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The Third-Person Effects of Political Attack Ads in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election

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This study examines the indirect effects of extensive negative political attack ads in the 2004 presidential election from a third-person effects perspective. Results of a survey using a probability sample of 496 college students indicate that these students believe attack ads harm others more than themselves. Moreover, the respondents tended to perceive attack ads in traditional media to have a greater harmful effect on self and others than attack ads on the Internet. Contingent factors that account for the magnitude of third-person effects include social distance and knowledge. Further, exposure to attack ads was found to be the strongest predictor of perceived harms of such ads on self and others, but only perceived harm on others is a significant predictor of support for restrictions on attack ads. The study contributes to research on the third-person effect by testing perceived harms of attack ads on self and others separately on likelihood to support restrictions.

Political attack ads (hereafter attack ads) refer to negative advertisements in political campaigns “that concentrated on what is wrong with the opponent, either personally or in terms of issue or policy stances” (Kaid, 2004, p. 157). In terms of advertising strategy, attack ads are characteristically “opponent-focused, rather than candidate-focused” (Kaid, 2004, p. 163). Although negative political advertising has been used for decades in campaigns at various levels, including presidential

elections (Jamieson, 1984), as a “main means of political communication in the United States” (Ansolahehere & Iyengar, 1995, p. 3), the use of attack ads in the 2004 U.S. presidential election was extensive and frequent. First, political ads spending by the two leading candidates, George W. Bush and John Kerry, and their supporting groups reached a record of \$601 million (U.S. Political Ad Spending, 2004). A number of those ads stirred up controversies, including the *Vietnam Swift Boat Veterans for Truth* and *Bush as Hitler*. Second, the Internet emerged as a viable supplementary channel to place attack ads. The Kerry campaign and its allied groups spent \$2.6 million on online advertising; the spending of the Bush campaign reached \$419,000 (Cornfield, 2004).

Prior research shows that the effect of attack ads hinges on voters’ overall attitude toward negative political advertising (Christ, Thorson, & Caywood, 1994). For example, 43% of surveyed voters in the 1996 presidential campaign believed negative ads were unethical (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). In terms of effects of negative political advertising on voters, previous research suggests that people had a tendency to believe that they were immune from the harm due to the influence of a variety of factors such as social distance and media use among others (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). However, past studies failed to consider the role of media context (viewing attack ads on TV is characteristically accidental) in assessing the impact of media use on perceived harms on self and others. The presumed effects of negative advertising on the Internet versus traditional media were also underresearched. Therefore, this study focuses on attack ads in the 2004 presidential campaign to examine the indirect effects of these ads on voters from a third-person effects perspective, which proposes that people tend to overestimate mass media as having a greater impact on others and underestimate the impact on self (Davison, 1983). Further, the perceptual discrepancy between self and others predicts support for restrictions on certain media content (Gunther, 1995; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998).

Specifically, this study investigates how voters viewed the controversial attack ads as doing harm on self relative to others. The context in which exposure to attack ads occurs is also examined to explore how media use predicts perceived harm on self relative to others. Moreover, the study compares the perceived harms of attack ads in traditional media vis-à-vis the Internet on self and others. Findings shed light on the indirect effects of attack ads on voters in a multichannel media environment, contributing to the robust third-person effects research. Finally, a number of past studies (Gunther, 1998; Lo & Wei, 2002; Salwen, 1998) questioned the use of self–other perpetual differential to establish the linkage between perceived media effects and behavioral outcomes. Gunther and Storey (2003) proposed a general model of presumed influence in which presumed influence on others is considered a more productive predictor than the self–other perceptual discrepancy. This study will test perceived harms of attack ads on self and others separately on likelihood to support restrictions. Doing so will further the research of this new approach.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE, RESEARCH QUESTION, AND HYPOTHESES

The Perceptual Component of Third-Person Effects

The third-person effect hypothesis states “that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others” (Davison, 1983, p. 3). The third-person effect refers to the perceived or indirect effects of media on others relative to self, and the perception of self as more vulnerable than are others to media influence is known as the first-person effect (Atwood, 1994; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfeld, 1991). Further, the hypothesis holds that the third-person perception predicts support for censorship (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al., 1996) and other attitudinal and behavioral effects such as intentions to relocate if people believed that others were affected by media coverage of their town than they were (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). Accordingly, the third-person effect hypothesis has two components: the perceptual and the behavioral.

Since Davison’s seminal piece in 1983 proposing the third-person effect, numerous studies have documented sufficient empirical evidence to support the hypothesis (see David, Liu, & Myser, 2004; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Perloff, 1993, 1999). Further, previous research demonstrated stronger third-person perceptual effects by negative, undesirable, or persuasive media content such as pornography, violence, controversial political news reports, coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial, gambling advertising, cigarette ads, and negative ads in political campaigns (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Cohen & Davis, 1991; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2002; Huh, Delorme, & Reid, 2004; Lo & Wei, 2002; McLeod et al., 1997; Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden, 2005; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000). The generalization is that the more negative or biased the media content, the stronger the third-person perceptual effects between self and others (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990, Salwen, 1998).

In the context of frequent attack ads in the 2004 presidential election, the press extensively covered the potential for negative outcomes on voters because attack ads are high on persuasive intent but low in source credibility. Thus, we hypothesize that:

- H1: Respondents will perceive attack ads in the 2004 presidential election to have a greater harmful effect on others than on themselves.

Previous third-person effects research mainly concerned ads appearing in traditional media, primarily newspapers and television. Source attributes, stimuli, and message types were identified as contingent factors determining the existence or magnitude of third-person perceptions (Perloff, 1993). Although Mason’s (1995)

study showed that the same message led to a greater third-person effect when it was presented as a newspaper article than when it was presented orally, past studies failed to conceptualize the influence of media channels. To our knowledge, no study has conceptually differentiated the perceived effects of media content in new interactive media, like the Internet, from that of traditional media. We contend that messages posted on the Internet may impact audiences differently, compared to messages in newspapers and on television. Our rationale is based on extensive research on audience media use patterns, which suggest that use of traditional media is characteristically passive, habitual, and low in involvement (Rubin, 1981). On the other hand, audience use of new media tends to be active, goal-directed, and highly involving (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Recent studies have suggested that the Internet is instrumental for an active audience that uses the Internet to achieve information goals (Metzger & Flanagin, 2002) thanks to selectivity, an interactive attribute that allows surfers to tailor messages to their needs (Kuehn, 1994). That is, Internet users have great control over browsing Web sites. Because of this control in exposure to messages online, we argue that voters may evaluate the effects of attack ads on the Internet to be less than those in traditional media.

To understand the channel factor in the process of third-person effects, we compare the third-person perceptions about attack ads in the traditional media with that of those on the Internet during the 2004 presidential election. Given the lack of empirical evidence, we raise a research question:

RQ1: Will respondents perceive attack ads in traditional media to have a greater harmful effect on themselves and others than will attack ads on the Internet?

Social Distance and the Third-Person Perceptual Gap

Previous third-person effect research has identified a set of contingent conditions of third-person perception as explanations of why the third-person effects occur. One of the conditions is social distance, or social distance corollary, which refers to the similarity or differences between the self and others (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Gibbon & Durkin, 1995). The self–other distance involves such dimensions as geographic, psychological, social–economic or political (David, Morrison, Johnson, & Ross, 2002; Duck & Mullin, 1995; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; White, 1997). Past research has suggested that people use social distance corollary as a heuristic mechanism to judge the effects of media messages on others relative to self. In other words, when asked to estimate media effects, people tend to render their judgments on the self and others by social comparisons.

Empirical findings show that the magnitude of the third-person effect increases with social distance (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Gunther, 1991; Henriksen & Flora,

1999; McLeod et al., 1997). The generalization is that the more distant the social corollary, the larger the perceptual gap between self and others in estimating media effects. For example, each increase of social distance resulted in a greater gap in perceived effects of media messages (Cohen et al., 1988; White, 1997). A recent study (Paek et al., 2005) found that the self–other perceptual gap in assessing political attack ads widened as geographic distance became larger. Meirick (2004) examined the relationships between reference groups and third-person effects of political advertising in the 2000 presidential primaries. He found that people perceived the out-group and the general public to have been more influenced by political ads than themselves. A most recent study on the indirect influence of cigarette ads (Meirick, 2005) reported similar findings: Groups that were more socially distant from the self (e.g., the public) were feared to be more affected than close groups (e.g., friends).

Thus, a connection between perceived influence of media messages and reference groups along dimensions of varying social distance is established. In the context of attack ads in the 2004 presidential election, we anticipated that respondents (college students) would perceive the extensive negative political ads to have a greater harm on general voters (the different others) than on other students (the similar others). The second hypothesis is formulated:

- H2: Student respondents will perceive attack ads to have greater harmful effects on general voters than on other students.

Knowledge and the Third-Person Perceptual Discrepancy

Assessing media effects on self and others, especially on self, involves a complicated cognitive process (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). As Paek et al. (2005) suggested, people operate under the condition of insufficient information when asked to estimate impact of media messages. As a contingent factor, knowledge or self-perceived expertise may function as a heuristic guide in coping with the uncertainty. Self-ascribed expertise would make one believe he or she is superior to others, thus overestimating media effects on others, relative to self. Others (e.g., White & Dillon, 2000) have suggested that estimates of media effect also involve a motivational bias—self-enhancement—even among children (David & Johnson, 1998; Gunther, 1991; Henriksen & Flora, 1999).

The third-person effects literature establishes a linkage between knowledge of a particular topic and the third-person perceptual differential. In general, as knowledge increases, the perceived harm of negative media content increases (Atwood, 1994; Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Lasorsa, 1989; White & Dillon, 2000). For example, in a study testing the third-person perceptual effect and school violence among middle and high school students, Chapin (2002) found that the self–other perceptual discrepancy was influenced by knowledge of real-world youth violence. In the

context of attack ads in the 2004 presidential election, we propose that knowledge about attack ads, such as its forms and function, will be positively related to the third-person perceptual gap. We hypothesize that:

- H3: Knowledge of attack ads will be a positive predictor of perceived harmful effects of such ads on others.

Mass Media Use and the Third-Person Perceptions

Similar to the influence of knowledge on third-person perceptions, use of mass media supposedly provides people with confidence because of knowledge gained from the media. Thus, media use, in theory, may “amplify” the third-person perceptual gap (Salwen, 1998, p. 264). However, empirical evidence is inconsistent. Some studies (Rusinski & Salmon, 1990) reported media use as a significant predictor of perceived media effects on self and others. Specifically, TV viewing was positively related to perceived effects of political messages on self, and greater newspaper exposure was positively associated with greater perceived effects on others. In more recent research, the presumed influence of media use on others was found to be greater than that on self in predicting self-enhancing reactions. Gunther and Storey (2003) reported that exposure to radio drama was positively related to presumed influence on others. Park (2005) also found that reading beauty and fashion magazines increased an individual’s desire to be thin, due to the perceived influence of the thin ideal on others.

On the other hand, other studies reported no or weak support (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Salwen & Driscoll, 1995; Salwen & Dupagne, 2003) with the direction between media use and perceptions of media impact on self and others being either negative or positive. Still, a number of studies on pornography reported that the more pornography to which people were exposed, the less negative effect they perceived on self and others (Lee & Yang, 1996; Lo & Paddon, 2001). Further, those who had higher level of exposure to pornography were less likely to support restrictions of pornography (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Paddon, 2001).

We suggest that the inconsistency may be attributed to contexts of exposure to different types of media content. For example, exposure to pornography or TV violence differs from exposure to negative political ads in a number of ways. First, exposure to pornography or violence is voluntary and prolonged; exposure to attack ads on TV is accidental and transient. Second, exposure to pornography or violence on TV is perceived as socially undesirable; exposure to attack ads aired on TV is not. Therefore, viewers of pornography or TV violence are motivated to bolster their self-esteem by perceiving less harm to self and others. As David et al. (2004) suggested, the third-person perceptual bias persisted even though subjects in their experiment were alerted about the self-serving motivation to appear better

than others. On the other hand, audiences of attack ads are unlikely to defend their self-esteem, because their sense of personal control of self-image is not threatened.

Accordingly, on top of identified contingent factors such as attributes of the source, stimuli, messages types, and media orientation that mitigate third-person effects (Perloff, 1993; Price, Huang, & Tewksbery, 1997), we suggest that different contexts of exposure to different media contents may account for the mixed results reported in past studies on the relationship between media use and perceived effects of the media messages on self and others. Regarding the presumed effects of attack ads examined in this study, because exposure to attacks ads on TV or in newspapers is accidental and transient and does not invoke a self-defensive mechanism, it is possible that people would be truthful in assessing the harms of viewing attack ads on themselves. Empirically, a study on effects of a Holocaust-denial ad (Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998) found that it was perceived impact on self, not on others, that predicted opposition to publishing the ad. Price et al. (1998) argued that knowledge about the self as a trustworthy gauge that people may consult when assessing media impact. Therefore, we further argue that the influence of the context of exposure to negative messages in determining the third-person perception needs to take into consideration. Based on the previously-detailed rationale, we hypothesize that exposure to attack ads would be a significant predictor of perceived harms on self and others.

H4a: Exposure to attack ads will be a positive predictor of perceived harmful effects of such ads on self and others.

Moreover, previous third-person effects research tended to measure media use in general terms, not the consumption of a specific type of program or content. This may be yet another reason for the mixed results in the literature. Media use in this study involves both general use and content-specific exposure. We anticipate that exposure to attack ads would be a positive predictor of perceived harms of attack ads on self and others.

H4b: Exposure to attack ads will be a better predictor of the perceived harmful effect of such ads on self and on others than will general media use.

The Behavioral Component of the Third-Person Effects

The utility of the third-person perception is that behavioral intentions or behaviors can be predicted based on the perceptual discrepancy between self and others. The behavioral outcomes included listening to radio drama (Gunther & Storey, 2003), increased desire to be slim (Park, 2005), and the likelihood of developing an eating disorder (David & Johnson, 1998). Studies on the presumed harmful influence of negative and undesirable media contents focused on predicting the likelihood of

public support for restrictions of such contents. Results of numerous studies have suggested that people who tend to overestimate the effect of controversial or negative media contents on others are more likely to support restrictions to protect the others (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2002; McLeod et al., 2001; Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2002; Youn et al., 2000). Salwen (1998) reported that perceived effects on others were positively related to support for restrictions on unfair election news coverage. Support for censorship of violent and misogynic rap lyrics was predicted by third-person perceptions (McLeod et al., 1997). Other studies (Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999; Lo & Paddon, 1998; Rojas et al., 1996) found that the perceived effect on others was a significant predictor of support for restrictions on sex and violence in the media. A more recent study by Lo and Wei (2002) reported similar findings. Women tended to perceive greater negative effects of Internet pornography on men, and were more likely to support restrictions on Internet pornography. Thus, the stronger the perceived harm of media messages on others, the more likely people would support restrictions. We hypothesize that:

- H5: Perceived harm of attack ads on others will be a more significant predictor of support for restriction on such ads than perceived harms on self.

Methodological Issue in Predicting Support for Restrictions on Media Content

Finally, previous studies examining the behavioral component of the third-person effect used the magnitude of perceptual bias, or the magnitude of the difference in perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others, as a predictor of support for media restrictions. However, results were mixed (Perloff, 1999). Magnitudes of perceptual bias were reported as significant predictors of support for restrictions on pornography (Gunther, 1995; Rojas et al., 1996), sensitive TV content (Gunther & Ang, 1996), rap music (McLeod et al., 1997), advertising (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999), and political campaign messages (Salwen, 1998), but they failed to show any predictive power over censoring pornography (Lo & Paddon, 1998), coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial (Salwen & Driscoll, 1997), and external control of political communications (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). One study (Price et al., 1998) even found that the magnitude of perceptual bias was negatively related to support for publication of a Holocaust-denial advertisement.

Lo and Wei (2002) suggested that the inconsistency was largely due to the inappropriate use of magnitude of perceptual bias as a predictor. They argued that as magnitude of perceptual bias was defined as the difference between perceived effects on self and perceived effects on others, it was inevitably related to perceived effects on self. Perceived effects on self and the magnitude of perceptual bias are collinear variables. It is statistically difficult to determine their separate effects on support for pornography restrictions (Hamilton, 1992; Neter, Wasserman, &

Kutner, 1983). Thus, the magnitude of perceptual bias was an unreliable predictor of support for restricting pornography online.

Another problem for using the magnitude of perceptual bias as a predictor of support for media restriction is that it does not distinguish between those who perceive media content to have high influence on themselves and on others and those who perceive media content to have low influence on themselves and on others. Furthermore, most of the past research has suggested that it is the perceived harmful effects on others that motivate people to support media restriction (Lo & Wei, 2002; McLeod et al., 1997; Salwen, 1998). Therefore, we propose that perceived harm of attack ads on others will be a better predictor of support for restriction on attack ads than magnitude of perceptual bias.

This study incorporates a test of the methodological effect. We intend to demonstrate that the perceived harm of attack ads on others would be more reliable than the magnitude of perceptual bias in predicting support for restrictions on attack ads in the 2004 presidential election. We propose the last hypothesis:

- H6: Perceived harmful effects of attack ads on others will be a better predictor of support for restriction on attack ads than will magnitude of perceptual bias.

METHOD

Sample

A probability sample was used in collecting data for hypothesis testing. The sample was drawn from a public university in the Southeast with 24,000 students. Specifically, using classes as the sampling unit, the sample was stratified by size of departments or programs. First, academic departments were randomly selected from a stratified list of large, medium, and small ones. After stratification, there were seven large, 37 medium, and 20 small departments. From these 64 departments, two large, five medium, and three small departments were randomly selected using a table of random numbers. Then, classes were selected from a stratified list of large (at least 200 students), medium (50–199), and small (less than 49) classes in each of the selected departments. Again, a table of random numbers was consulted. Using this multistage sampling procedure, a total of two large, six medium, and six small classes were randomly drawn. The total sample size was 754. Trained undergraduates assisted in administering the survey in visiting the selected classes across the campus during a 2-week period ending on November 1, 2004. Specifically, the survey was administered at the beginning of class (students who came in late were not approached); respondents were assured of anonymity and confi-

dentiality. Participation was voluntary, no class credit was offered. Among the 754 students in the sample, 496 completed the survey, a response rate of 65.8%.

Among the 496 respondents, 47.9% were men and 52.1% were women. Of the sample, 36.4% were freshmen, followed by juniors (17.9%), seniors (22%), sophomores (12.9%), and graduate students (.9%). The average age was 20.17 years ($SD = 2.52$) with a range from 17 to 39. Of the sample, 84.4% were White, 8.9% were African American, 5.3% were Asian American, and 1.3% were Hispanics. With regard to party affiliation, 26% reported to be strong or moderate Democrats, 16.3% Independent, and 56.1% as strong or moderate Republicans.¹

Measures of Variables

Third-person effects. The perceptual component of third-person effects was measured by three questions. On a 5-point scale where 1 = *none* and 5 = *a great deal*, respondents were asked to rate how much harmful influence attack ads on newspapers, television, and the Internet would have on their presidential voting decision.² A principal component factor analysis showed that the three self items were grouped in a single factor (Eigenvalue = 2.25, explaining 74.90% of the variance). The three self items were added and divided by three to create a composite measure of “perceived harmful effects on self” ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .83$).

Respondents were then asked to rate the harmful effects of attack ads in the previously mentioned three media on the voting decision of college students at the university. Principal component factor analysis showed that the three items were also grouped in a single factor (Eigenvalue = 2.09, explaining 69.61% of the variance). The three other student items were combined into a composite measure of “perceived harmful effects on other students” after adding and dividing by three ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .91$, $\alpha = .79$).

Similarly, respondents rated the harmful effects of attack ads in the previously-mentioned three media on the voting decision of voters in general using the same 5-point scale. The three items were subjected to a principal component factor analysis to verify conceptual dimensionality. Results show a single-factor solution (Eigenvalue = 2.04, explaining 67.98% of the variance). The three general voter items were combined into a composite measure of “perceived harmful effects on general voters” after adding and dividing by three ($M = 3.19$, $SD = .87$, $\alpha = .76$).

Support for restrictions on attack ads. Support for restrictions on attack ads in presidential elections was measured by asking respondents to indicate whether they agreed with these five statements: (a) Congress should consider legislation to restrict attack ads; (b) voters should avoid viewing attack ads; (c) media should not run attack ads; (d) voters should protest against attack ads; and (e) current laws allowing attack ads have too many loopholes. These items were subjected to a principal component factor analysis. A single-factor solution emerged

(Eigenvalue = 3.10, explaining 62.07% of the variance). The items were combined into a composite measure of "support for restrictions on attack ads" ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .87$, $\alpha = .85$).

The measurement of media use included two dimensions: use of mass media in general and exposure to attack ads.

General media use. Measures of mass media use were the number of days per week that respondents read newspapers, as well as the number of hours per day they spent viewing television and going online.

Exposure to attack ads. To measure exposure to attack ads in traditional media, respondents were requested to report how frequently they had seen attack ads in newspapers and on television. The scale ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, and 4 = *often*. A combined measure of exposure to attack ads in traditional media was developed by adding the exposure to attack ads in television and newspaper and dividing the sum by two ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .61$, $r = .21$, $p < .05$). Further, exposure to attack ads on the Internet was measured with a single item, which asked respondents to report how frequently they had seen an attack ad on the Internet, using the same 4-point scale ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .94$).

Knowledge about attack ads. This variable was measured in a question asking respondents to self report how knowledgeable they believed they were about attack ads in terms of function, appeal, and impact. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 = *not knowledgeable at all*, and 5 = *extremely knowledgeable* ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.00$).

Demographic variables included age, gender, and race. They were used as controls in the regression analyses, because previous studies indicated that these socioeconomic contingency variables were related to the third-person perception or support for restrictions on media content (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Paddon, 1998; Rojas et al., 1996).

RESULTS

H1 predicted that respondents would perceive attack ads in the 2004 presidential election to have greater harm on others than on themselves. Results of paired *t*-tests shown in Table 1 supported the baseline third-person effect hypothesis. As expected, respondents perceived other people, both college students and general voters, as more vulnerable than themselves to the influence of attack ads on their voting decision-making.

RQ1 explored whether respondents would perceive attack ads in traditional media to have a greater harmful influence on themselves and others than would the at-

TABLE 1
Mean Estimates of Perceived Harmful Effects of Attack Ads on Self and
Perceived Harmful Effects on Third-Person Comparison Groups

Samples	N	Comparison Groups			t
		Self	Other Students	General Voters	
1	463	2.68 (1.07)	2.96 (.91)		-5.95***
2	459	2.68 (1.07)		3.20 (.87)	-10.66***
3	462		2.96 (.91)	3.20 (.87)	-6.69***

Note. Figures in parentheses are standard deviations.

tack ads on the Internet. Table 2 summarizes the results of paired *t*-tests, indicating that respondents perceived attack ads in traditional media to have a greater negative effect on self than did attack ads on the Internet ($t(481) = 12.77, p < .001$, for TV vs. Internet; $t(478) = 4.09, p < .001$, for newspaper vs. Internet). Moreover, respondents perceived attack ads in traditional media to do greater harm on other students and general voters than did attack ads on the Internet ($t(469) = 6.93, p < .001$, for television vs. Internet on other students; $t(465) = 11.14, p < .001$, for television vs. Internet on general voters; $t(468) = -2.26, p < .05$, for newspaper vs. Internet on other students; $t(465) = 3.20, p < .001$, for newspaper vs. Internet on general voters). With the exception of the difference between perceived harm of attack ads in newspapers and on the Internet, all the self–other perceptual differences were statistically significant. Accordingly, the answer to the first research question is affirmative. Respondents tend to perceive attack ads in traditional media have a greater harm both on self and others than do attack ads on the Internet.

TABLE 2
Mean Estimates of Perceived Harmful Effects of Attack Ads in Traditional
Media and on the Internet for Third-Person Comparison Groups

Groups	Traditional Media		
	TV	Newspaper	Internet
Self	3.08 (1.28)	2.58 (1.23)	2.38 (1.22)
Other students	3.24 (1.11)	2.77 (1.01)	2.88 (1.16)
General voters	3.54 (1.10)	3.10 (1.01)	2.95 (1.05)

Note. Figures in parentheses are standard deviations. Except the difference between newspaper and Internet on perceive effects on USC students ($t = -2.26, p < .05$), all the differences among TV, newspaper, and Internet on the three perceived effects are significant at $p < .001$.

H2 predicted that respondents would perceive attack ads to have a greater harmful effect on general voters than on other students. The purpose was to test the influence of social distance as a cognitive mechanism in estimating effects of negative advertising. Again as Table 1 shows, results of the paired *t*-tests show that respondents perceived general voters to be more harmed by attack ads than other students. The more dissimilar the comparison others (i.e., general voters vs. other college students) were to the respondents (college students), the more harm was estimated. The results supported H2.

H3 predicted that knowledge about attack ads would be positively related to the perceived harmful effect of such ads on others. To test it, three separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed. The first block of the equation entered gender, age, and race as control variables. The second block included the variable of self-reported knowledge about attack ads, followed by the three general media use variables. The final block entered exposure to attack ads in traditional media and exposure to attack ads on the Internet. As shown in Table 3, knowledge was a significant predictor of perceived harm of attack ads on other students. As knowledge of attack ads increased, the perceived harmful effect of such ads on other students also increased. However, knowledge did not show any predictive power over perceived harm on general voters. H3 was partially supported.

H4a predicted that exposure to attack ads would be a positive predictor of perceived harm of such ads on self and others. Three hierarchical regression analyses were performed separately to test it with perceived harm to self, other students, and general voters as the dependent variables respectively. As shown in Table 3, when controlling for the influence of gender, age, and self-reported knowledge about attack ads, frequency of exposure to attack ads in traditional media was the strongest predictor of the perceived harmful effect respectively on self, other students, and general voters. These results indicate that the more frequently respondents reported seeing attack ads in traditional media, the more harmful effect of such ads they perceived on themselves, other students, and general voters. Exposure to attack ads on the Internet was significantly related to the perceived harmful effect on self only. The results of the regression analyses partially supported H4a.

These results also supported H4b, which predicted that exposure to attack ads would be a better predictor of the perceived harm of such ads on self and on others than would general media use. The hierarchical regression analyses showed that none of the three general media use variables (i.e., newspaper reading, TV viewing, and surfing the Internet) was a significant predictor; but exposure to attack ads in traditional media showed predictive power consistently over the three outcome variables of perceived harm of such ads on self, other students, and general voters (see Table 3). Thus, the content-specific measure proved to be superior to general media use in examining the linkage between media use and third-person perceptions.

TABLE 3
 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Harmful Effects on
 Self, Perceived Harmful Effects on Other Students and Perceived Harmful
 Effects on General Voters

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Perceived Harmful Effects</i>		
	<i>Self</i>	<i>Other Students</i>	<i>General Voters</i>
Block 1: Demographics			
Gender	.06	-.03	-.09+
Age	-.03	-.03	-.05
Race	.00	.02	-.03
Adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.01
Block 2: Expertise			
Knowledge about the attack ads	-.07	.12*	.04
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.01	.00
Block 3: Media Exposure			
Television use	-.03	-.01	-.06
Newspaper use	.03	.07	.03
Internet use	.09+	.09+	.04
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.01	.00
Block 4: Attack Ads Exposure			
Tradition media exposure	.16**	.15**	.11*
Internet exposure	.14**	.04	.08
Incremental adjusted R ²	.05	.02	.02
Total adjusted R ²	.05	.05	.03

Note. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. $N = 419$. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (1 = *man*, 0 = *woman*); knowledge about the attack ads ranged from 1 (*not at all knowledgeable*) to 5 (*extremely knowledgeable*); TV use and Internet use (hrs per day); newspaper use (days per week); perceived effects on self and others ranged from 1 (*no harmful effect*) to 5 (*a great deal of harmful effect*); Exposure to attack ads ranged from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*).

H5 predicted that perceived effects on others, not on self, would be a more powerful predictor of support for restriction on attack ads in presidential elections than perceived effects on self. Two separate hierarchical regression analyses were run to test it. In the first hierarchical regression analysis (see Column 1 in Table 4), the first block of the regression equation entered gender, age, and race as control variables. The second block included the variable of self-reported knowledge about attack ads, followed by the three general media use variables as the third block. The fourth block included the two measures of exposure to attack ads, and the final block entered perceived effects of attack ads on self and other students (to avoid multicollinearity, perceived effect on general voters was not entered in the first run). Results show that gender and age were significantly related to the support for restrictions on attack ads, but none of the media use variables was. Women and

older respondents tended to be supporters; perhaps protection of others is in the nature of women, and older students considered themselves wiser than younger students who needed to be protected (see Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). As expected, perceived effects on other students was the strongest predictor of support for restriction on attack ads, but perceived effect on self was not a significant predictor.

In the second hierarchical regression analysis (see Column 2 in Table 4), the order of variables entered in the equation was similar to that of the first analysis. The only change was perceived effects on general voters in the last block instead of perceived effects on other students to avoid multicollinearity. As anticipated, perceived effect on general voters was the most powerful predictor of support for restrictions on attack ads. Again, perceived effects on self were not a significant predictor. H5 was supported.

H6 predicted that perceived effects of attack ads on others would be a more reliable predictor of support for restriction on attack ads than would magnitude of perceptual bias. To test it, four separate hierarchical regression analyses, including the two used to test H5, were performed. In the third and fourth regression analyses (see third and fourth Columns in Table 4), the first four blocks were unchanged. The final block did change. Specifically, in the third regression run, the final block entered perceptual bias (other students vs. self). In the fourth regression equation, the final block included perceptual bias (general voters vs. self). As Table 4 shows, the two magnitudes of perceptual bias variables were nonsignificant predictors of support for restrictions on attack ads. H6 was supported as well.

DISCUSSION

As David et al. (2004) pointed out, third-person effects represent a persistent social judgment bias. The goal of this study was to test the robust phenomenon of third-person effects in the context of extensive and frequent attack ads in the 2004 presidential election. Regarding the perceptual gap between self and others, respondents tended to perceive other people as more likely to be harmed by attack ads in the election than themselves. Also, as expected, perceived effects on others, not on self, predicted support for restriction on attack ads. These results are consistent with numerous third-person effects studies (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Cohen & Davis, 1991; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Henriksen & Flora, 1999; Huh et al., 2004; Lo & Wei, 2002; Paek et al., 2005; Youn et al., 2000), providing fresh evidence that the third-person effect is more pronounced in negative media messages.

It is particularly noteworthy that the third-person perception in estimating the harm of attack ads was found to differ by media. Respondents tended to perceive attack ads on traditional media to have a greater harm on both self and others than attack ads on the Internet. In other words, traditional media were perceived to affect audiences more powerfully than did the Internet. We offer the following expla-

TABLE 4
 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Support for Restrictions of
 Attack Ads

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Support for Restrictions of Attack Ads</i>			
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Block 1: Demographics				
Gender	-.12*	-.11*	-.11*	-.12*
Age	.10*	.11*	.09+	.09+
Race	.05	.05	.05	.04
Adjusted R ²	.01	.01	.01	.01
Block 2: Expertise				
Knowledge about attack Ads	-.11*	-.09+	-.10+	-.09+
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 3: Media Exposure				
Television use	-.04	-.03	-.05	-.04
Newspaper use	.06	.07	.07	.08
Internet use	.01	.02	.04	.04
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 4: Media Exposure				
Traditional media exposure	.01	.02	.05	.06
Internet exposure	-.01	-.02	.02	.02
Incremental adjusted R ²	.00	.00	.00	.00
Block 5: Third-person variables				
Perceived effects on self	.04	.05		
Perceived effects on other students	.20***			
Perceived effects on general voters		.21***		
Perceptual bias (other students-self)			.06	
Perceptual bias (general voters-self)				.06
Incremental adjusted R ²	.04	.05	.00	.00
Total adjusted R ²	.06	.06	.01	.02

Note. Beta weights are from final regression equation with all blocks of variables in the model. $N = 419$. Variables coded, or recoded, as follows: gender (0 = man, 1 = woman); race (1 = White, 0 = other); knowledge about the attack ads ranged from 1 (not at all knowledgeable) to 5 (extremely knowledgeable); TV use and Internet use (hrs per day); newspaper use (days per week); perceived effects on self and others ranged from 1 (no harmful effect) to 5 (a great deal of harmful effect). Support for restriction of attack ads ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. + $p < .10$.

nations for this finding: Attack ads on traditional media (TV spots in particular) have the inherently advantage of drama (Kaid, 2002). On the other hand, respondents may know less about attack ads on the Internet, which in turn mitigates their assessment of effects. Further, users of the Internet have the unique opportunity to control exposure to attack ads, giving them a sense of being impervious to the influence of such ads. It may well be the combination of these medium-related factors that resulted in perceiving attack ads in traditional media as more harmful than

those via the Internet. The theoretical implication is that the attributes of traditional media (i.e., intrusive, excitement) vis-à-vis that of the Internet (i.e., interactive, user control) should not be ignored in the processes of third-person perceptions. The newly found media-based perceptual discrepancy suggests that the channel of media messages needs to be considered as a contingent factor in assessing the perceived effect of negative media content in addition to factors like source attributes, stimuli, and message types.

Davison (1996) suggested that the third-person effect represents a complex cognitive process, contingent upon communication types, individual characteristics, and situations. We found that the magnitude of the third-person effect tends to vary as social distance and knowledge about attack ads differs. The harm of attack ads was estimated to be greater on general voters (the different others) than other college students (the similar others). Consistent with previous research (Meirick, 2004; Paek et al., 2005), this finding validates the mediating role of social distance in rendering effects of media messages to various target others. Knowledge was found to be a predictor of perceived harms on other students. Theoretically, these results indicate that perceived harms of political attack advertising are socially judged, and expertise-based self-enhancement was evoked in coping with social judgments of the impact of attack ads on self relative to others. This pattern fits what Taylor and Brown (1994) called “positive illusions” (p. 927) about one’s traits and abilities as self-enhancement mechanisms in the context of estimating the perceived harms of attack ads.

Another major finding is that media use of a general nature was not a significant predictor of the perceived harms of attack ads on self and others. It also failed to predict support for restrictions. On the other hand, exposure to attack ads was found positively related to perceived harms on self and others. The more frequently respondents reported seeing attack ads, the more harmful effect they perceived on themselves, other students, and general voters. This finding indicates that general use of media (ranging from news to entertainment) does not cause people’s concern about media influence, but exposure to specific, negative, or controversial content like attack ads triggers audience’s concern about harm (see Huh et al., 2004). Past research has revealed that the third-person effect is reversed if respondents perceive being influenced by media messages as smart and socially desirable. The messages are characteristically prosocial and beneficial such as public service announcements (Gunther & Thorson, 1992; Henriksen & Flora, 1999). Self-enhancement or self-serving bias was offered as an explanation for the reverse third-person effects or first-person effect (Tiedge et al., 1991; White & Dillon, 2000). Results of this study show that because the viewing context of attack ads is accidental and transient, and viewers are less motivated to bolster their self-esteem, exposure to attack ads (primarily in traditional media) predicted perceived harms on both self and others. Thus, media use did not amplify the self–other perceptual differential when the context of exposure was taken into ac-

count. This conclusion may help resolve the mixed findings concerning the relationship between media use and perceived harm of negative media content.

Finally, our results provide strong evidence to support the linkage between the third-person perception and support for restrictions on attack ads. The result also demonstrates that magnitude of perceptual bias is not a productive predictor of support for restrictions. Thus, our approach of using perceived effects of attack ads on self and others as separate predictors of support for restrictions adds fresh evidence in support of the alternative methodology to link the perceptual and the behavioral component. The results generated by this new approach are consistent with Price et al.'s proposition (1997) that people tend to support restricting certain types of media content in the interests of protecting vulnerable others. The results are also consistent with past research that general media use is not a significant predictor of support for media restrictions. However, exposure to attack ads plays a mediating role in predicting the support for media restrictions. As our results demonstrate, exposure did not lead to support for restrictions on attack ads directly; it resulted in the third-person perception, which directly predicted the likelihood of support.

This particular finding has important implications. The effect of negative political advertising on voters has been debated for decades without reaching a consensus (Kaid, 2004). Part of the reason is that past studies failed to consider perceived or indirect media effects as a type of media effect. As results of this study suggest, attention to perceptions of negative political ads as doing harm is a worthy direction to resolve the issue.

This study has some limitations. The purpose of this study was not to build a comprehensive model to explain the third-person effect, but rather to test the linkages between various contingent variables and the third-person perception and support for restrictions on attack ads. Variances explained by the tested models were small. Thus, a full model is needed in future research, incorporating variables such as involvement and media orientations. Cautions need also to be raised about the measures. Knowledge about attack ads was based on a direct measure, relying on respondents' perceived knowledge about negative political ads. In addition, this study did not measure actual behavior. What we actually have measured is attitude. Further research should extend this study to measure actual behavior—the actions initiated by persons who seek to initiate legislation or public policy initiatives to restrict attack ads. In addition, the measures of perceived harm of attack ads relied on no more than three items, which may not capture the full dimensions of the effects. As Huh et al. (2004) suggested, the perceived effects of advertising messages may be multidimensional. Future research can include more measures.

NOTES

¹The ratio between male and female students in the sample was 47.9% vs. 52.1%, while the same ratio at the University was 45.65% vs. 54.35%. A chi-square test shows that there is no difference be-

tween the sample and population ($\chi^2 = 1.17$, $df = 1$, $p > .05$). The mean age of the population was 21 as compared to that of the sample at 20.17. Obviously, the sampled respondents were slightly younger than the population ($t = -7.2$, $p < .001$). The race makeup was comparable between the sample and the population. For White, it was 84.4% vs. 79.03%, African Americans 8.9% vs. 16.32%; Asian Americans 5.35 vs. 3.05%, and Hispanics 1.3% vs. 1.9%. It seems respondents in the sample were more likely to be white ($\chi^2 = 26.2$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$).

²In this study, the Web in which political attack ads appear refers to the Web as a medium or channel for distributing advertising messages for a candidate.

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