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**The “Primed” Third-Person Effect of  
Media Portrayals about African Americans**

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**The “Primed” Third-Person Effect of  
Media Portrayals about African Americans**

**by**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my family, who always showed invaluable love and support.

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I am greatly indebted to my two thesis readers: Dr. Dominic Lasorsa and Dr. Hsiang Iris Chyi. Dr. Lasorsa has been a great supervisor, instructor, and mentor to me. Working with him has been a great privilege and a wonderful learning experience. Under the guidance of Dr. Lasorsa, I could obtain comprehensive research and academic training as a master's student. He showed great support to me from the beginning of my graduate studies. Without his encouragement and consideration, I would not have been able to complete the program successfully.

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## **Abstract**

### **The “Primed” Third-Person Effect of Media Portrayals about African Americans**

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Using an online posttest-only control group experiment, this study explores how priming of different levels of media effects influences the third-person effect of media portrayals about African Americans. In the experiment, a total number of 200 participants were randomly assigned to read either an article about media’s power (strong media effects condition), an article about media’s lack of power (weak media effects condition) or nothing (control condition). The study reveals several important findings. First, reading an article about media’s strong effects influenced the perceptions of media effects on others. To be specific, people who were exposed to information about media’s strong effects perceived others of the same race (in-group) and others of different races (out-group) to be more influenced by media than people who did not read such article. Second, for those who read the article about media’s less powerful role, the article priming influence on the perceived media effects on the in-group others depended on one’s preexisting beliefs about media effects. In other words, as people held stronger beliefs about media power, the perceived media effects on the in-group others increased among those who read the weak media effects article. Third, as a behavioral consequence of perceived media effects, the

intention to support media literacy education depended on perceived media effects on *others*, rather than *self-other disparities*. Reading the article about media's weak effects also influenced the greater support for media literacy education.

This study gives novel theoretical and practical contributions. First, beyond replicating the simple self-other disparities which the most previous third-person effect studies focused on, this study provides a new direction of linking the two theoretical frameworks – priming and the third-person effect-, thus deepening the understanding of psychological dimensions of person perceptions. In addition, the direct and immediate influence of messages on perceptions and behaviors suggests practical insights for persuasive tactics and media literacy.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the media and racial perceptions has been well documented. Much of the literature investigated how media's depictions of racial minority groups are influential in shaping perceptions about those racial groups (Ford, 1997; Holt, 2013). Ford (1997), for instance, found that stereotypical television portrayals of African Americans increased the likelihood of making negative perceptions and judgments about them. Ramasubramanian (2010) also found that perceived TV portrayals of African Americans and Latino Americans as lazy and criminal increased negative stereotypical beliefs toward them.

As such, much research has been conducted over the years to examine how racial minorities are portrayed in media and how people's perceptions, judgments, and attitudes are affected by these media portrayals. However, little research on racial stereotypes has been done in the framework of the third-person effect hypothesis, which argues that people perceive the media to be more influential on others than on themselves (*third-person perception*) and that this perceptual differential between self and others further makes people to take certain actions (*third-person effect*). Researchers have already documented how media portrayals about racial minorities affect the way people think about them. Then, how would such media depictions about racial minorities affect perceptions about self and others differently? Looking at the third-person perception of media portrayals about African Americans, this study expands previous research on person perceptions about media's racial portrayals.

This study further deepens the understanding of person perceptions by linking priming and the third-person effect. In other words, to increase the understanding of the perceptual difference between self and others, this study investigates how priming of certain information would influence the third-person perception of media portrayals of African Americans. To be specific, this study mainly examines how exposure to information about either (a) the power or (b) the lack of power of the media to influence public might influence perceived media effects on self and others. Research on the third-person perception has focused on replicating self-other disparity in perceived media effects, but further theoretical explications are necessary to document the perception mechanism (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). In this sense, by combining priming and the third-person perception, this study aims to contribute to the current literature by exploring various dimensions of self-other perceptions.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study also provides practical implications by examining the behavioral component of the third-person effect, such as willingness to support media literacy education. This study provides a guideline for the understanding of support for media literacy education, such as how one's perceptions of media effects can predict subsequent behavioral intention, as suggested by the third-person effect hypothesis. The study employs a posttest-only control group online experimental method to collect data. Taken together, focusing on the issue of media portrayals of African Americans, this study generally addresses how exposure to different information about media power influences the perceptions about self and others, further leading to a behavioral intention.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The Third-Person Perception of Media Portrayals

First proposed by Davison (1983), “the third-person effect” refers to a two part hypothesis: (1) people perceive that others are more influenced by media messages than they are (*the third-person perception*) and (2) this perceptual difference also makes people take certain actions (*the third-person effect*). In a recent meta-analysis which analyzed 135 studies, Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) reported that the analyzed studies revealed substantial support for the perceived discrepancy between media effects on the self and others. This result indicates that the third-person perception is a consistent and reliable perceptual phenomenon.

In much of the third-person perception literature, message desirability has been the most important factor in defining the perceptual differential. Specifically, the third-person perception has been robust for socially undesirable or negative media messages whereas for positive messages, it has been smaller, nullified, and even reversed; in the reversed case, it is often referred to as the first-person perception (Sun et al, 2008). Much of the literature has demonstrated that when it comes to socially negative media content, such as pornography (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Paddon, 2001; Chen, Wu, & Atkin, 2015), violent video games (Hong, 2013), cosmetics product advertising (Meng, Gonzenbach, & Pan, 2015) gambling, tobacco, and alcohol advertisements (Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), political attack ads (Wei & Lo, 2007), drug-encourage messages (Leung & Lo, 2015), people tend to consider others to be more vulnerable than they themselves. Sun and

colleagues (2008)'s meta-analysis documented collective evidence that the third-person perception is strong for socially negative media messages.

In this context, the media's depictions of certain social groups, especially when portrayed in stereotypical ways, can be considered as socially undesirable content, thus increasing the third-person perception. For example, Duck and Mullin (1995) reported that when facing messages with stereotypical content about other race and gender such as encouraging viewers to adopt racist attitudes toward blacks and downplaying female careers, people perceived these messages to be less influential to themselves but more influential to distant others. Their experiment reconfirmed that the perceived self-other differentials were pronounced when the potential impact of such depictions about other social groups was considered to be negative or anti-social. Similarly, female and male body images in magazines, which portrayed stereotypical or "ideal" body shapes, increased the perceptual gap between self and others (Chia, 2007, 2009; David, & Johnson, 1998; David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002; Wan, Faber, & Fung, 2003). For both female and male college students, they perceived the ideal body images depicted in media to be more influential on others than on themselves. Also, Robinson and Umphrey (2006) examined the first- and third-person perceptions of stereotypical images of older people in advertising. Using advertisements portraying either positive or negative stereotypes about the older generation, this study found a significant linkage between different stereotypes and the first- or third-person perceptions of older people. For older people who saw an ad

with negative stereotypes showed greater third-person perception while those who saw positive stereotypical images about themselves reported greater first-person perception.

Based on the evidence discussed above, this current study explores the third-person perception of media's portrayals about African Americans. In the history of discrimination against African Americans in the U.S., the mass media including television, newspapers, and advertisements have been considered as having socially undesirable influence on people's perception about them. Thus it will be worthy to investigate the third-person perception in the context of media's portrayals about such an under-represented social group. Presuming socially undesirable influence of the media portrayals about African Americans, this study proposes that people will perceive others to be more influenced than themselves by these media messages.

**H1: People will perceive the media portrayals about African Americans to be more influential on others than on themselves.**

## **2.2 Social Distance Corollary and The Third-Person Perception**

According to the "social distance corollary" of the third-person effect hypothesis (Perloff, 2002; 2008), the perceptual gap between self and others tends to increase with the increment of social distance of the comparison group. A number of studies which examined the role of social distance in the third-person perception have defined social distance as "a set of nested social or geographical levels." (Wei & Lo, 2007, p. 171) In other words, people tend to perceive others who are geographically distant or socio-demographically dissimilar

to be more influenced by media effects than themselves. For example, Cohen, Mutz, Price, and Gunther (1988) found that the perceived influence of a defamatory news story was the least on self and increased accordingly as the social distance of comparison groups increased to “other Stanford students,” “other Californians,” and “public opinion at large.” Similarly, David and Johnson (1998) found that the third-person perception of idealized female body image increased as the distance of the referent groups (female classmates, other women on campus, and U.S. women in general) increased. Wei and Lo (2007) also documented that perceived harmful effects of attack ads in the U.S. 2004 presidential election were the greatest on “general voters,” followed by “other students” and self.

However, Meirick (2005) argued that defining social distance in contexts of socio-demographics or geography is not fully appropriate especially when social groups are seen as opposed to each other. He further suggested an alternate conceptualization of social distance to view social groups as “adjacent circles – in-groups and out-groups” (p. 236). People tend to perceive that members of out-groups are distant and different from members of in-groups. As a result, people would show a greater self-other perceptual gap when the comparison group is the out-group than the in-group. This in-group-out-group approach toward social distance was well explored in the contexts of gender, race, and political party identification. For example, female college students in Singapore, when asked to measure the perceived effects of female body images in fashion magazine ads, answered that male friends would be more influenced than female friends (Chia, 2009). In the contexts of race, Neuwirth and Frederick (2002) investigated that non-White respondents perceived that the

effects of news depictions of a minority neighborhood on White others would be greater than the effects on non-White others. David, Morrison, Johnson, and Ross (2002) also found that Black female college students perceived White others to be more influenced by Black female models in fashion magazines than Black others. Using a political party identification based comparison group, Wei, Chia, and Lo (2011) investigated that people perceived others of the opposite party to be more influenced by the election polls during the 2008 U.S. presidential election than others of the same party. These findings consistently suggest that the third-person perception are usually larger for comparisons with out-group than in-group comparisons.

The current study, which focuses on racial portrayals in media, also expects to have a difference in the perceptual gap when the comparison group is the ethnic out-group and the ethnic in-group. To be specific, people will perceive others of difference races (ethnic out-group), who are considered to be socially more distant and dissimilar, to be more influenced by the media's portrayals about African Americans than others of the same race (ethnic in-group), who are socially closer and similar. Thus, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

**H2: People's perceptual gap between self and others will be larger when the comparison group is the ethnic out-group rather than the ethnic in-group.**

## **2.3. The “Primed” Third-Person Perception**

### **2.3.1. PRIMING**

Beyond the existence of the third-person perception, it is necessary to seek a deeper understanding of the person perception of the media’s racial portrayals. Is the third-person perception a robust and constant media effect? What would drive the differences in the perceptual gap between the self and others? To the extent that people’s third-person perception of media portrayals about African Americans may differ, this study is interested in priming as the mechanism of influence.

Priming, in general, refers to how media content can influence individuals’ subsequent behaviors, judgments, and evaluations related to that content (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002). Presuming people’s information processing is based on their memory, priming adapts network models of memory (Carpentier, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2008; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). Information is stored in memory in the form of nodes, which represents a concept, and these nodes are connected to other nodes that represent related or similar concepts. Once a specific area of network becomes activated, the nodes of related concepts are activated as well; this process of priming then activates as a filter or contextual framework for subsequent information (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). This memory-based mechanism of information processing allows priming to occur rather easily and frequently. Though the effects might not last long and dissipate over time unless an activation continues, priming scholars demonstrated that short and simple exposure of certain

concepts, such as presentation of words, sentences, or pictures, are sufficient to trigger certain concepts in people's memory (Arendt, 2013; Hansen & Hansen, 1988).

Often considered as a temporal extension of agenda-setting theory (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), which argues that issues that are covered saliently in the media also become salient in people's minds, priming has implications for influencing real-life consequences after media exposure (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2008). To be specific, priming allows people to shape perceptions, judgments, and behaviors in the contexts of the activated concepts in their memory. For example, Ardent (2013) investigated that reading articles with "criminal foreigner" stereotypes had a noticeable influence on implicit stereotypes about foreigners. He discussed that reading a newspaper article about a crime committed by a foreigner might have activated specific concepts related to "criminal foreigner" in people's memories, thus leading to increased stereotypical perceptions. Ashikali and Dittmar (2012) found that women who saw several ads conveying materialistic messages showed greater perceptions of the centrality of appearance of their self-concept. In other words, exposure to ads that were manipulated to prime the importance of money and wealth led women to put more emphasis on appearance-related concepts in defining their identities. In political settings, furthermore, priming effects were evident in forming evaluation criteria of presidents or candidates. For example, watching late-night comedy shows influenced the viewers' judgments about the candidates who appeared on these shows. After watching "The Late Show with David Letterman," people

tended to make judgments about George Bush based on characters appeared on the show (Moy, Xenos, and Hess, 2006).

### **2.3.2. THE “PRIMED” THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION**

As media priming is shown to influence people’s perceptions and judgments in a primed context, it is also expected that priming will affect people’s third-person perceptions. In other words, it is likely that after priming of a certain concept, the perceptual gap between self and others will be influenced by the relevant primed concept.

Why would priming be important for the third-person perception? Tyler and Cook (1984) demonstrated that depending on how media portrayed the issue, media reports of crimes had different impacts on judgments about others (societal level judgment) and judgments about self (personal level judgment). In other words, when media presented the problem in a dramatic and convincing way, people had greater concern about crime in their neighborhoods than concern about themselves becoming victims. How media depicts the same issue differently, or to which type of descriptions about the issue people are exposed to, influences people’s perceptions about self and others, which further suggests a possible linkage between priming and the third-person perception.

According to Berkowitz (1984), arguments about media’s harmful effects emphasized in news media can directly or indirectly influence the estimates of media effects on others. Learning about media effects would evoke relevant ideas and thoughts, thus further leading to one’s reaction to others. For example, when parents worry about children’s exposure to violent video games, their concern comes not only from watching

their children playing the games but also from learning about video's strong effects on children from the news (Hong, 2013). In this context, several studies attempted to look at how priming of "strong media effects" influences the perceptual difference between self and others. For example, David and Johnson (1998) examined whether media priming (a video clip discussing a potential influence of idealized female body image) would affect the third-person perception of female body image. In this study, they did not see a significant difference in the third-person perception of female body image between the groups that watched the video and did not watch the video. Though the main effect was not supported, video priming had a significant influence on the perceived media effect of self and others on self-esteem and eating disorder. In other words, watching the video heightened the perceived influence of idealized media images on self-esteem and likelihood of developing an eating disorder both for women themselves and other women.

Suk (2015) later re-examined the linkage between priming and the third-person perception of ideal female body image. Suk (2015)'s experiment revealed that reading an article about media's strong influence on body image perception weakened the third-person perception of ideal female body image, narrowing down the perceptual gap between self and others. To be specific, exposure to the article increased women's perceived media effects on themselves compared to those who did not read the article. This study advocated that the article worked successfully as a priming stimulus to strengthen people's awareness of media influence on the self, thus decreasing the third-person perception. Though both of these studies tested the relationship between the third-person perception and media

priming (video or article) of strong media effects, the findings are rather inconclusive and mixed. This suggests that further investigation is necessary.

Tal-Or, Cohen, Tsfati, and Gunther (2010) indirectly manipulated the “strong media effects” in their experiment. Unlike previous two experiments done by David and Johnson (1998) and Suk (2015), which used either video or article to directly convey the information, Tal-Or and his colleagues indirectly manipulated the perceptions of media effects by locating a newspaper story about shortage in sugar in either the front or back page of a newspaper. They presumed a front page story would prime participants to think greater media effects than the back page story. As a result, they found that participants who were primed to think that news about an imminent shortage in sugar would have a strong impact on the general public were more likely to report that they will purchase sugar or try to use less sugar than participants who were led to think that the news report will be less impactful. Though this study did not explicitly measure the perceptual gap between self and others, it has implications for demonstrating that people’s perceptions of media influence shape their consequent attitudes, despite implicit manipulations.

Though some of the previous studies have produced mixed results for the same topic, this study hypothesizes that priming of strong media effects will strengthen the third-person perception. Berkowitz (1984) argued that exposure to media’s violence would strengthen the activation of certain related concepts, which will shape people’s perceptions about others. Moreover, this argument is in accord with the third-person perception’s motivational explanation. The motivational account, such as self-serving bias or self-

enhancement bias (Perloff, 2002), is associated with individual assumptions about how they themselves and others will respond to media messages. In an attempt to defend their self-images, people tend to downplay their vulnerability to media while overestimating others' susceptibility to media (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). Overestimation of media effects on others leads people to increase concerns for others as well, adapting the paternalistic tendency to protect others. This account explains why the third-person perception is robust for the socially undesirable messages; that is, as people are likely to refuse to admit their susceptibility to socially undesirable influence, they perceive others to be more influenced by negative media content than they themselves.

Therefore, based on the above rationale and evidence, this study proposes that when priming people to think about media's powerful impact on shaping racial stereotypes, it would evoke reactions to others, such as inflation of media effects on others, thus increasing the self-other disparity. At the same time, the current study expands previous research on priming and the third-person perception by exploring the influence of priming "weak media effects" as well. Employing the same logic, priming of weak media effects is expected to have a less significant or even an opposite effect than priming of strong media effects. Thus, this study examines the following hypothesis.

**H3a: People exposed to information saying that media effects are strong will show stronger third-person perception than people exposed to information saying that media effects are weak.**

In addition to the perceptual gap between self and others, this study further suggests the increased salience of perceived media effects on self and others after priming of strong media effects. As priming activates a specific area of a certain concept, exposure to strong media effects will increase the overall salience of concepts relevant to media's power (David & Johnson, 1998). On the other hand, exposure to weak media effects will activate ideas related to media's weak power. Therefore, this study expects that priming of strong media effects would increase overall salience of media's effects, thus resulting in an increase in the perceived effect of media on self and others, compared to the priming of weak media effects.

**H3b: People exposed to information about strong media effects will exhibit greater perceived media effects on self and others than people exposed to information about weak media effects.**

## **2.4. The Third-Person Perception from Social Identity Perspective**

### **2.4.1. SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SELF-CATEGORIZATION THEORY**

According to Meirick's (2005) conceptualization of social distance, as discussed earlier, comparison groups are more distant when they are considered to be "out-groups" whereas they are closer and similar when they are considered to be "in-groups." In this sense, social identity theory can be used as a basis for the communicative perceptual phenomena. First proposed by Tajfel (1978), social identity theory is a "social-psychological theory that attempts to explain cognitions and behavior with the help of group-processes." (Treppe,

2006, p. 256) This theory posits that in social contexts, people see themselves as members of a group, rather than unique individuals. Social identity theory aims to explain how people's identification with social group(s) is manifested in social settings, thus influencing their perceptions, emotions, judgments, and behaviors.

Central in the social identity approach lies self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). As one's self-concept is dependent on the group membership(s) (McKinley, Mastro, & Warber, 2014), when the salience of in-group to which an individual belongs to increases, it leads to a categorization of one's in-group and out-group. In other words, as people's in-group identity increase, they tend to focus on similarities between members within the same category while differences within the same group are underestimated. Similarly, they overestimate the differences between in-group and out-group and downplay the similarities. Though the categories are context-dependent, gender and race are often considered as strong social categorizations because they are chronically and easily accessible (McKinley et al, 2014).

Some researchers have applied social identity and self-categorization theory in attempt to explain the underlying mechanism of the third-person perception. Researchers suggest an individual's beliefs about social identities play a key role in group-relevant judgments (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002). Much evidence finds that the level of in-group identification influenced the perceived media effects on self (or other in-group members) and others (out-group members).

#### **2.4.2. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION IN THE THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION**

As cited in the earlier section, many studies showed consistent evidence that the perceptual gap is larger when the referent target is out-group than in-group. However, these studies also suggest the moderating role of one's social identification in influencing the perceptual gap between self and others. Depending on how people categorize themselves and others and how they identify with certain category, the linear tendency of social distance (the third-person perception is greater when the comparison group is the out-group than the in-group) becomes not always consistent and robust.

For example, Duck, Hogg, and Terry (1995) examined how the strength of political identification moderates the perception of media effects on self and others. Those who had strong party identification showed lower perceived influence of campaign content on themselves than those who had low party identification. Also, they predicted those high in political identification would perceive less perceptual difference between self and political in-group members. But their findings showed that political identification strength increased the in-group third-person perception, contrary to their prediction. Similarly, Gardikiotis (2008) investigated the effect of political identification strength on perceptions of media influence during 2004 Greek national election. The findings showed that the strength of political identification increased the perceived vulnerability of the political out-group to campaign messages while decreasing the perceived impact on the political in-group. In other words, people thought that the media's election coverage had greater influence on members of political out-group than on members of political in-group, which is contrary

to Duck, Hogg, and Terry's (1995) findings that political identification heightened the in-group third-person perception.

Scharrer (2002) looked at the role of social identification in various contexts in shaping the third-person perception of television violence. He showed that people's identification with gender, education, and racial groups showed a smaller in-group third-person perception. Respondents were less likely to view members of gender, education, and racial in-group to be affected by television violence and more likely to perceive out-group members to be influenced by television violence. On the other hand, people's identification with age and class did not show the same result. Respondents' age and income levels were not associated with their views of whether susceptibility to television violence influence would differ according to different age group and class. Although he did not measure the exact level of identification (strong or weak) with each social group, his findings have implications for observing that the third-person perception largely depends on to which social group one identifies with.

In David and his colleagues' experiment (2002), they indirectly manipulated the strength of ethnic identification by matching the race of female fashion models in magazine ads instead of explicitly asking one's ethnic identification strength. Presuming that matching the race of models would increase one's ethnic identification, the researchers measured the perceived influence of body image in magazine ads on others of the same race and others of a different race. Among Blacks female students, perceived media effects on other White women was greater than perceived effects on other Black women after

exposure to the White fashion models. After exposure to Black fashion models, they showed greater perceived media effects on other Black women than on other White women. In other words, as the salience of racial identification was heightened, the linear trend of social distance corollary became inconclusive.

The previous evidence documents the role of social identification in the perceptual difference between self and others, though not always consistent in one direction. It is likely that in the context of racial portrayals about African Americans, one's strength of ethnic identification will affect differences in perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races. Given that a certain concept in memory can be activated by priming, exposure to the message about media's effects on shaping racial stereotypes will influence the activation of race-related concepts as well, such as the preexisting belief about one's ethnic strength. This study explores whether, depending on one's ethnic identification strength, the priming influence on the perceived media effects on self, ethnic in-group and ethnic out-group will be different. In other words, one's ethnic identification strength will moderate the priming influence on perception of media effects – the stronger the ethnic identification one holds, the stronger the priming influence on perception of media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races.

**H4: The priming influence on perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races will be moderated by the strength of one's ethnic identification.**

## **2.5. Media Power Beliefs and The Third-Person Perception**

As the social psychology literature suggests, people have different beliefs about media effects. According to Perloff (2002; 2008), people have various schemas, or beliefs, about media effects, including media's strong influence on society and vulnerability of others to media effects. Perloff (2002; 2008) suggested that such beliefs could support the difference in perceived media effects on self and others.

In this context, several third-person perception studies explored how people's general beliefs about media effects would influence the perceived media impact on self and others. However, evidence for this relationship has been inconclusive. Price, Huang, and Tewksbury (1997) investigated the empirical connection between the third-person perception and general beliefs about news media. They first distinguished people's general beliefs about media in three major concepts, which are "news media are powerful," "news media are biased," and "people are vulnerable to media influence." According to their findings, only belief about vulnerable others was positively related to the perceptual gap between self and others, mainly due to their influence on perceived media effects on others, not on self. Belief about powerful media only affected the perceived media effect on others with no significant relationship to the third-person perception. Belief about biased media was not associated with the third-person perception and perception of media effects on self and others. In sum, this study suggested only modest connection between general beliefs about media and the third-person perception.

Meirick (2006) also investigated the linkage between media belief and perceived media effects. He developed more various measures of media effects beliefs: a belief in powerful media, a belief in savvy audiences, a belief that public service announcements are laughable, a belief that people see themselves as invulnerable, and a belief that people want to avoid negative affect. However, the overall results showed little support for the connection between people's general assumptions about media effects and the third-person perception. To be specific, powerful media effects belief was associated with neither the third-person perception nor the perceived media effects on others, contrary to his predictions. Though Price and his colleagues' study (1997) showed modest but significant support, this study revealed much weaker connection between people's beliefs about media and the estimates of perceived effects.

More recent study documented the positive role of media beliefs in affecting the perceived media influence. Boyle, Schmierbach, and McLeod (2013) explored the underlying mechanism behind the third-person perception, including the influence of the deep rooted assumption about vulnerable others on the third-person perception. After showing participants a brief news story on either positive and negative effects of video games, they measured the perceived effects of video games on self and others. The findings showed that exposure to a brief news story on the effects of video games had no impact on perceptions of effects or on the the third-person perception, but the belief about media vulnerability did. Though the experiment's main effect was not significant, it did show that

people's long-standing beliefs took precedence in influencing the perception of media effects.

As described above, researchers have not documented consistent evidence for corroborating either a positive or negative role of the deep-rooted beliefs in affecting the perceptual gap between self and others. One cannot explicitly conclude that the influence of preexisting beliefs about media effects is weak or strong on the perceived media effects on self and others. Thus, how these assumptions about media effects would affect the perception about self and others is questionable in this study; thus, the current study can reexamine the moderating role of media power belief in influencing the perceptual gap. Moreover, given the context of this study, which includes the priming of different levels of media effects, testing people's long-lasting belief about media power seems inevitable and necessary. In other words, according to the priming mechanism, exposure to different levels of media effects will likely influence the activation of related concepts, such as people's long-lasting beliefs about media effects, and this activation will further influence the estimates of perceived media effects on self and others. In this sense, therefore, this study proposes the moderating role of preexisting beliefs about media effects in the relationship between priming of media effects and the perception of media effects on self and others – the stronger people believe about media's power, the strong priming influence on perception of media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races.

**H5: The priming influence on perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races will be moderated by preexisting beliefs about media effects.**

## **2.6. Behavioral Consequences of the “Primed” Third-Person Perception**

Another important component of the third-person effect hypothesis is the behavioral outcome predicted by the third-person perception. This behavioral component posits that the greater perceived media effects on others than on the self leads people to take certain actions. While the perceptual component of the third-person effect hypothesis has been explicated with sufficient evidence, its behavioral outcome has not received as much attention as the perceptual aspect (Sun et al, 2008; Feng & Guo, 2012).

In most research, the behavior implication has been more supported when it is a rectifying behavior, such as restrictive, corrective, and promotional behaviors (Sun et al, 2008; Feng & Guo, 2012). In other words, when people hold different perception of media effects on self and others and perceive others are more vulnerable to the media effects, this perceptual gap leads them to redress the situation. For example, presuming certain harmful influence is greater on others than themselves, people may support for censoring the harmful content (restrictive behavior) (e.g. Lee, & Tamborini, 2005, Lo, & Paddon, 2001 for Internet pornography; Scharrer, 2002 for television violence; Leung & Lo, 2015 for online drug-encourage messages), and educating vulnerable others (corrective behavior) such as parents monitoring their children’s peer relationship (Tsfati, Ribak, & Cohen, 2015)

and parental role to mediate the impact of television content (Hoffner & Buchana, 2002). When perceiving beneficial influence, however, people may support for promoting such beneficial messages to others, including engagement in promotional social media behavior (promotional behaviors) (Wei & Golan, 2013).

Support for media censorship is one unique and main behavioral effect that has been supported in many studies (Feng & Guo, 2012; Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004). However, studies which explored the behavioral consequence in domains other than media censorship have not always exhibited significant linkage between perception and behavioral intention. For example, Chia (2007) investigated the effect of the third-person perception of female body image on college women's intention to lose weight, but no significant connection between perceptual gap between self and others and overall intention to adopt weight-loss behavior was found.

Another inconsistency can be found in Mutz (1989) and Willnat's (1996) studies on predicting willingness to speak out from the perceptual gap. Linking the third-person effect and spiral of silence, Mutz (1989) looked at students in Stanford University's willingness to speak out as a behavioral outcome of the perceptual difference between the self and others. Her findings suggested that the tendency to believe that others were more influenced by media would change the perceptions of opinion climate, thus influencing people's willingness of public expression. However, when Willnat (1996) examined the same phenomenon in Hong Kong, the perceived difference between media's influence on the self and others did not predict people's willingness to speak out.

As discussed above, though different types of behavioral component of the third-person effect have been explored, evidence is more supportive when the behavior is rectifying intention to redress the situation, presuming the negative media influence (Sun et al., 2008). In this sense, this study expects the third-person perception of media portrayals about African Americans will be likely to increase support for the media literacy education. Media literacy generally refers to as the ability to ability to access, analyze, evaluate media messages (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). The importance of encouraging critical thinking regarding media content through media literacy education has been emphasized in many studies, as an intervention to limit media's influence on forming subsequent prejudice, attitudes, and judgments (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). Thus support for media literacy education can be considered as a rectifying or corrective behavior to solve the problematic self-other disparity, similar to support for media censorship. Since support for media literacy education as a behavioral consequence of the third-person perception has not yet been explored, it will be worthy to examine this new area of behavioral aspects of the third-person effect. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

**H6a: The willingness to support media literacy education in schools is positively associated with the perceptual gap between self and others.**

Theoretically, it is logical to expect rectifying behaviors to stem from the perceptual gap between self and others (Sun et al., 2008). It is the self-other perceptual disparity that

one identifies a problematic situation, and perceiving others to be more influenced by media than self gives rise to one's motivation to engage in actions to correct the problem. However, some scholars also argued that individual perceptions – perceived media effects on self and others separately- can be more meaningful than the gap between self and others (Schmierbach, Boyle, & McLeod, 2008) because the importance of separate estimates of perceived effects on self and others can be underscored when the self-other gap is only used. Indeed, there has been inconsistency among previous literature in predicting behavioral outcome from perceptions; some used the self-other perceptual gap as the predictor, while others used the perceived effects on self and others as separate predictors. And in some cases, it was the individual estimates on self and others not the self-other differential that predicted the behavioral intention. For example, in Eveland and his colleague's (1999) study on the third-person effect of rap/death metal music, the perceived effects on self was a significant predictor of censorship for the music, not the self-other gap. In the study on the third-person effect of pornography, researchers demonstrated that support for censorship of pornography depended on perception of media effects on others, not self (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). To provide detailed analyses and sufficient information on what predicts the behavioral intention, the current study also expects that support for media literacy education will be associated with the perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of a different race, separately.

**H6b: The willingness to support media literacy education is associated with people's perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races.**

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

To examine how priming of different levels of media effects would influence the third-person perception of media portrayals about African Americans, this study used a posttest-only control group online experiment. This analysis aims, first, to determine how reading an article about different levels of media effects influences participants' perceived media effects on themselves and others; second, to explore the role of moderators in the priming influence on the perceptions of media effects; third, to determine if the perceptual gap affects people's intention to take an action, which is willingness to support media literacy education.

### **3.1. Participants**

A total of 200 participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk ([www.mturk.com/mturk](http://www.mturk.com/mturk); known as Amazon MTurk). MTurk is a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace which has recently become a popular way of conducting population-based experiments or surveys (Mason & Suri, 2012). MTurk has been suggested as a viable alternative for data collection since MTurk users (known as "workers") represent a general population of the United States and provide comparable quality of data as traditional subject pools (Paolacci, Chander, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Thus the use of MTurk as a means of recruiting participants was appropriate.

Once the workers voluntarily decided to participate, they were directed to Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) which is one of the online research panels in the United States. On the first page of Qualtrics, they were presented with an informed consent form, which explained the purpose, potential benefits, potential risks, and confidentiality of the study and contact information. When they agreed to participate, they were automatically assigned into one of the three groups – two experimental (strong media effects and weak media effects) and one control group. The result for one participant could not be used in the final analysis because it was identified as a multivariate outlier (see Results section). Thus the records of 199 participants were used in the final analysis, with 67 in strong media effects condition, 66 in weak media effects condition, and 66 in the control condition.

### **3.2. Procedures**

Prior to conducting the experiment, the approval from the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Boards (IRB) was obtained in January, 2016 since the study involved human subjects. After receiving the approval of the measurement instrument and study procedures from the IRB, the online experiment was conducted from February 15 to February 16, 2016. The participants were asked to complete a “News Consumption Study,” and those assigned to experimental conditions read an article about either strong or weak media effects on racial stereotypes. After answering simple attention check questions about the content of the article, they were asked to measure the perception of media effects on self and others (third-person perception), intention to support media literacy education

(third-person effect), ethnic identification strength, and a general belief about media effects. Finally, demographic information such as gender, age, and race/ethnicity, and media use questions were asked. For participants in the control group, they went through the same procedure except for reading an article. Since the purpose of the control group was to measure general third-person effect of racial stereotypes in media, they answered the same questions without any exposure to an article. After completing the task, all participants were rewarded with \$.50 through their MTurk accounts.

### **3.3. Stimuli**

The articles presented to participants in the experimental groups were formatted with a newspaper title, date, headline and columned text for a realistic presentation. Every detail of the articles except for the contents was manipulated to be the same, including the length (about 400 words for each), organization, sentence structures, and name of the interviewee. The contents were adapted from real news articles and research about the relationship between the media and people's subsequent perceptions and behaviors.

To be specific, the article for the strong media effects condition emphasized the media's strong influence on people's racial perceptions. Under the headline of "Watching local news could make you racist," the article introduced a recent research study documenting the relationship between watching news and stereotypical perceptions about Blacks. The main argument of the research was that the more people watched the television news, the more likely they were to draw on negative stereotypes about Blacks because the

media, especially in crime news coverage, are largely biased in portraying them as harmful, poor, and violent. The article added the researcher's interpretation that this tendency was due to people's lack of control and consciousness when watching news.

For the article about weak media effects, with the headline of "Questioning the role of media in racism," it argued that the media are not as influential as one might assume but instead other personal factors such as personal experiences are more important in shaping the racial stereotypes. As consistent with the other article, it also introduced a recent research study, doubting the media's effects in influencing people's perceptions. The main argument of the research was that there was no clear relationship between the increasingly negative portrayals of Blacks in crime news coverage and people's racial bias and that rather, real-life black-related crime experience was the most significant factor. It was interpreted that today viewers are empowered and conscious of how to consume media and are able to selectively expose themselves to stories of interest, thus their perceptions are mainly shaped by their direct experiences not what they see on television.

### **3.4. Measurement**

For the experimental groups, after reading an article about either strong or weak media effects, the participants were asked to answer the posttest questionnaire. For the control group, the participants were directed to the posttest questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of five main measures: the perceived effects of racially stereotypical media

content (third-person perception), media literacy support (third-person effect), ethnic identification strength, media effect beliefs, and media use and demographic information.

#### **3.4.1. THE THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION**

Before asking the third-person perception question, participants were first asked to think about African Americans recently seen on media, including TV programs, newspapers, and ads and to indicate how positively and negatively they think African Americans were portrayed in such media on a seven-point scale (1 = very negatively, 7 = very positively). The purpose of this question was to check whether participants were perceiving such portrayals about the racial minority to be negative or positive, which might further influence the perceived media effects on self and others. Then the participants were asked to measure the influence of these images on their own/others of the same race's/others of different races' perceptions of African Americans. To avoid misunderstanding, "others of the same race" and "others of different races" were clarified with specific instructions (e.g. "If you are white, think about others who are whites as well," or "If you are white, think about others who are neither white nor African Americans.") The three items were measured using a seven-point scale, ranging from not influential at all (1) to very influential (7).

#### **3.4.2. THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT**

The participants then answered a single question that directly asked their willingness to support the school's media literacy education. The definition of media literacy was given

as well to clarify the meaning. The item was measured in a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

### **3.4.3 ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION STRENGTH**

To measure the ethnic identification strength, this study adopted Phinney's (2007) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R), which was one of the most widely used and reliable measures to assess the ethnic identity strength. The participants were first asked to specify their ethnic identity (Asian, black/African American, Hispanic or Latino, white/Caucasian, American Indian/Native American, mixed, or other) then answered the following six questions ( $\alpha = .91$ ) according to a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree): I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs; I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group; I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me; I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better; I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group; I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.

### **3.4.4. MEDIA POWER BELIEF**

The participants' general beliefs about media effects before participating in the study was asked. This measure was composed of three items ( $\alpha = .89$ ), including "The media influence how people make decisions," "The media are very influential in our society," and

“The media don’t really influence what most people think (reverse-coded).” The items were measure on a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

#### **3.4.5. MEDIA USE AND DEMOGRAPHICS**

In the final section of the questionnaire, data on media use were collected. The participants were asked how often they used newspaper, television, radio, magazines, and on-line news on a five-point ordinal scale (1 = never, 2 = less than once a week, 3 = once a week, 4 = a few times a week, 5 = every day). They also answered some demographic questions such as age, gender, education level, and marital status.

### **3.5. Manipulation Check**

A manipulation check was performed before launching the experiment. The purpose of the manipulation check was to ensure whether the articles in the experimental conditions successfully delivered different information about media effects. A total number of 28 undergraduate and graduate students participated in the manipulation check process, 16 of which were exposed to the article of strong media effects and 12 to the article of weak media effects. They answered six questions on a seven-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: The article emphasizes the media’s significant role in influencing people’s racial biases; The article provides me with factual information about the media’s strong influence on racial stereotypes; The article emphasizes that people are empowered and conscious of how to consume the media (reverse-coded); The article tells how the

media can be less influential on racial perceptions than one might assume (reverse-coded); The article directly opposes the conception that media are playing a main role in shaping racial biases (reverse-coded); The article says that media are powerful enough to affect racial perceptions. The mean scores of 16 participants who read the strong media effects article ( $M = 23.63$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ) were significantly higher than the mean scores of 11 participants who read the weak media effects article ( $M = 13.08$ ,  $SD = 4.12$ ;  $t(26) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that each article did indeed deliver its main argument successfully, clearly emphasizing the media's either strong or weak role in influencing racial perceptions.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### 4.1. Preliminary Analysis

Before running the main analyses, a preliminary analysis was conducted for an initial screening of the data and identifying any problematic individual observations. No missing data was found, and the values for skewness and kurtosis for all variables within each group were between -2 and +2, showing that the data were normally distributed (Pituch & Stevens, 2016). Scatterplots, histograms, and Mahalanobis' distances for each variable within each group were used to identify univariate and multivariate outliers. One outlier was identified and discarded, thus the records for 199 participants were included in the final analyses.

The demographic characteristics of the 199 participants are shown in Appendix A. To affirm the randomization of the control and experimental groups, the comparability of the groups of participants in terms of control variables such as demographics (age, gender, race, education level, and marital status) and media use (newspapers, television, magazines, and online-news) were checked. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed that the two groups were comparable for all demographics and media use variables. The moderators, ethnic identification strength ( $F(2, 196) = .02, p > .05$ ) and belief in media power variables ( $F(2, 196) = 2.65, p > .05$ ), were also comparable across the groups. Also, on average, participants perceived media portrayals about American Americans to be negative rather than positive ( $M = 3.72, SD = 1.50$ ), all in keeping with expectations.

## **4.2. Summary of Analysis Strategy**

To test H1 and H2, a series of paired t-tests was conducted. To test H3a, a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) was used to detect group differences on in-group and out-group perceptual gap. For H3b, a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was employed to test the priming influence on perception of media effects, controlling for preexisting belief about media effects. Using belief about media power as a covariate was appropriate to control its possible influence on the dependent variables. For the remaining hypotheses from H4 to H6b, a series of hierarchical regressions were run.

## **4.3. Hypotheses Testing**

### **4.3.1 GENERAL THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION AND SOCIAL DISTANCE**

H1 proposed that people would perceive the media portrayals about African Americans to be more influential on others than on themselves. To construct a measure for the perceived overall effects on others, the participants' perceptions of media effects on others of the same race and others of different races were combined. A paired t-test for each group was conducted to compare the participants' perceptions of media effects on others to that on themselves. In each group, the perceived media effects of portrayals about African Americans on others were significantly greater than the perceived media effects on themselves. As expected, this result corroborated the general third-person perception of stereotypical media content (see Table 1), thus H1 was supported.

Table 1. Mean Scores (SD) of Perceived Media Effects On Self and Others

Group	Self	Others	<i>t</i> -value
Strong (N = 67)	3.78 (1.58)	5.02 (0.99)	-5.78***
Weak (N = 66)	3.20 (1.68)	4.45 (1.57)	-5.96***
Control (N = 66)	3.50 (1.81)	4.47 (0.97)	-4.49***
Total (N =199)	3.49 (1.70)	4.69 (1.23)	-9.38***

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

H2 suggested that people’s perceptual gap between self and others would be larger when the comparison group was the ethnic out-group than when the ethnic in-group. To test this hypothesis, the perceived media effects on self were subtracted from the perceived effects on others of the same race to form the in-group third-person differential and from the perceived effects on others of different races to construct the out-group third-person differential.

Table 2. In-group and Out-group Third-Person Differentials

Group	In-group TP differential	Out-group TP differential	<i>t</i> -value
Strong (N = 67)	1.27 (1.81)	1.22 (1.90)	.33 ( $p = ns$ )
Weak (N = 66)	1.28 (1.71)	1.23 (1.84)	.36 ( $p = ns$ )
Control (N = 66)	.89 (1.91)	1.05 (1.78)	-1.07 ( $p = ns$ )
Total (N =199)	1.15 (1.81)	1.17 (1.83)	-.26 ( $p = ns$ )

A series of paired *t*-tests, as shown in Table 2, revealed that the in-group perceptual gap and the out-group perceptual gap were not statistically significant for all groups. In

other words, the perceptual gap when the comparison group was others of different races and when others of the same race was comparable. Thus, H1b was not supported.

#### **4.3.2. PRIMING OF MEDIA EFFECTS AND THE THIRD-PERSON PERCEPTION**

H3a suggested that people in the strong media effects condition would have stronger third-person perception than people in the weak media effects condition. Two sets of ANOVAs were conducted to compare the third-person perceptions – both in-group and out-group third-person perceptions- across the three groups, including the control group. All groups showed comparable in-group and out-group third-person perceptions. The in-group third-person perception ( $M = 1.27$ ,  $SD = 1.81$  for strong condition,  $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = 1.71$  for weak condition,  $M = .89$ ,  $SD = 1.91$  for control condition;  $F(2, 196) = .96$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and the out-group third-person perception ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 1.90$  for strong condition,  $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 1.84$  for weak condition,  $M = 1.05$ ,  $SD = 1.78$  for control condition;  $F(2, 196) = .21$ ,  $p > .05$ ) were not statistically different across all groups, indicating the self-other perceptual gaps were not statistically greater for the strong media effects condition. The third-person perceptions were similar both in strong and weak conditions, thus H2a was rejected.

H3b posited that people in the strong media effects condition would exhibit overall greater perceived media effects than people in the weak media effects condition. To test H3b, a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted with three dependent variables- the perceived media effects on self, on others of the same race, and on others of different races. Preexisting belief in media power was entered as a covariate. Logically, using preexisting belief about media effects as a covariate in the

analysis was inevitable to control for its possible influence on the perception of media effects on self and others. Also, this variable showed significant correlations with two of the dependent variables (perceived media effects on others of the same race and on others of a different race), thus it was controlled as a covariate.

Prior to conducting MANCOVA, the data were examined whether the MANCOVA assumptions seemed tenable. First, tests of the homogeneity of regression assumption indicated that there was no interaction between treatment and preexisting belief about media effects (Wilks'  $\lambda = .95$ ,  $F(3, 382) = 1.64$ ,  $p > .05$ ) for any outcome. Second, the equal variance-covariance matrices assumption was tested and it seemed to be violated as the  $p$ -value associated with Box's  $M$  test was smaller than .05. Further, Levene's tests revealed that the equal variance assumption was violated for the perceived media effects on others of the same race ( $F(2, 196) = 4.96$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and for the perceived media effects on others of different races ( $F(2, 196) = 6.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while it was not violated for the perceived media effects on self ( $F(2, 196) = 1.58$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Though there is evidence of a violation to this assumption, MANCOVA is known to be robust to an existing violation provided the sample size is comparable across groups (Pituch & Stevens, 2016). Thus given the equal group size in this experiment, the use of MANCOVA can be appropriate. Third, there was no violation of the independence assumption because the treatments were individually administered and participants responded to the measures on an individual basis.

Table 3 displays the group means, which show that participants in the strong media effects condition had greater perception of media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races than those in the other groups. The use of covariance analysis provides proper adjustments for the preexisting beliefs in media effects, with these adjusted means shown in Table 3. MANCOVA results indicated that the adjusted group means differed on the set of outcomes, Wilks'  $\lambda = .936$ ,  $F(6, 386) = 2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ . Univariate ANCOVAs indicated that group adjusted mean differences were present for the perceived media effects on in-group others,  $F = 4.57$ ,  $p = .011$ , and the perceived media effects on out-group others,  $F = 3.42$ ,  $p = .035$ .

Table 3. Observed (SD) and Adjusted Means for the Analysis Variables (\*: adjusted means)

Group	Media power belief	Perceived media effects on					
		self	self*	Same race others	Same race others*	Different race others	Different race others*
Strong (N = 67)	17.37 (3.53)	3.78 (1.58)	3.784	5.04 (1.13)	5.031	5.00 (1.14)	4.982
Weak (N = 66)	16.50 (3.38)	3.20 (1.68)	3.164	4.47 (1.68)	4.528	4.42 (1.61)	4.497
Control (N = 66)	17.73 (2.43)	3.50 (1.81)	3.525	4.39 (1.23)	4.350	4.55 (1.03)	4.491

Table 4 presents information on the pairwise contrasts. Comparisons of adjusted means were conducted using the Bonferroni correction. The Bonferroni correction, which

is an adjustment made to  $p$ -values, was used to provide type 1 error control for the number of pairwise comparisons. For the perceived media effects on others of same race, the significant difference in adjusted means was observed between strong media effects and control condition. People in the strong media effects condition had greater perceived media effects on in-group others than people in control condition. For the perceived media effects on others of a different race, although the univariate ANCOVA showed the group difference ( $F = 3.42, p = .035$ ), the statistical significance disappeared after using the Bonferroni procedure as the  $p$ -value associated with mean differences became less than .10. Nonetheless, the mean difference among groups for the perceived media effects on others of different races was in a predicted direction, people in strong media effects group showing greater estimates than those in other groups. In sum, as group membership did influence two of the three perceptions of media effects, H3b was partially supported.

Table 4. Pairwise Comparisons for the Adjusted Means

Outcome	Comparison	Mean difference (SE)
Perceived media effects on self	Strong vs Control	.26 (.29)
	Weak vs Control	-.36 (.30)
	Strong vs Weak	.62 (.29)
Perceived media effects on others of the same race	Strong vs Control	.68* (.23)
	Weak vs Control	.18 (.24)
	Strong vs Weak	.50 (.24)
Perceived media effects on others of different races	Strong vs Control	.49# (.22)
	Weak vs Control	.01 (.22)
	Strong vs Weak	.49# (.22)

#  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$

### **4.3.3. THE ROLE OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION STRENGTH AND MEDIA POWER BELIEF**

H4 posited that the priming influence on perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races would be moderated by ethnic identification strength. To be specific, H4 proposed the stronger one's ethnic identification is, the greater the priming influence on perceived media effects. To test this interaction effect, three separate linear regressions were conducted.

For all regression tests, the control variables (gender, newspaper consumption, and media power belief) were entered in the first block, dummy variables referencing each condition and ethnic identification strength were entered in the second block, and the interaction terms with each condition and ethnic identification strength were entered in the third block. The control variables were added because they showed significant correlations with the dependent variables in the preliminary analysis.

For all the dependent variables, the interaction between group membership and one's strength of ethnic identification did not have significant influence, thus rejecting H4 (see Table 5). However, for the perceived media effects on self, newspaper consumption was a significant predictor, but in a negative direction, indicating that those who read newspaper less often tended to perceive themselves to be more influenced by media. For the perceived media effects on others of the same race, one's belief about media power was a significant predictor, indicating that as people believe media are powerful, they are likely to show greater perception of media effect on in-group others. Strong media effects

condition was also associated with the perception of media effects on in-group others. In other words, people read an article about strong media effects perceived greater media influence on in-group others than people who did not read any article.

For the perceived media effects on out-group others, both newspaper consumption and belief about media power were significant predictors. As people read newspaper more often, and they believed media's strong effects, they tended to show greater perception of media effects on others of a different race. Also strong media effects condition was significant, showing people who read an article about strong media effects showed greater perceived media effects on out-group others.

Table 5. Standardized Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Perceived Media Effects

	Perceived media effects on		
	Self	Others of same race	Others of different race
Gender (1 = female)	-.06	.11	.07
Newspaper consumption	.18*	-.01	-.16*
Media power belief	-.05	.17*	.21**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.04*	.08***
Strong condition	.09	.22**	.16*
Weak condition	-.10	.06	.00
Ethnic identification strength	-.04	.06	.19
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.07**	.12***
Strong * Ethnic strength	-.06	-.03	-.02
Weak * Ethnic Strength	.03	.04	.01
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.06*	.12***

#  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

H5 stated that the priming influence on perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races would be moderated by preexisting beliefs about media effects. To test whether the association between, three linear regressions predicting the perceived media effects on self, others of same race, and others of different race, respectively, were conducted. Similar to the previous regression model, gender, newspaper consumption, and ethnic identification strength were entered in the first block as control variables, dummy variables referencing each condition and media power belief were entered in the second block, and the interaction terms with each condition and media power belief were entered in the third block. The control variables were chosen based on the results of correlations among variables.

Table 6 shows the results of regression models predicting the perceived media effects. The results indicate that the interaction between group membership and preexisting beliefs in media power is significant for the perceived media effects on others of the same race. Especially, the interaction between weak media effects and the media power belief had an influence on the perception of the in-group others. This suggests that the influence of reading a weak media effects article on perception of media effects on the in-group others depended on the level of one's preexisting assumptions about media power. Also, for the perceived media effects on others of different races, the interaction showed a similar trend, though still not significant. Figure 1 below, which plots the simple slopes for each group, reveals a significant positive association for weak media effects condition and the

preexisting media power belief. In other words, for those who read an article about weak media effects, to what extent they believed about media power was significant for influencing their perception of media effects on in-group others. Among those who read an article about media's weak effect, the greater they believed media power, the greater perceived media effects on others of same race.

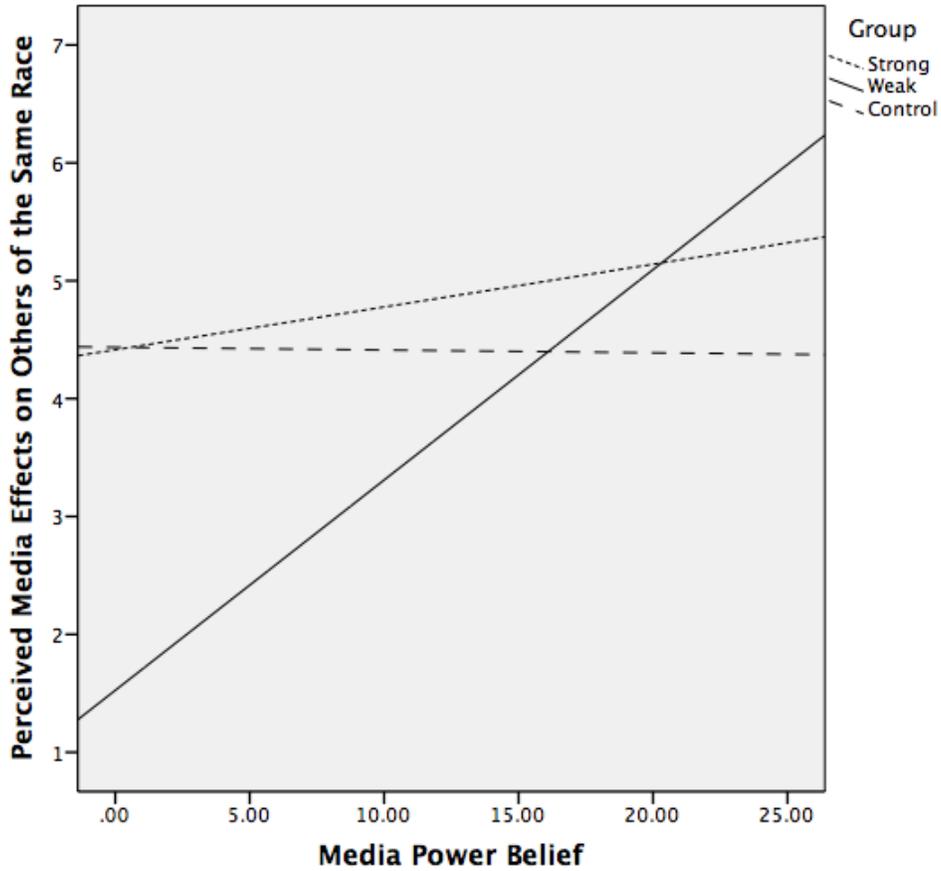
Table 6. Standardized Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Perceived Media Effects

	Perceived media effects on		
	Self	Others of the same race	Others of different races
Gender (1 = female)	-.04	.14*	.09
Newspaper consumption	.17*	-.01	-.18*
Ethnic identification strength	-.06	.06	.19**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.02	.07**
Strong condition	.09	.20*	.15#
Weak condition	-.09	.07	.02
Media power belief	-.10	-.04	.11
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.07**	.12***
Strong * Media power belief	-.06	.06	-.04
Weak * Media power belief	.13	.27*	.20#
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.04*	.09**	.15***

#  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

For other variables predicting the perception of media effects, newspaper consumption was the only significant variable predicting the perceived media effects on

Figure 1. Interaction Between Group Membership and Media Power Belief on Perceived Media Effects on Others of the Same Race



self. The more people read newspapers, the more they perceived themselves to be more influenced by media. For the perceived media effects on in-group others, gender was a significant predictor, suggesting that women were more likely to show greater perception of media effects on others of the same race. Strong media effects condition was associated with the perception of media effects on in-group others, showing that those who read an article about strong media effects tended to perceive in-group others to be more influenced by media than those in the control group. For the perceived media effects on others of

different races, newspaper consumption showed a negative association, which is contrary to the perceived media effects on self. This suggests that those who read newspaper less often showed greater perception of media effects on out-group others. The strength of one's ethnic identification was positively associated, as the stronger one's ethnic identification is, the stronger people perceived out-group others to be more influenced by media. Overall, the interaction effect was found when predicting perceived media effects on others of the same race, thus H4 is partially supported.

#### **4.3.4. THE BEHAVIORAL COMPONENT OF THE THIRD-PERSON EFFECT**

H6a proposed that the willingness to support school's media literacy education would be positively associated with the perceptual differential between self and others. Two sets of linear regressions were conducted to test H6a. The control variables including gender, on-line news consumption, preexisting beliefs in media effects, and ethnic identification strength were entered in the first block, dummy variables referencing each condition were entered in the second block, and in-group third-person differential and out-group third-person differential were entered separately in the third block. The control variables were added because they were shown to have significant correlations with dependent variables.

The results of linear regressions in Table 7 show that the in-group and out-group third-person perceptions did not predict the support for media literacy education, rejecting H6a. Instead, the willingness to support media literacy education was also predicted by gender, and on-line news consumption, signaling that women and those who use on-line news more often were likely to support the education. Also, the stronger media power

belief one held, the greater support they showed. Weak media effects condition predicted the support, indicating that those who read an article about media's weak effects were more likely to support for media literacy education than those who did not read any article.

Table 7. Standardized Linear Regression Predicting Willingness to Support Media Literacy Education

	Support for media literacy education	
Gender (1 = female)	.23**	.23**
On-line news consumption	.15*	.15*
Media power belief	.16*	.15*
Ethnic identification Strength	.11	.11
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.12***	.12***
Strong condition	.10	.10
Weak condition	.21**	.22**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15***	.15***
In-group TPP	.09	-----
Out-group TPP	-----	.09
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15***	.15***

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

H6b stated that the intention to support media literacy education would be associated with separate individual perceptions about media effects, which are perceived media effects on self, others of the same race, and others of different races. Three sets of linear regressions were performed to examine H5b. Gender, on-line news consumption, prior beliefs in media power, and ethnic identification strength, which had significant correlations among variables, were entered in the first block as control variables. The

dummy variables referring to each group condition and perceived media effects on self, others of same race, and others of different race were entered in the second and third blocks as independent variables. Due to relatively high correlations (.69) among the three perceived media effect items –on self, on others of same race, and on others of different race-, these items were entered into the regression models two at a time to avoid a multicollinearity problem.

Table 8. Standardized Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Willingness to Support Media Literacy Education

	Support for media literacy education	
Gender (1 = female)	.22**	.23**
On-line news consumption	.14*	.16*
Media power belief	.15*	.13
Ethnic identification strength	.11	.09
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.12***	.12***
Strong condition	.07	.08
Weak condition	.21**	.22**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.15***	.15***
Perceived media effects on		
Self	-.03	-.03
Others of same race	.16*	-----
Others of different race	-----	.18*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.16***	.16***

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

Table 8 reveals that the perception of media effects on others of the same race and others of different races were positive predictors of supporting media literacy education. This indicates that the greater people perceived the media effects on others, rather than on self, the greater support they showed for education. Females and greater on-line news consumption also predicted the willingness to support media literacy education. Those who read an article about media's weak effects also showed greater support for media literacy education than those who did not read any article. In sum, perception of media effects on others was associated with behavioral intention, thus H6b was corroborated.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Evaluations of Findings**

This study investigated the priming influence on the third-person effect using a post-test only control group online experimental design. Specifically, this study examined how exposure to information about different levels of media effects (either strong or weak) influences one's third-person perception of media's portrayals about African Americans, and how this perception of media effects would lead to one's behavioral intention, which is willingness to support media literacy education. The present study further explored how the priming influence on the third-person perception depended on people's preexisting factors – such as ethnic identification strength and belief about media power.

The general third-person perception about media's portrayals about African Americans was corroborated, as expected. As findings showed, people indeed perceived African Americans in media were depicted in a negative way, which led them to hold different perceptual gap between self and others. Of course, there were a few who perceived the media portrayals about African Americans to be positive, but overall, they did not change the study's findings. Rather, it is more important that whether negative or positive, such media portrayals about the racial minority did induce the perceptual gap between self and others, perceiving others to be more influenced than they themselves.

However, contrary to previous evidence, this study did not provide support for the role of social distance in predicting the third-person perception. The in-group and out-group approach to the social distance (Meirick, 2005), supported by social identity and

self-categorization theory, was not significantly corroborated in this study, showing comparable in-group and out-group perceptual differentials. However, for the control group whose goal was to measure the general third-person perception, the out-group perceptual gap was slightly larger than the in-group perceptual gap, signaling an expected direction. For both strong and weak media effects group, despite lack of statistical significance, the in-group third-person perception was slightly larger or at least comparable to the out-group third-person perception. This at least suggests a direction that reading an article may have influenced the relationship between the social distance and the third-person perception, though it was not statistically influential in the current study. Further study could re-examine this interplay among social distance, priming, and the third-person perception.

The third-person perception was expected to be larger for those who read the article about strong media effects, yet this study showed that the self-other perceptual gaps were comparable across all conditions. However, the more important finding is that the article priming did influence the perception of media effects on both in-group others and out-group others. Though the self-other disparities did not differ across conditions, the overall perceptions of media effects were influenced by reading an article, keeping the self-other disparities constant across the groups. To be specific, the perceived media effects on the in-group others and the out-group others were greatest for those who read an article about strong media effects. This is in line with Berkowitz (1984)'s argument that learning about media's harmful effects would lead to reactions to others. In this current study, when

reading about media's strong influence on shaping racial perceptions, people's perceptions of media effects on others were heightened. As the third-person perception's motivational account explains, people tend to downplay their vulnerability to media while overestimating others' susceptibility to media, thus defending their self-images (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). It is likely that exposure to information about strong media effects strengthened such motivation to enhance self-ego, showing greater perceptions of media effects on others.

Another important finding reveals that the article priming influence on the perceived media effects on the in-group others depended on one's preexisting beliefs about media effects. This tendency was especially evident for those who read the article about media's less powerful role; as people held stronger beliefs about media power, the perceived media effects on the in-group others increased among those who read the weak media effects article. To be specific, for those who were previously holding beliefs about weak media effects, exposure to information that matched their preexisting beliefs significantly lowered the perceived media effects on the in-group others. It is likely that for weak media effect believers, the article strengthened their beliefs, undermining the media effects on their in-groups.

On the other hand, those who had stronger beliefs about media power showed greater perceived media effects on the in-group others than weak media effects believers, when exposed to the article about media's less powerful influence. This same article might have been new information for strong media effects believers as it contradicted their belief.

Thus one possibility is that they overestimated the media effects on others who they assumed were not exposed to such informational message. It is likely that they believe their in-group others to share similar beliefs about media effects, as social identity theory's in-group bias suggests (Tajfel, 1974; Turner et al., 1987). Learning about new information that mismatched their preexisting belief about media effect might have led reactions to others, especially their in-groups who they thought were sharing similar beliefs, thus acknowledging these in-group others to be more vulnerability to media's portrayals because of their lack of awareness about this new information, unlike themselves. As discussed above, reading about strong media effects resulted in similar consequences, increased perception of media effects on in-group others. Thus, similarly, for those who held beliefs about media's powerful effects, exposure to contradictory information might have increased their motivation to enhancing their self-images, thus inflating the vulnerability to media's effects on in-group others, as the motivational account suggests.

Lastly, this study's findings about willingness to support media literacy education reveal that such behavioral intention did not actually depend on the self-other gap but instead on perceived media effects on others. This indicates that intentions for such rectifying behavior comes from concerns about others, who people think are more vulnerable than themselves. This is logical when considering the paternalistic characteristics of the third-person effect, which is also linked to the self-enhancement mechanism. Paternalism stems from individual assumptions about how others will respond to media content, which lead them to want to protect others from harmful media because

they are not as capable of protecting themselves (Boyle et al., 2013; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). Therefore, it is reasonable to predict such rectifying or corrective behavior from estimations on *others*, rather than from estimations on *self*. In addition, as this study's variable for behavioral intention implies media literacy education at schools, targeting children or young adults, it is likely that the study's participants, whose average age is mid-30s, perceived others – especially younger generations – to be more vulnerable to media. Women have also been shown to be more supportive of media literacy education, which is consistent with previous literature that women were more accepting of censorship (McLeod et al., 2001).

Interestingly, reading the article about media's weak effects turned out to be predicting more support for media literacy education. On the contrary, reading the article about strong media effects influenced greater perceived media effects on others, as previously discussed, but it did not further predict behavioral intention. Recalling the context of the weak media effects article, it argued that media's effects are not as influential as one might assume because people are more conscious of and reasonable in processing media content. It is plausible that the article's emphasis on people's ability to limit media's influence heightened the importance of becoming competent, critical, and literate when consuming media, leading to show greater support for media literacy education.

## **5.2. Implications and Suggestions**

This study has several important theoretical implications. First of all, this study provided a new direction of the third-person effect research by exploring the priming influence on the third-person effect. Specifically, the study investigated how exposure to an article about different levels of media effects would influence the perceptions of media effects on self and others. The media's influence on racial perceptions has been consistently examined in two separate literatures on priming and the third-person effect, but few studies attempted to seek the existence of a relationship between the two important mass communication theories. In this sense, beyond replicating the simple self-other disparities which the most previous third-person effect studies focused on (Sun et al., 2008), this current research makes a novel contribution to the literature by experimentally demonstrating the direct, immediate causal effect on the perceived media effects on self and others. Furthermore, examining the role of an important moderator, the media power belief, deepens the understanding of the priming influence on the perception of media effects. By investigating both main and interaction effects, this study found out not only the direct priming influence on the third-person perceptions but also how such influence occurred, which helped to explain various psychological dimensions of person perceptions.

Also, this study explored the support for the media literacy education as a behavioral outcome. The behavioral component of the third-person effect hypothesis has less established than the perceptual component (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008), thus it is meaningful that this study explored the domains other than censorship and found

significant linkage between perceptions about *others* and the intention to support media literacy education. More importantly, this study proves that the theoretical linkage between priming and the third-person effect is not just limited to the perceptual component of the third-person effect but also the behavioral aspect as well. The study examined one's willingness to support media literacy education was predicted by the priming stimulus, especially the article about weak media effects, which suggests a more comprehensive relationship between the two theories.

On top of the novel theoretical contributions, this study provides insights for several important practical applications. The successful manipulations of media effects that influenced both perceptions about self and others and behavioral intentions might suggest a persuasive tool. As discussed, the study showed interesting results that one's perceptions about others were influenced by strong media effects article whereas the willingness to support media literacy education was predicted by weak media effects article. This suggests that persuaders such as advertisers or policy makers employ a delicate usage of persuasive tactic to influence people's perceptions and behaviors differently. Though this study focused on the contexts of racial perceptions and media literacy education, future studies can replicate the findings in different contexts so that such individual-level changes can be expanded to broader settings such as policy or social change.

The study has another applied implication for media literacy. Not only did the findings show important predictors for supporting media literacy education but also the study's design itself reveals the importance of media literacy because simple exposure to

an article was shown to have an immediate influence. Especially learning about media's strong impact influenced people to perceive possible media effects. The heightened awareness of media effects is a crucial component of media literacy (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015), therefore this study suggests a short article itself about media's strong influence on racial perceptions can serve as a successful media literacy intervention. Though this study did not examine the consequences of reading the article, such as decreased racial perceptions, the findings imply simply learning about the media effects can easily shape media-related perceptions. Reading the article about weak media effects did not influence the perceptions about media effects, but instead predicted behavioral intention, which also provides another evidence for the direct influence of simple media exposure. For media practitioners or educators, this study reconfirms the importance of producing media content with caution and having sufficient media literacy education.

This study has a few suggestions for future research. One limitation stems from conducting a posttest-only control group experiment. When measuring such moderators as ethnic identification strength and preexisting beliefs about media effects, this study chose to explicitly ask participants to provide their thoughts that they were having before participating in the study. This approach was inevitable in order for them not to recognize the study's intention before exposure to the stimuli. The wordings of questions were successful as the findings showed that these variables were not manipulated or influenced by priming stimulus, all groups showing comparable estimates. Using a pretest-posttest control group experimental design would be an alternative to successfully carry out the

study. In addition, the behavioral intention was measured using only one item. Though explicitly asking the willingness to support a behavior using one item was documented in some of the previous studies and also well supported in this study, using several items will certainly increase the reliability of the measure.

Overall, the present study sought to examine the linkage between priming and the third-person effect in the context of media's portrayals about African Americans. The study goes beyond past findings, documenting that the priming of different levels of media effects influenced perceptions of media effects and exploring a new domain of behavioral outcome. Given that the mere exposure to different media messages had a significant effect on perceptions or behaviors, this study further provides practical insights for persuasive tactics and media literacy. Using the priming and the third-person effect, future research can substantiate the understanding of mechanisms influencing perceptions or behaviors.

## Appendix A: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic variable	Total (n = 199)	Strong condition (n = 67)	Weak condition (n = 66)	Control condition (n = 66)
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	111 (55.8)	32 (47.8)	40 (60.6)	39 (59.1)
Female	88 (44.2)	35 (52.2)	26 (39.4)	27 (40.9)
<b>Age</b>	35.16	34.46	35.59	35.42
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Asian or Asian American	15 (7.5)	4 (6.0)	8 (12.1)	3 (4.5)
Black or African American	15 (7.5)	7 (10.4)	3 (4.5)	5 (7.6)
Hispanic or Latino	14 (7.0)	4 (6.0)	5 (7.6)	5 (7.6)
White, Caucasian, Anglo European American; not Hispanic	144 (72.4)	49 (73.1)	46 (69.7)	49 (74.2)
American Indian/Native American	4 (2.0)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	2 (3.0)
Others (mixed or don't know)	7 (3.5)	2 (3.0)	3 (4.5)	2 (3.0)
<b>Education level</b>				
Less than high school or high school incomplete	2 (1.0)	0	0	2 (1.0)
High school graduate	26 (13.1)	8 (11.9)	8 (12.1)	10 (15.2)
Some college, no degree	46 (23.1)	15 (22.4)	19 (28.8)	12 (18.2)
Two year associate degree from a college or university	22 (11.1)	12 (17.9)	6 (9.1)	4 (6.1)
Four year college of university degree/Bachelor's degree	72 (36.2)	21 (31.3)	24 (36.4)	27 (40.9)
Some postgraduate or professional schooling, no postgraduate degree	8 (4.0)	4 (6.0)	3 (4.5)	1 (1.5)
Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical or law degree	23 (11.6)	7 (10.4)	6 (9.1)	10 (15.2)
<b>Marital status</b>				

Married/Living as married/Co-habiting	88 (44.2)	30 (44.8)	31 (47.0)	27 (40.9)
Separated	5 (2.5)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	3 (4.5)
Divorced	11 (5.5)	3 (4.5)	4 (6.1)	4 (6.1)
Widowed	2 (1.0)	1 (1.5)	0	1 (1.5)
Never married	93 (46.7)	32 (47.8)	30 (45.5)	31 (47.0)
Newspaper use				
Never	77 (38.7)	28 (41.8)	27 (40.9)	22 (33.3)
Less than once a week	55 (27.6)	17 (25.4)	14 (21.2)	24 (36.4)
Once a week	29 (14.6)	14 (20.9)	8 (12.1)	7 (10.6)
A few times a week	24 (12.1)	4 (6.0)	10 (15.2)	10 (15.2)
Every day	14 (7.0)	4 (6.0)	7 (10.6)	3 (4.5)
Television use				
Never	16 (8.0)	6 (9.0)	5 (7.6)	5 (7.6)
Less than once a week	25 (12.6)	11 (16.4)	8 (12.1)	6 (9.1)
Once a week	22 (11.1)	8 (11.9)	9 (13.6)	5 (7.6)
A few times a week	47 (23.6)	16 (23.9)	13 (19.7)	18 (27.3)
Every day	89 (44.7)	26 (38.8)	31 (47.0)	32 (48.5)
Radio use				
Never	41 (20.6)	11 (16.4)	16 (24.2)	14 (21.2)
Less than once a week	60 (30.2)	22 (32.8)	17 (25.8)	21 (31.8)
Once a week	22 (11.1)	10 (14.9)	7 (10.6)	5 (7.6)
A few times a week	45 (22.6)	14 (20.9)	13 (19.7)	18 (27.3)
Every day	31 (15.6)	10 (14.9)	13 (19.7)	8 (12.1)
Magazine use				
Never	63 (31.7)	20 (29.9)	26 (39.4)	17 (25.8)
Less than once a week	84 (42.2)	31 (46.3)	21 (31.8)	32 (48.5)
Once a week	29 (14.6)	8 (11.9)	11 (16.7)	10 (15.2)
A few times a week	20 (10.1)	8 (11.9)	6 (9.1)	6 (9.1)
Every day	3 (1.5)	0	2 (3.0)	1 (1.5)

On-line news use				
Never	3 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)
Less than once a week	11 (5.5)	5 (7.5)	2 (3.0)	4 (6.1)
Once a week	13 (6.5)	7 (10.4)	3 (4.5)	3 (4.5)
A few times a week	46 (23.1)	22 (32.8)	13 (19.7)	11 (16.7)
Every day	126 (63.3)	32 (47.8)	47 (71.2)	47 (71.2)

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