the social distance corollary: Perceived likelihood of exposure and the third-person perception. *Communication Research, 26*(3), 275–302.
- Gunther, A. (1991). What we think others think cause and consequence in the third-person effect. *Communication Research, 18*(3), 355–372.

- Gunther, A., & Mundy, P. (1993). Biased optimism and the third-person effect. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 70(1), 58–87.
- Gunther, A. C. (1995). Overrating the X-rating: The third-person perception and support for censorship of pornography. *Journal of Communication*, 45(1), 27–38.
- Gunther, A. C., & Schmitt, K. M. (2004). Mapping boundaries of the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication*, 54(1), 55–70.
- Gunther, A. C., & Storey, J. D. (2003). The influence of presumed influence. *Journal of Communication*, 53(2), 199–215.
- Gunther, A. C., & Thorson, E. (1992). Perceived persuasive effects of product commercials and public service announcements. *Communication Research*, 19(5), 574–596.
- Hauser, D. J., & Schwarz, N. (2016). Attentive Turkers: MTurk participants perform better on online attention checks than do subject pool participants. *Behavior Research Methods*, 48(1), 400–407.
- Hoffner, C., Buchanan, M., Anderson, J. D., Hubbs, L. A., Kamigaki, S. K., Kowalczyk, L., . . . Silberg, K. J. (1999). Support for censorship of television violence: The role of the third-person effect and news exposure. *Communication Research*, 26(6), 726–742.
- Hogg, M. A., & Reid, S. A. (2006). Social identity, self-categorization, and the communication of group norms. *Communication Theory*, 16(1), 7–30.
- Hu, L.-T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6(1), 1–55.
- Jackson, S. J., & Foucault Welles, B. (2015). Hijacking# myNYPD: Social media dissent and networked counterpublics. *Journal of Communication*, 65(6), 932–952.
- Jensen, J. D., & Hurley, R. J. (2005). Third-person effects and the environment: Social distance, social desirability, and presumed behavior. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 242–256.
- Kim, H. (2016). The role of emotions and culture in the third-person effect process of news coverage of election poll results. *Communication Research*, 43(1), 109–130.
- Lambe, J. L. (2002). Dimensions of censorship: Reconceptualizing public willingness to censor. *Communication Law & Policy*, 7(2), 187–235.
- Lambe, J. L., & McLeod, D. M. (2005). Understanding third-person perception processes: Predicting perceived impact on self and others for multiple expressive contexts. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 277–291.

- Liebelson, D. (2015, February 23). How the Obama administration is asking tech companies to help combat ISIS. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/23/white-house-isis-social-media\\_n\\_6736792.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/23/white-house-isis-social-media_n_6736792.html)
- Lim, J. S., & Golan, G. J. (2011). Social media activism in response to the influence of political parody videos on YouTube. *Communication Research*, 38(5), 710–727.
- Lo, V.-H., & Wei, R. (2002). Third-person effect, gender, and pornography on the Internet. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(1), 13–33.
- Malik, K. (2016, March 30). The little we know about the jihadists in our midst. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/opinion/the-little-we-know-about-the-jihadists-in-our-midst.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/31/opinion/the-little-we-know-about-the-jihadists-in-our-midst.html?_r=0)
- McLeod, D. M., Detenber, B. H., & Eveland, W. P. (2001). Behind the third-person effect: Differentiating perceptual processes for self and other. *Journal of Communication*, 51(4), 678–695.
- McLeod, D. M., Eveland, W. P., Jr., & Nathanson, A. I. (1997). Support for censorship of violent and misogynic rap lyrics: An analysis of the third-person effect. *Communication Research*, 24(2), 153–174.
- Meirick, P. C. (2005). Rethinking the target corollary: The effects of social distance, perceived exposure, and perceived predispositions on first-person and third-person perceptions. *Communication Research*, 32(6), 822–843.
- Mohamed, B. (2016, January 6). A new estimate of the U.S. Muslim population. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/06/a-new-estimate-of-the-u-s-muslim-population/>
- Nacos, B. L., & Torres-Reyna, O. (2003). Framing Muslim-Americans before and after 9/11. In P. Norris, M. Kern, & M. Just (Eds.), *Framing terrorism: The news media, the government, and the public* (pp. 133–158). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nathanson, A. I., Eveland Jr, W. P., Park, H.-S., & Paul, B. (2002). Perceived media influence and efficacy as predictors of caregivers' protective behaviors. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(3), 385–410.
- Paek, H.-J., & Gunther, A. C. (2007). How peer proximity moderates indirect media influence on adolescent smoking. *Communication Research*, 34(4), 407–432.
- Papacharissi, Z., & de Fatima Oliveira, M. (2012). Affective news and networked publics: The rhythms of news storytelling on# Egypt. *Journal of Communication*, 62(2), 266–282.

- Paolacci, G., & Chandler, J. (2014). Inside the Turk: Understanding Mechanical Turk as a participant pool. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*(3), 184–188.
- Paolacci, G., Chandler, J., & Ipeirotis, P. G. (2010). Running experiments on Amazon Mechanical Turk. *Judgment and Decision Making, 5*(5), 411–419.
- Paul, B., Salwen, M. B., & Dupagne, M. (2000). The third-person effect: A meta-analysis of the perceptual hypothesis. *Mass Communication and Society, 3*(1), 57–85.
- Perloff, R. M. (1993). Third-person effect research 1983–1992: A review and synthesis. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 5*(2), 167–184.
- Perloff, R. M. (1999). The third-person effect: A critical review and synthesis. *Media Psychology, 1*(4), 353–378.
- Price, V., Tewksbury, D., & Huang, L.-N. (1998). Third-person effects on publication of a Holocaust-denial advertisement. *Journal of Communication, 48*(2), 3–26.
- Reid, S. A., & Hogg, M. A. (2005). A self-categorization explanation for the third-person effect. *Human Communication Research, 31*(1), 129–161.
- Rojas, H. (2010). "Corrective" actions in the public sphere: How perceptions of media and media effects shape political behaviors. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 22*(3), 343–363.
- Rojas, H., Shah, D. V., & Faber, R. J. (1996). For the good of others: Censorship and the third-person effect. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 8*(2), 163–186.
- Rosenthal, S., Detenber, B. H., & Rojas, H. (forthcoming). Efficacy beliefs in third-person effects. *Communication Research*. Advance online publication. doi:0093650215570657
- Salwen, M. B. (1998). Perceptions of media influence and support for censorship: The third-person effect in the 1996 presidential election. *Communication Research, 25*(3), 259–285.
- Scharrer, E. (2002). Third-person perception and television violence: The role of out-group stereotyping in perceptions of susceptibility to effects. *Communication Research, 29*(6), 681–704.
- Scharrer, E., & Leone, R. (2008). First-person shooters and the third-person effect. *Human Communication Research, 34*(2), 210–233.
- Schmierbach, M., Boyle, M. P., Xu, Q., & McLeod, D. M. (2011). Exploring third-person differences between gamers and nongamers. *Journal of Communication, 61*(2), 307–327.
- Shah, D. V., Faber, R. J., & Youn, S. (1999). Susceptibility and severity: Perceptual dimensions underlying the third-person effect. *Communication Research, 26*(2), 240–267.

- Shen, L., Palmer, J., Mercer Kollar, L. M., & Comer, S. (2015). A social comparison explanation for the third-person perception. *Communication Research, 42*(2), 260–280.
- Sides, J., & Gross, K. (2013). Stereotypes of Muslims and support for the War on Terror. *Journal of Politics, 75*(3), 583–598.
- Smith, S. M., Roster, C. A., Golden, L. L., & Albaum, G. S. (2016). A multi-group analysis of online survey respondent data quality: Comparing a regular USA consumer panel to MTurk samples. *Journal of Business Research, 69*(8), 3139–3148.
- Sun, Y., Pan, Z., & Shen, L. (2008). Understanding the third-person perception: Evidence from a meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication, 58*(2), 280–300.
- Sun, Y., Shen, L., & Pan, Z. (2008). On the behavioral component of the third-person effect. *Communication Research, 35*(2), 257–278.
- Velasquez, A., & LaRose, R. (2015). Youth collective activism through social media: The role of collective efficacy. *New Media & Society, 17*(6), 899–918.
- Vidino, L., & Hughes, S. (2015). *ISIS in America: From retweets to RAQQA*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University. Retrieved from [https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS in America-Full Report\\_0.pdf](https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America-Full%20Report_0.pdf)
- Warrick, J. (2015). *Black flags: Therise of ISIS*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Wei, R., Chia, S. C., & Lo, V.-H. (2011). Third-person effect and hostile media perception influences on voter attitudes toward polls in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 23*(2), 169–190.
- Wei, R., Lo, V.-H., & Lu, H.-Y. (2008). Third-person effects of health news: Exploring the relationships among media exposure, presumed media influence, and behavioral intentions. *American Behavioral Scientist, 52*(2), 261–277.
- Weimann, G. (2015). Going dark: Terrorism on the dark Web. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 39*(3), 1–24.
- Witte, K. (1994). Fear control and danger control: A test of the extended parallel process model (EPPM). *Communication Monographs, 61*(2), 113–134.
- Xu, J., & Gonzenbach, W. J. (2008). Does a perceptual discrepancy lead to action? A meta-analysis of the behavioral component of the third-person effect. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 20*(3), 375–385.

Zhong, Z.-J. (2009). Third-person perceptions and online games: A comparison of perceived antisocial and prosocial game effects. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*(2), 286–306.