

2013

Elections and the third-person effect: Voters' perception of the 2012 first presidential debate's effects

Ge Wang
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wang, Ge, "Elections and the third-person effect: Voters' perception of the 2012 first presidential debate's effects" (2013). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 13600.
<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/13600>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

**Elections and the third-person effect:
Voters' perception of the 2012 first presidential debate's effects**

by

Ge Wang

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Raluca Cozma, Major Professor
Eric Abbott
Cindy Yu

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2013

Copyright © Ge Wang, 2013. All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	5
The Third-Person Effect	5
The Perceptual Component of the Third-Person Effect	9
The Behavioral Component of the Third-Person Effect	13
The Third-Person Effect in Political Communication	15
Desirability of Messages	18
Partisanship as A Variable in Effects of Election Campaigns	20
Partisanship as A Variable in The Third-Person Effect	21
Gender Gap in 2012 Presidential Election	22
The Presidential Debate in the USA	24
Hypotheses and Research Questions	27
CHAPTER 3. METHOD	29
The Questionnaire Design	30
Variables and Their Measure	31
The Third-Person Effect on Receivers of Undesirable Content and on Receivers of Desirable Content	31
Identification of Partisanship	31
Gender	32
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	33
Results for Hypothesis 1	33
Results for Hypothesis 2	36
Results for Hypothesis 3	41
Results for Research Question 1	46

Results for Research Question 2	48
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	49
Justification of Results and Contribution to Theory	49
Limitations and Directions for Future Research	57
REFERENCES	62
APPENDIX A. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	70
APPENDIX B. CODE BOOK	73
APPENDIX C. IRB APPROVAL LETTER	76
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	77

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	The variable distributions of participants who had completed the questionnaire	30
Table 2.	Number and percentage for assumed knowledge gaining about Obama and Romney through the debate	34
Table 3.	Number and percentage for participants' assumed attitude change about Obama and Romney through the debate	35
Table 4.	<i>t</i> -Test for significant differences between perceived influences on self and others in knowledge	36
Table 5.	<i>t</i> -Test for significant differences between perceived influences on self and others in knowledge	36
Table 6.	Number and percentage for two kinds of supporters assumed self-other knowledge gain gap about Obama and Romney after the debate	38
Table 7.	Number and percentage for two groups of supporters' assumed self-other attitude change gap about Obama and Romney after the debate	39
Table 8.	<i>t</i> -Test for perceived knowledge differences between Republican participants and Democratic participants	40
Table 9.	<i>t</i> -Test for perceived attitude differences between Republican participants and Democratic participants	41
Table 10.	<i>t</i> -Test for the different voting changes between participants with strong partisanship and participants with weak partisanship	43
Table 11.	Number and percentage for strong and weak partisans' assumed self-other knowledge gain gap about Obama and Romney following the debate	44
Table 12.	Number and percentage for strong and weak partisans' assumed self-other attitude change gap about Obama and Romney following the debate	44

Table 13.	<i>t</i> -Test for self-other perceived knowledge gain gap between participants with strong partisanship and participants with weak partisanship	45
Table 14.	<i>t</i> -Test for self-other perceived attitude change gap between participants with strong partisanship and participants with weak partisanship	46
Table 15.	<i>t</i> -Test for self-other perceived knowledge gain gap between female participants and male participants	46
Table 16.	<i>t</i> -Test for self-other perceived attitude change gap between female participants and male participants	47
Table 17.	<i>t</i> -Test for self-other perceived voting intention gap between female participants and male participants	47
Table 18.	<i>t</i> -Test for the Perceived Voting Changes Gap Between Others and Selves	48

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Obama and Romney's popularity among female voters in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012c).	24
Figure 2.	Obama and Romney's popularity among male voters in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012c).	24
Figure 3.	Trends of Partisanship Breakdown from 1990 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012d).	59

ABSTRACT

The first presidential debate in 2012 was unique, in that it significantly changed the original balance and the commonly predicted election outcome. This survey study is theoretically based on the third-person effect approach, aiming to investigate the perceived self-other discrepancy with regards to how the presidential debate influenced voters' knowledge, attitudes and choices. Results showed that there was a stronger third-person effect on the recipients of negative content than those of positive content, but people with stronger party identification would not change their candidate preference by only watching the first presidential debate. This study brings a unique contribution to the third-person effect theory, by investigating a variable previously overlooked by related studies: the knowledge gain layer of the perceptual component, which is considered to be a crucial precursor to attitude and behavior change. Implications of the results and suggestions for further studies are also discussed.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The effects of election campaigns have drawn considerable attention from researchers. As an attractive component of American presidential election campaigns, televised presidential debates are expected to shape public knowledge and attitudes toward candidates and their policy stands. Presidential debates may cause people to change their minds or strengthen their voting choices. This study aims to investigate voters' perception of the effects on other voters and on themselves regarding the first televised debate in 2012, from the perspective of the third-person effect hypothesis.

This study was grounded in Davison's (1983) third-person effect approach, which predicts that "people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others." Davison also predicted that people might take actions to fix this assumed effects difference between themselves and others. Though this hypothesis was inspired by anecdotes, it was successfully supported by Davison's (1983) four trials and by growing evidence from psychology, sociology, and communication researchers.

Researchers have tested the third-person effect mainly with message, receiver, source, and channel variables, as well as variables used to define "the others," or the so-called "third person." However, variables did not behave consistently across results (Andsager & White, 2007). Among topics, three have received wide-spread attention: news issues, violence in media, and advertising campaigns, including political and social advertising campaigns. It was generally expected that undesirable messages might produce third-person effects more than desirable messages, but this conclusion was not wholly supported. Disputes generated

among scholars mostly due to differing definitions of “undesirability” (Andsager & White, 2007).

In terms of presidential elections, research is scarce. Most of the existing studies are about presidential campaign advertising (e.g., Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Paek et al., 2005; Hitchon et al., 1997). Only Salwen (1998) specifically tested the third-person effect in the 1996 American presidential election. He concluded that voters’ self-other discrepancy about the perception of political advertisements might lead to their willingness of advertisement censorship.

The 2012 first presidential debate provides an opportunity to explore the third-person effect in politics other than in relation to political advertisements. This presidential debate cast much drama onto the presidential election, as it changed the anticipated election result. More specifically, this debate added negative properties to incumbent Barack Obama, who was previously ahead in polls, and positive properties to challenger Mitt Romney. Surveys asking people’s perception of the debate revealed that the first televised presidential debate eroded Obama’s advantage, which he had kept prior to the debate.

Most research and surveys conducted before the debate showed Obama leading in the polls. In a national survey by the Pew Research Center (2012a), conducted amongst 3,019 adults including 2,424 registered voters, Obama’s favorability rating had risen to 55% in late July, with 42% holding unfavorable views about him. On the contrary, Romney's favorability was only 45% in July, with a 50% unfavorable public rating, which ranked almost the worst among all the previous presidential candidates in a presidential campaign in Pew Research’s records since 1988.

The same survey also indicated that compared with previous presidential election winners, Barack Obama held a bigger September lead than the last three candidates who went on to win in November, including Obama himself in 2008, with an eight-point lead over Mitt Romney (Pew Research Center, 2012a). By combining all the study results, it seemed that all Obama needed to do was only to wait for victory in November.

However, the story changed on the day after the Oct. 3rd televised presidential debate. Barack Obama no longer led Mitt Romney in the Pew Research Center's (2012b) presidential election polling surveys. Romney gained more public confidence in his ability to improve the unemployment situation and reduce the budget deficit. As a result, Romney tied with Obama in the presidential race among registered voters by 46% to 46%, and a slight edge by 49% to 45% over Obama among likely voters (Pew Research Center, 2012b).

With such a U-turn of the election situation, how did voters' political knowledge, attitude, and final decision develop according to the third-person effect hypothesis? Compared with the election story told by Davison (1983), the first presidential debate in 2012 was able to serve as a typical case to test the third-person effect and an exploration of certain underlying variables. High domestic involvement offered a relatively unbiased and adequate sample for the current study. Partisanship, which seldom appears in the third-person effect research, would be one of two main variables. This was inspired by Dalton, Beck, and Hucfeldt (1998), who observed that in the 1992 presidential election, loyal Republicans were more likely to evaluate independent campaign news as leaning toward Clinton, and similarly, loyal Democrats were more likely to view independent campaign news as leaning toward Bush. Voters with stronger partisanship might have greater bias when observing others. The

other variable was the favorability of the message for the message receivers, which was inspired by Duck and Mullin's (1995) research to group media messages as desirable and undesirable ones. According to Romney's better performance in the debate, his supporters were expected to be the receivers of desirable messages; meanwhile, Obama's were undesirable message receivers.

In this thesis, given the apparently determinative impact of the 2012 first presidential debate on the predicted election outcomes, a survey was conducted to gauge people's perceptions of debate effects on themselves and on others, thus exploring whether the third-person effect worked on people's voting choices. The findings provide insights to assist candidates in formulating better election campaigns, helping to build up a steady image among the public and to win persistent public support. This study can also offer insights for other research dealing with persuasion theory, interpersonal communication among the last-minute voters, and campaign message censorship in presidential elections.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study aims to investigate the existence of a third-person effect in the first presidential debate in October 2012. Toward this end, this section reviews related study results on the third-person effect, presidential debates, as well as related variables including voters' partisanship, gender, message desirability, and perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect.

The Third-Person Effect

According to Davison (1983), the third-person effect suggests that compared with themselves, people assume others would be more easily influenced by media. Moreover, they probably would try to manipulate this perception difference. As Davison (1983) noted, "In the view of those trying to evaluate the effects of a communication, its greatest impact will not be on 'me' or 'you,' but on 'them', the third persons." The social distance between the first person the third person, according to Duck and Mullin (1995), has been mainly measured by "vagueness" and "closeness." The results of their experiment were consistent with what Andsager and White (2007) reviewed, that the social distance between the first person and the third person was positively related to the magnitude of the third-person perception.

Davison (1983) articulated the third-person effect by three anecdotes. The first story was the Japanese military playing white American and African American soldiers in American troops off against each other during World War II. Behavioral changes occurred such that American troop officers withdrew from their service units. The second story was about journalists' perception of newspaper editorials influence on readers. Journalists expect

a higher influence on ordinary readers than on the people like themselves. The last story involved a sociologist worried that swinging voters would vote for the opposite candidate because he assumed them to be easily influenced by campaign leaflets disseminated on the eve the election.

After Davison's (1983) proposal and trials of the third-person effect, there has been a growing body of research examining the third-person effect. As noted by Perloff (1999), the third-person effect includes perceptual and behavioral components. However, the level of support for the perceptual component has been much higher than that of the behavioral component.

As the key part of the third-person effect, the perceptual component has received wide-spread acknowledgement by experiments and surveys across topics. Studies have found as many as 90% of respondents perceived greater media influence on others than on themselves (e.g., Paxton, 1995; Tiedge, Silverblatt, Havice, & Rosenfield, 1991).

Controversial issues have always been stimulus materials for third-person effect studies.

Cases like the President Clinton Whitewater scandal (Price & Tewksbury, 1996), molestation charges against Michael Jackson (Price & Tewksbury, 1996), and the O. J. Simpson trial

(Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Price et al., 1997) have been stimulus materials to test

third-person effects. In Price and Tewksbury's (1996) study, they mainly tested third-person

effects from the side of receivers' variables, such as uses of media, general knowledge and

orientation, with multiple controversial issues. Another study by Price et al. (1997) tested

how respondents' levels of knowledge and the order of questions affected the magnitude of

third-person effect, with three pieces of negative news. Jensen and Hurley (2005) made use of

two issues, unregulated dioxin in fertilizers and the removal of the gray wolf from the endangered species list, to investigate how social desirability and social distance affect third-person effects. One rare case study, specifically about one controversial issue, was Salwen and Dupagne's (2003) study regarding the news coverage of Year 2000 (Y2K), which investigated third-person effects in relation to respondents' perceptions of new technologies, or knowledge variable.

Socially undesirable message such as libelous news stories (e.g., Gunther, 1991; Cohen et al., 1988; Lambe & McLeod, 2005), media violence (e.g., Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Gunther & Hwa, 1996; Eveland et al., 1999; Lambe & McLeod, 2005) and pornography (e.g., Rojas et al., 1996; Lo & Paddon, 2001; Lee & Tamborini, 2005) have also received wide-spread attention from researchers. Cohen et al.'s (1988) study exposed student samples to several defamatory news articles. The results confirmed the existence of the third-person effect, explaining that the magnitude of the third-person effect might be affected by news sources and social distance between "the first person" and "the third person." Another study about libelous news stories was by Gunther's (1991) exploration of cause and consequences of third-person effect in a libel context. Gunther's (1991) experiment manipulating the trustworthiness of the source of a defamatory newspaper article produced a third-person effect, indicating that the overestimation of the opinions of others contributed more to third-person effects than the underestimation of respondents themselves. Newspaper articles that unjustly harm a celebrity's reputation were one of the nine stimulus materials employed by Lambe and McLeod (2005) to provide support for third-person effects in all kinds of expressive context.

Media violence and pornography have been very popular topic among third-person effect and media censorship studies. Television violence has been a classic undesirable example to test third-person perceptions on special social groups, such as teens and children who are less educated, and groups with lower income (Scharrer, 2002). Television violence also has been reported to produce more public support for restrictions, compared with other issues (Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). Pornography has often been used to test gender as a medium variable of the third-person effect, and willingness to support censorship as a behavioral component of the third-person effect. Lo and Paddon's (2001) study reported that females who had a lower level of past exposure to pornography perceived greater negative effects of pornography on others than on themselves, and these female respondents were more in favor of pornography control. Female respondents in Lo and Wei's (2002) study tended to perceive greater negative effects of Internet pornography on other males than on other females, and they were more willing to support restrictions on Internet pornography. Lee and Tambrini's (2005) study indicated that respondents' third-person perception on Internet pornography might produce support for Internet censorship. Media violence and pornography have sometimes been taken together into consideration as typical undesirable message examples in the same study. Rojas, Shah and Faber (1996) used both pornography and violence in media in their research to explore the relationship between censorship and the third-person effect; Eveland et al. (1999) used both of them in their study to investigate which one of the two measures, social distance and perceived likelihood of exposure, was the stronger predictor of third-person effects.

When testing the third-person effect, researchers tend to employ several messages as

stimulus material in the same study instead of doing case studies. Moreover, researchers mostly use negative or controversial message content to test the third-person effect instead of including positive ones. This is partially because the third-person effect does not significantly show up when people are exposed to positive content. In fact, Gunther and Thorson (1992) argue that positive content might lead the third-person effect to diminish and even reverse, a concept developed by Tiedge et al., (1991) as a “first person effect.”

Another hot topic for third-person studies have been advertisements, mainly including social issue advertisements (e.g., Dina et al., 1999; Youn et al., 2000; Huh et al., 2004) and political campaign advertising (e.g., Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Hitchon et al. 1997; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Paek et al., 2005). Youn, Faber and Shah (2000) reported significant evidence that respondents perceived others to be more influenced than themselves by gambling advertisements thus increasing their support for gambling advertisement censorship. Dina et al. (1999) tested how exposure to a smoking environment influenced seven-graders’ third-person perception. Huh, Delorme, and Reid (2004) did a survey examining perceptions of Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) prescription drug advertising, indicating that negative content-based third-person effects were greater than positive effects.

More literature about political advertisements was reviewed in the section of third-person effect studies in political communication.

The Perceptual Component of the Third-Person Effect

The first presidential debate in 2012 was an important information resource for the public to gain knowledge concerning the candidates. It thus provided an opportunity to examine perceptions related to the knowledge layer in the third-person effect. According to

the theoretical frame of the hierarchy of effects, media influence on recipients has three layers of effects, those being knowledge, attitude, and behaviors. This section reviews existing scholarship on the knowledge and attitude layers, which make the perceptual component of the third-person effect theory.

Knowledge and attitude can predict behaviors together and individually. Knowledge, or cognitive factors, according to Bandura (1971), play an indispensable role in predicting behaviors by determining how and what an individual observed and felt. By anticipating consequences correctly or inaccurately according to their cognitive assumptions, people take right or wrong actions (Bandura, 1971). Thus, knowledge has been widely assumed by researchers as a structural property of attitudes (e.g., Krosnick & Petty, 1995; Fabrigar, Petty, Smith & Crites Jr., 2006), and assessed by attitude and experiences people can recall in studies (e.g., Wood, 1982; Davidson, Yantis, Norwood, & Montano, 1985; Kallgren & Wood, 1986). However, knowledge has not been investigated individually in previous third-person effect studies. Considering that knowledge gain is a precursor to attitude and behavior change, it is important to explore this layer of effects. The fact that scholarship has overlooked this important variable provides an opportunity to contribute new knowledge to the third-person effect theory.

Davison (1983) described his third-person hypothesis as “in its broadest formulation, this hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others.” His description, to some extent, confined the content of effect in the following studies to attitude and behaviors. It was explicitly demonstrated in Price, Huang, and Tewksbury’s (1997) study that their subjects

were only asked about the likely news effects on others and on themselves “in general.” They then explained how general their questions were with an example question from their survey, such as “How much do you think the news coverage influenced your attitude toward Newt Gingrich,” which mainly regarded subjects’ attitude instead of knowledge as perceptual component. Douglas and Sutton (2004) introduced a new methodological paradigm for measuring the TPE, during which they only compared ratings of all kinds of attitudes (current self attitudes, current others’ attitudes, retrospective self attitudes and retrospective others’ attitudes.)

In previous studies, most studies merely use “effect,” “influence,” “impact” and “perception” to generally measure third-person effect instead of performing an in-depth investigation into the layers of effects, or precisely defining the media influence measured in their respective studies (e.g., Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Lambe & Mcleod, 2005; Wei & Lo, 2007; Cheng & Riffe, 2008). Salwen and Dupagne (2003) collected data about respondents’ ownership of computer-related technologies and beliefs about new technologies, which can be regarded as the knowledge layer of media effect, in their studies of third-person effect in news of Y2K and Experiencing Y2K. However, they did not examine any hypothesis regarding the knowledge layer of media effect resulting from third-person effect. In their hypothesis descriptions, they used words like “perceptions”, “influenced”, and “judge” (by individuals). Jensen and Hurley (2005) merely use the word “influence” in their hypothesis descriptions and survey wording.

Knowledge and ideology were more a control variable, together with other demographic variables, rather than a layer of perceptual component of third-person effect

investigated in previous studies (e.g., Lasorsa, 1989; Atwood, 1994; Driscoll & Salwen, 1997; Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid & Houden, 2005; Wei & Lo, 2007; Chapin, 2002). The third-person effects literature establishes a linkage between knowledge of a particular topic and the third-person perceptual gap, that generally as knowledge increases, the perceived harm of negative media content increases. Lasorsa's study (1989) suggested that those who believed themselves as political experts were more likely to overestimate media effects on others. Atwood (1994) investigated in people's perception about the prediction from media of a 50 percent chance of a Richter 6.5 to 7.5-magnitude earthquake in the New Madrid Seismic Zone in the Central United States within about twenty- four hours of 3 December 1990. His study indicated that no matter if people really had knowledge about the stimuli message in his study, as long as they believe they did master more knowledge than others, they would produce more third-person effect. Driscoll and Salwen (1997) found reading more biased news about J.O. Simpson trial would prime people's perception of Simpson's guilt or innocent, thus leading to greater third-person perception. Wei and Lo (2007) suggested that exposure to political attack ads was the strongest predictor of perceived harms of such ads on self and others, but only perceived harm on others was a significant predictor of support for restrictions on attack ads. There were exceptions. Chapin (2002) found that students' self-other perception gap of susceptibility by media violence decrease with their grades increase, but data was significant to indicate relations between perception gap and students' knowledge of real world youth violence.

According to the literature reviewed above and to the knowledge of the author, no third-person effect study has so far investigated perceptions of knowledge gains by self and

others, or the linkage between perception of self-other knowledge gain gaps and perception of self-other attitude gaps. In order to build on existing literature and add to it based on a historically unique case study, the current study employs all three layers in the hierarchy of effects to ensure a thorough analysis of potential third-person effects. The following section review relevant literature concerning the third layer: the behavioral component of the third-person effect.

The Behavioral Component of the Third-Person Effect

Compared with the perceptual component, the behavioral component of the third-person effect has not received as much support. Salwen (1998) described the behavioral component in his study on 1996 American presidential election, saying it “technically... refers to any behavioral outcome attributable to third-person perception.” According to Davison (1983) himself, when referring to the behavioral effect, “any effect that the communication achieves may thus be due not to the reaction of the ostensible audience but rather to the behavior of those who anticipate, or think they perceive, some reaction on the part of others.” That is, as Perloff (1999) reviewed, “effects are due to the actions of those who anticipate some reaction on the part of others (the third persons) and behave differently as a result.” Simply put, the behavioral component of the third-person effect is an actual action resulting from the perceptual component.

However, behavioral-component research has not always followed the same definition as proposed by Davison (1983) and Perloff’s (1999). For examples, McLeod and his colleagues (1997) reported that the more antisocial the student participants perceived rap lyrics to be, the more they would endorse a censorship; Shah and companions (1999) found

positive relations between the third-person effect and willingness to censor controversial products; Salwen and Dupagne's (1999) survey supported that third-person perceptions were a significant predictor of restrictions on negative political advertisements; Salwen (1998) found that a perceptual component of third-person effect might lead to restrictions on election messages as a behavioral component of the third-person effect; Chia, Lu and McLeod (2004) explored the third-person perception as a motivation for media censorship. All these studies aiming to test the behavioral component of the third-person effect stopped at "willingness of doing" instead of actual behaviors. Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) differentiated behaviors resulting from the third-person effect by restrictive, corrective, and promotional, yet their findings did not look into actual actions. Simply put, when the previous studies test the behavioral component, they mostly confined behavioral component to "censorship" and "restrictions." Also what these studies have found is merely a tendency of supporting censorship, instead of an actual public protest. There is no guarantee that this tendency would translate into real-life consequences.

Scholars offered two main explanations for the existence of the behavioral component. The first one was known as the preventive explanation (Dority, 1989), and developed as paternalism by McLeod et al. (1997) and as protection motivation by Shah et al. (1999). Golan, Banning, and Lundy (2008) also provided evidence, indicating that people are more likely to vote when they see a negative political advertisement of their preferred presidential election candidate. The second explanation was the punitive explanation, which was discussed in Gunther's study (1991) exploring cause and consequence in the third-person effect. He found that the way people evaluated the damaging effects of a defamatory news

story about a police chief did not correspond to their assessment of a penalty against the newspaper. Chia, Lu, and McLeod's (2004) study supported the punitive explanation by a case study on public motivations for media censorship. Their comparison of punitive and preventive explanations in the context of a controversial sexual video compact disc suggested a strong support for the punitive explanation and merely limited support for preventive explanation.

Most third-person effect studies on the behavioral component have focused on political advertising and restrictions on political advertising. There was relatively less attention paid to other campaign means and public voting behaviors. Two rare exceptions were Griswold's (1994) and Golan et al.'s (2008) studies. The former one investigated the relations between the third-person perception and likelihood to vote; the latter one further explored the influence of the third-person perception on voters' choice. The current study plans to further explore participants' choices following a presidential debate, one of general elections' central and most mediated rituals.

As reviewed in the following section, when testing the third-person effect, results were slightly inconsistent when taking different variables into consideration, including message variables, receiver variables, source and channel variables, and variables used to define "the others" or "the third person."

The current study investigates variables such as messages' desirability, partisanship, gender, as well as perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect.

The Third-Person Effect in Political Communication

Political communication research has investigated the third-person effect in several

contexts, with some topics receiving more attention than others. Political scandals showed up in third-person effect studies, such as Clinton Whitewater scandal (Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Price et al., 1997). However, the majority of third-person effect studies in political communication focus on political advertisements.

Cohen and Davis (1991) used negative political advertisements to find that supporters of a certain candidate would perceive others to be more influenced when there was an attack on the candidate they liked, and this perception gap would reverse when there was an attack on the candidate they disliked. Salwen (1998) found that a perceptual component of the third-person effect might lead to restrictions on election messages as a behavioral component of third-person effect, which was consistent with the conclusion of Salwen and Dupagne's (1999) survey, supporting that third-person perceptions were a significant predictor of restrictions on negative political advertisements. Hitchon, Chang and Harris (1997) found that neutral ads for female candidates generate a smaller third-person effect than positive or negative ads for female candidates, and these neutral ads might produce more favorable attitudinal and conative responses than positive or negative ads for female candidates. Paek et al. (2005) also reported social distance as a predictor to widen third-person perception by a survey and an experiment in their study. In the survey, respondents were asked to distinguish between "your kind of people" and "other kinds of people." It was designated that "your kind of people" was "people with the same background and political orientation as yours" and that "other kinds of people" were "people with background and political orientation very different from yours." To assess how different labels of target others might affect perceived-effect disparity between self and others, the experiment of the same article grouped

“the average undergraduate student from your university” and “the average undergraduate student from other Big Ten universities”. Wei et al. (2011) found that respondents perceived others as more vulnerable than themselves to the influence of election polls in 2008 presidential election.

The 2004 presidential election received more attention. Cheng and Riffe’s (2008) study about the 2004 presidential election involved a hypothesis about the third-person effect. It was hypothesized that pro-Kerry respondents would display a greater third-person effect regarding the Swift Boat ads (negative to Kerry) than pro-Bush respondents; meanwhile pro-Bush respondents would display a greater first-person effect than pro-Kerry respondents. Unfortunately, their hypothesis was rejected. Another study about 2004 presidential election’s negative ads (Wei & Lo, 2007) revealed that respondents perceived attack ads had more negative influence on others than on themselves, and Internet attack ads might be more harmful than those on traditional media. Other predictors such as social distance, knowledge, and exposure were tested in this study. Golan, Banning and Lundy (2008) explained how third-person perceptions affected people’s likelihood to vote. If individuals sensed others who were less politically knowledgeable might be easily persuaded by political advertisements, they in turn would attempt to compensate for other’s perceived ignorance by taking political actions such as voting to manipulate the self-other perception gap. This study was the first to test actual behaviors as behavioral component of the third-person effect.

Generally speaking, studies about political topics mostly focused on election advertisements. Among the election advertisements, negative and attack advertisements were the most popular stimuli. However, as a persuasive message format, results from studies on

election advertisements cannot be expanded to other campaign activities, such as presidential debates, which is an informative message. Gunther and Mundy (1993) marked that media topics presented as persuasive would lead to greater third-person effect than topics presented as informative ones. In this way, it does matter to distinguish persuasive and informative messages when examining the third-person effect. The current study takes the first presidential debate in 2012 to test the third-person effect, which has been rarely found in previous studies.

The contention on whether the third-person effect is a universal phenomenon from desirable to undesirable messages hinders researchers' interpretation of why a perceptual level of the third person effect happens. As Andsager and White (2007) reviewed, there were three main explanations. The first one has been known as "better than average effect" (Alicke et al., 1995) or "downward comparison" (Wills, 1981) in psychology literatures, which believe that individuals tend to evaluate themselves as superior to others. The second one was the so-called "optimistic bias" (Weinstein, 1980), indicating that people regarded themselves as less vulnerable to negative events than others. The third explanation was the "self-enhancement motivation" (Brown, 1986), which was also interpreted as "ego-defensive mechanism" (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber & McLeod, 1999). While these motivations can be used to explain whatever results the current study produces, it is not within the scope of this thesis to add support to any of the three explanations.

Desirability of Messages

A latent assumption in the third-person effect theory is that certain messages would generate negative consequences for society. It is overwhelmingly believed that the

third-person perception mainly occurs on undesirable media messages. (Gunther, 1991; Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988). Duck and Mullin (1995) classified them as “positive” and “negative” media messages, and their research supported that the third-person effect existed in both of them, but it was more pronounced for negative messages. However, this conclusion has not been wholly supported by all studies, partially because of different measurement and definitions of “desirability.” Paul, Salwen and Dupagne (2000) argued that “desirability” was a more multifaceted concept than scholars had conceived. Rucinski and Salmon (1990, p. 363) explained that desirability could be taken to describe both the message content and the message aftermath, and it was hard to tell which one was the participants’ definition of this concept. Discussions by Gunther and Mundy (1993) in their research suggested that for desirable messages, people would consider themselves to be as much influenced or even receive more effect on themselves.

Message desirability measurement varies among studies. White and Dillon (2000) described it as a universally considered positive message. Jensen and Hurley (2005) chose “helpful” as a facet. Duck and Mullin (1995) defined desirability as positive content to “influence people in positive ways.” By these standards, researchers can simply judge if a message is desirable or undesirable for the whole public. Social service campaign advertising to reduce drinking and driving is a desirable message, and violent video games work as undesirable messages.

However, this does not work for controversial issues, such as personal preference for either candidate. Neither of the candidates in a democratic general election can win general/total public support. In other words, in the 2012 election, just like in any similar race,

some voters hoped Obama would win the election, while other voters hoped he would lose. Toward this end, the current study uses a different definition of desirability and undesirability. Instead of pursuing a socially positive influence of a desirable message, undesirability and desirability of the 2012 first televised presidential debate were defined by voters' partisanship. In this way, the debate delivered an undesirable message for Obama's supporters, but was a desirable message for Romney's supporters. The third-person effect of Obama's supporters was expected to be stronger than that of Romney's supporters. According to Gunther and Thorson's (1992) hypothesis, a reversed third-person effect might be detected in the perceptions of Romney's supporters.

Partisanship as A Variable in Effects of Election Campaigns

The critical role partisanship plays in shaping voters' opinion has been widely observed by scholars (e.g., Abramowitz, 1978; Hillygus, & Jackman, 2003; Fournier, et al., 2004; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004), and it cannot be ignored in the current study. Researchers studied influences on voters' decisions by dividing them into long-term ones and short-term ones (Campbell et al. 1980). The long-term factors reflected voters' political attitude formed before the election campaign started, which prompted voters to make up their mind much earlier than others, and to resist campaign information from opposite party candidates. The more a voter identifies himself as a member of a party, the less likely this person is to decline to vote for the candidate from this party.

The measurement of partisanship in previous studies was done in two main ways. Participants were given a chance to subjectively identify their partisanship (e.g., Hofstetter & Buss, 1980), or they answered questions about two competing parties for researchers to judge

their partisanships (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier, & Kimball, 1999).

However, a “decline of parties” is broadly acknowledged in contemporary American politics. Smith (1988) suggested that the rise of independent voters is one of the most important phenomena of American politics in the recent twenty years. Wilson (2002) commented that the age that voters strongly identify themselves with a major party had passed. Also Greenberg and Page (1997) agreed that the two major parties were losing their influence on the public in this age.

What Bartels (2000) observed was another result, indicating that the impact of partisan identification on voting behaviors had been intense in American presidential elections from 1976 to 1996. This did not conflict with the “decline of parties” hypothesis. People might consider themselves as independent partisans, but they still have their favored parties. Even though they identified themselves as independent partisans, and made voting decisions without being affected by partisanship, the vast number of the remaining partisans was still loyal enough to generally influence an election.

Toward this end, the current study did not identify participants’ partisanship only by a list of questions or their subjective judgment. Two dimensions were employed to define the partisanship: political affiliation and political ideology. The former one offered a chance for participants to claim a party preference by themselves, and the latter one offered a chance for researchers to gauge participants’ party inclination.

Partisanship as A Variable in the Third-Person Effect

Partisanship was seldom involved in third-person effect studies, but previous findings about personal expertise and knowledge as a variable of the third-person effect suggest

partisanship might make a difference in the current research design.

It was originally observed by Davison (1983) that journalists believed “the editorials have little effect on people like you and me, but the ordinary reader is likely to be influenced quite a lot.” Studies on personal expertise and knowledge as a variable of the third-person effect can be an explanation of this phenomenon. As reviewed by Andsager and White (2007), it was supported by at least four studies that individuals who felt they were knowledgeable about a certain topic tended to overestimate other people’s susceptibility by media contents.

Similarly, when a voter believes himself to be more knowledgeable and confident in a candidate, it is possible that he would suffer a stronger third-person effect occurring on him. In this case, the current study tested third-person effect with the partisanship variable, expecting the results to be consistent with other studies on personal expertise and knowledge.

Gender Gap in 2012 Presidential Election

Gender as a demographic variable has received a good deal of attention as it is easy to measure and often produces significant results. However, according to Andsager and White’s (2007) review, demographic variables did not work consistently when it came to the third-person effect. Preliminarily summarizing, the extent to which gender influenced the third-person effect depended on what content receivers were exposed to. Studies on certain issues such as pornography effects consistently produced significant gender differences, with women perceiving stronger effect on men than on themselves (lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Wei, 2002). Meanwhile, results of other studies conflicted with each other. For example, Salwen and Dupagne (2003) found no significant gender difference happened when testing the third-person effect with news about Year 2000 (Y2K), which was opposite to another study

testing the third-person effect with violent television contents (Hoffner et al., 2001).

Gender was seldom investigated when testing the third-person effect in the context of political issues in previous studies. In this study, gender is of particular interest because of another gender-related phenomenon occurring in the 2012 election: a clear gender gap in the favorability of the two candidates. Numerous editorials and reports reported that Obama won more women's support and Romney did better among men (e.g., Marcotte, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Bassett, 2012). A gender gap persisted in almost every presidential election, but it was observed as significantly wide in 2012 in relation to women voters. Pew Research Center (2012c) did a 12-wave survey based on registered voters by asking them "suppose the 2012 presidential election were being held TODAY, if you had to choose between Barack Obama, the Democrat or Mitt Romney, the Republican, who would you vote for?" showing that Obama and Romney split votes by gender. From beginning of 2012 (Jan. 16th) to few days before the Election Day, Romney had never beaten Obama among the female voters (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the favorability among male voters was not a consistent prediction (Figure 2).

Keeping this fact in mind, the current study will therefore test whether gender might be a factor influencing the magnitude of the third-person effect. The gender variable will be further tested within the participants with the same partisanship, to explore whether they would split the magnitude of the third-person effect by gender.

Figure 1. Obama and Romney's popularity among female voters in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012c).

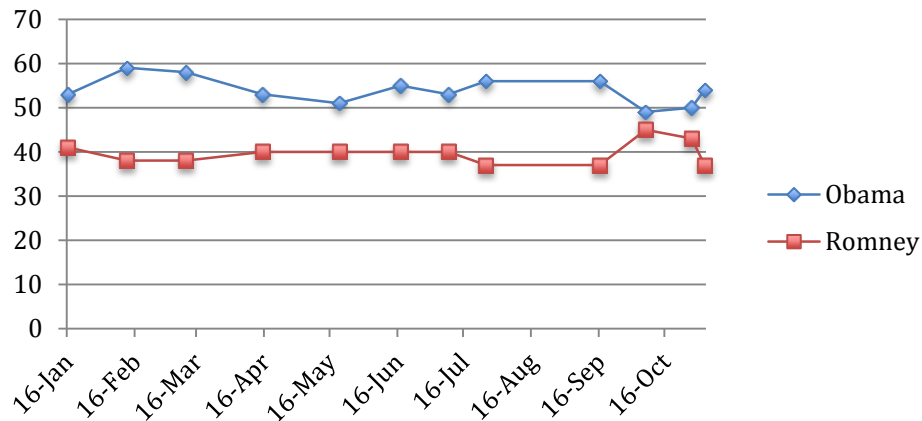
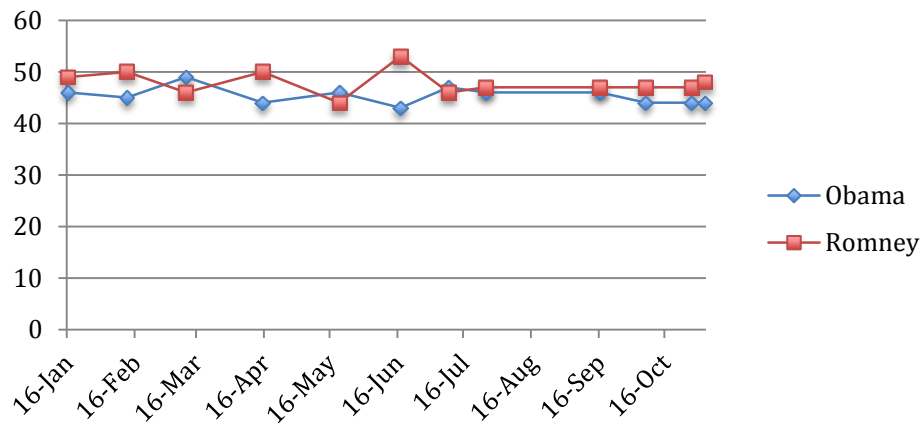


Figure 2. Obama and Romney's popularity among male voters in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012c).



The Presidential Debate in the USA

American presidential debates have gone through eleven presidential elections (1960, 1976-2012), and they have become a central and expected component of American presidential election campaigns. Its great potential to aid American democracy and provide informative information to the voters have received wide agreement (e.g., Jamieson, 1987; Mulder, 1978; Pfau & Eveland, 1992; Kaid, Mckinney, & Tedesco, 2000; etc.). According to Gunther and Mundy (1993), it makes a difference to examine third-person effect with informative message and persuasive message.

Benoit and Hansen (2004) discussed its advantages in details. First, debates present a

chance for the voters to see the candidates side by side, arguing about the hot issues back and forth, which is very helpful for voters to compare candidates and to make their vote choices. Moreover, the 90-minute long presidential debates provide voters a systematic and continuous demonstration to learn the pros and cons of policies from the two candidates. Presidential debates are much longer than any of the other forms of election campaigning, such as political advertisements and political speeches. Furthermore, televised broadcasting helps presidential debates attract much more audiences than before and than other campaign events (Carlin, 1992). Besides, compared with other campaign forms, the setting of the candidates answering unexpected questions from opponents may leave a more spontaneous impression on voters. Finally, debates can strengthen voters' confidence in their choice, thus increasing the possibility to cast a vote on Election Day (Benoit, Mckinney, & Holbert, 2001).

However, whether presidential debates as political campaigning generally make a difference in voters' decisions is still debatable. On one hand, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee's (1986) famous survey in Elmira discovered that underlying the voting process, there was a large degree of agreement between the two parties and between voters of different political persuasions; besides, politics is not a major concern for most of the American electorate. Since the outcome of the election makes little difference to an ordinary voter, citizens' interest might be low and he might not be as politically active as researchers expect. Katz (1973) developed a dichotomous model to describe the reason: pre-committed voters were not affected because of resistance to the media exposure; swinging voters were not affected neither because of lack of media exposure. Finkel (1993) addressed this issue with his

primary findings that subjective attitudes formed before a campaign were important determinants of voters' final decisions, while the possibility of changing vote choice during the campaign was limited.

On the other hand, by identifying a group of voters who make their decisions during the campaign rather than either prior to or very late in the campaign, Chaffee and Choe (1980) challenged the assertion of limited effects of election campaign, together with other studies (e.g., Gopioian & Hadjiharalambous, 1994; Fournier et al. 2004). The two viewpoints did not conflict with each other, since they were concentrating on different groups of voters.

Last-minute voters were generally more susceptible.

When looking into study results dealing specifically with presidential debates, the consensus seems to be that presidential debates can only reinforce voters' choices instead of altering preferences. Abramowitz (1978) examined the rationality of voting decisions before and after the presidential debate in 1976. He defined rational voting as a process that citizens made choices by judging candidates' issue positions. In his survey, there was a nearly 100% increase in the viewer numbers that gained awareness of candidate's positions. However, no significant evidence was found to build up a rational relation between knowledge gaining and process of voting decisions. Geer (1988), as well as Benoit and Hansen (2004) found that presidential debate served as reinforcement of voting decisions rather than altering preferences. Geer's (1988) study also indicated that presidential debates might influence undecided voters or the citizens who weakly committed to one candidate.

When studying the first presidential debate in 2012, the effects turned out to be more conditional. First, this was not a tie debate, as Romney obtained an ample victory. According to

Pew Research Center (2012b), 75% of the voters said Romney did a better job than Obama in the Oct. 3rd debate. Second, the first presidential debate changed the advantage position of Obama immediately. Again in the same post-debate survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2012b), Romney tied with Obama in the presidential race among registered voters by 46% to 46% after trailing by 42% to 51% in September. Among likely voters, Romney gained a slight edge of 49% to 45% over Obama.

With such a U-turn of the election situation, the first presidential debate in 2012 was able to serve as a typical case to test the third-person effect and exploration of certain underlying variables. Partisanship, which seldom appears in the third-person effect research, would be one of two main variables. The other variable was the favorability of the message for the message receivers. According to Romney's better performance in the debate, his supporters were expected to be the receivers of desirable messages; meanwhile, Obama's were undesirable message receivers. Gender as a mediated factor and behavioral component of third-person effect were also within the exploration of the current study.

Hypotheses and Research Questions:

Building on the literature reviewed above, this thesis sets out to test the following hypotheses:

H1A: Audiences of the 2012 first presidential debate would assume that other audience members would gain more knowledge from the debate than themselves.

H1B: Audiences of the 2012 first presidential debate would assume that other audience members would have a more negative attitude towards Obama and a more positive attitude towards Romney than themselves after the debate.

H2A: The receivers (Democrats) of undesirable content will perceive a higher self-other knowledge gap compared to the receivers (Republicans) of desirable content.

H2B: The receivers (Democrats) of undesirable content will perceive a higher self-other attitude gap compared to the receivers (Republicans) of desirable content.

H3A: The first televised presidential debate in 2012 had less impact on the strong partisans' voting choices compared to weak partisans.

H3B: Strong partisans will perceive a higher self-other knowledge gap than weak partisans.

H3C: Strong partisans will perceive a higher self-other attitude gap than weak partisans.

Given the scarcity and inconclusive findings of scholarship on gender differences and the behavioral component of the third-person effect, this study's author is disinclined to formulate any directional hypotheses, and thus asks,

RQ1: Did female voters have a stronger third-person effect in terms of knowledge, attitude, and voting intentions gaps between themselves and others?

RQ2: Did voters think the 2012 first presidential debate influence other voters' final decision more than their own final decisions?

Chapter 3

METHOD

A population of 3,000 students from an American Midwestern university and 150 eligible voters from a randomly picked local church community was contacted by e-mail. According to Lowry & Sundararaman (2003), 41% of empirical articles in mass communication journals employed student samples. This number is up to 87% in psychology journals. There might be concern on using student samples, but student group as a key constituency in modern political life is of particular importance when examining third-person effect in presidential debates.

The link to the questionnaire was disseminated to participants about one month (Nov. 6th) after the first televised presidential debate (Oct. 3rd) was broadcast. The site that carried the survey questionnaire was kept active until a total of 194 questionnaires were returned, which took two weeks (the link was closed on Nov. 20th). The sample collecting process only lasted two weeks to avoid decreasing accuracy of participants' answers, as it might be difficult for them to recall their perception of the first presidential debate, and their voting behaviors on the Election Day.

Among the 194 participants, 156 offered completed answers, composing the final sample. The distribution of 108 participants who admitted to having watched the first presidential debate on Oct. 3rd, 2012, is showed in Table 1:

Table 1. The variable distributions of participants who had completed the questionnaire.

**

Gender	Male	57	53%	Party Affiliation	Democrat	39	36%
	Female	51	47%		Republican	27	25%
Political Ideology	Conservative	23	20%		Independent	36	33%
	Moderate	47	44%		Other	6	6%
	Liberal	38	36%				

**Total N=108.

Both political ideology and party affiliation data were distributed almost evenly, indicating a relatively heterogeneous sample for the current study.

Questionnaire Design

The study's questionnaire was composed of three sections.

The first section defined the general political ideology and partisanship of respondents. Questions intended to solicit (1) participants' identification of their political ideology; (2) participants' sensitivity of their political affiliation; (3) participants' engagement in the 2012 first presidential debate.

The second section examined people's perception of the effects of the 2012 first presidential debate on themselves and on others. The participants were asked: (1) if their knowledge and attitude of Obama or Romney had changed after watching the 2012 first presidential debate; (2) if the participants assumed the people around them changed the knowledge and attitude of Obama or Romney after watching the 2012 first presidential debate; (3) if the participants would change their final voting decisions; (4) if the participants thought the people around them would change the final voting decisions.

The last section gathered demographic information, including (1) age, (2) educational

background, and (3) gender.

Variables and Their Measures

The Third-Person Effect on Receivers of Undesirable Content and on Receivers of

Desirable Content. According to Duck and Mullin's (1995) experiment, the third-person effect was more pronounced for negative content receivers than for positive content receivers.

According to the new favorability of Obama and Romney as shown in the post-debate national polls (Pew Research Center, 2012b), the 2012 first presidential debate was an undesirable content for Obama's followers, but a desirable content for Romney's followers.

Candidate support was defined by participants' answers to the political affiliation and ideology questions. By comparing answers of voters with different partisanship, we evaluated the third-person effects on undesirable content receivers and desirable content receivers of the same message.

Identification of Partisanship. According to Campbell et al. (1980), partisanship is a cluster of principles and feelings that contribute in a popular image of a party and its candidates, thus having effects on electorates. Bartels (2000) evaluated partisan loyalty as a motivation of voters' behavior, such as how likely they are to vote and whom they are probably going to vote for. Two dimensions were employed to define the partisanship: political affiliation and political ideology.

By asking participants about their political affiliation, we could glean their partisan identification. Through their political ideology from "very conservative" to "very liberal," we further gauged the strength of their party identification and the probability of their voting choice changing. Also their political engagement was tested by their attentions paid to the

first 2012 televised presidential debate.

Gender. Standard demographic questions gauged respondent's age, gender, and education level.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Results for Hypothesis 1. H1 predicted that a) audiences of the 2012 first presidential debate would assume that other audience members would gain more knowledge from the debate than themselves and that b) audiences of the 2012 first presidential debate would assume that other audience members would have a more negative attitude towards Obama and a more positive attitude towards Romney than themselves after the debate. To test the two layers, knowledge and attitude, the perceived effects of the first presidential debate on other viewers and on the respondents themselves were compared (Table 2) with a two-way t-test.

Perceived effects on knowledge gaining towards Obama and Romney were respectively measured on a 5-point scale, where 1 stands for nothing more and 5 means much more. To measure the difference in perceived effects (the third-person effect) in knowledge gaining, the score for assumed knowledge gaining of “a third person” toward Obama or Romney was subtracted from a participant’s own assumed knowledge gaining toward the same candidate. A resulting score smaller than 0 indicates that the participant assumed other people gained less knowledge toward the two candidates than him or herself after watching this debate, while a resulting number bigger than 0 indicates that the participant assumed other people learned more from the debate about the candidates following the debate.

Perceived effects on attitude change of selves and others were measured on a 5-point scale, where 1 and 2 represent negative attitudes toward a candidate were generated following the debate, 3 stands for no attitude change, and 4 and 5 indicate positive attitudes were

generated by the debate. To gauge the difference in perceived effects (the third-person effect) in attitude, the score for assumed attitude of “a third person” toward a candidate was subtracted from a participant’s attitude toward the same candidate. A resulting score smaller than 0 indicates that the participant assumed other people to be more negatively influenced by the debate than him or herself; while a resulting number bigger than 0, indicates that the participant assumed other people to be more positively influenced, than themselves, towards a candidate following the debate.

In terms of the assumed knowledge gained about Obama through the debate, the general percentage showed that 11 participants (10.19%) assumed others learned less than themselves; another 46 (42.59%) of the participants supposed others learned more than themselves; the last 51 (47.22%) of them did not think there was a difference in knowledge gaining between themselves and the others. In terms of the knowledge gained about Romney through the debate, 14 participants (12.96%) assumed others would learn less than themselves about Romney; another 37 of the participants (34.26%) supposed the others learned more than themselves; the last 57 of them (52.78%) did not think others gained more or less knowledge about Romney than themselves after watching the debate (Table 2).

Table 2. Number and percentage for assumed knowledge gaining about Obama and Romney through the debate.

	Assumed Knowledge Gaining (Number and Percentage)		
	Less than Selves	Same with Selves	More than Selves
About Obama	11 (10.2%)	46 (42.6%)	51 (47.2%)
About Romney	14 (13.0%)	37 (34.3%)	57 (52.8%)

N=108.

In terms of people’s assumed attitude change toward Obama after the debate, descriptive analysis indicated that more than half (51.85%) of the participants assumed others

would hold a more negative attitude toward Obama than themselves. Correspondingly, over half (56.48%) of the participants estimated other voters might hold a more positive attitude toward Romney than themselves, after watching the debate (Table 3).

Table 3. Number and percentage for participants' assumed attitude change about Obama and Romney through the debate.

	Assumed Attitude Change (Number and Percentage)		
	Negative than Selves	Same with Selves	Positive than Selves
Towards Obama	56 (51.9%)	36 (42.6%)	16 (47.2%)
Towards Romney	19 (13.0%)	27 (34.3%)	52 (56.5%)

N=108.

To test whether the differences in Tables 2 and 3 are statistically significant, two-way t-tests (Table 4 and Table 5) were performed, providing support for H1A and H1B, which predicted audiences of the debate would assume other audience members to gain more knowledge from the debate than themselves, and that other audience members would have a more negative attitude towards Obama and a more positive attitude towards Romney than themselves after the debate.

In terms of the assumed knowledge gain after the debate, the participants believed that they did learn something about Obama and Romney from the debate, with the mean scores being 2.25 and 3.05 respectively. The scores were taken on a 5-point scale, where 1 means they learned nothing more and 5 means they learned much more about the candidates. Data also showed participants generally believed both others and themselves gained more knowledge about Romney than about Obama. However, no matter the candidate, participants always presumed other audiences gained more knowledge than themselves (Table 4), hence supporting H1A.

Table 4. *t*-Test for Significant Differences Between Perceived Influences on Self and Others in Knowledge.

	Means			t-value
	Self	Others	Difference	
About Obama	2.25	2.71	.463	5.006**
About Romney	3.05	3.37	.324	3.422**

** $p < .001$

In terms of the assumed attitude change following the debate, participants commonly did not believe they had obvious opinion changes toward either of the two candidates ($M_{\text{Self-Obama}}=2.68$, $M_{\text{Self-Romney}}=2.81$), but they perceived that other voters probably held a more negative attitude toward Obama ($M_{\text{Other-Obama}}=2.21$) after the debate, and a more positive attitude toward Romney, ($M_{\text{Other-Romney}}=3.57$), than themselves. The scores were measured on a 5-point scale, from 1 to 5 standing for negative, kind of negative, stay the same, kind of positive, and positive, respectively. Table 5 shows that the differences were statistically significant; thus, H1B was supported.

Table 5. *t*-Test for Significant Differences Between Perceived Influences on Self and Others regarding Attitudes.

	Means			t-value
	Self	Others	Difference	
Towards Obama	2.68	2.21	-.463	-4.956**
Towards Romney	2.81	3.57	.759	6.192**

** $p < .001$

Results for Hypothesis 2. To test the second hypothesis, that the third-person effect (in both knowledge and attitude) would be stronger for the receivers (Democrats) of undesirable content than for the receivers (Republicans) of desirable content, the participants were grouped based on their party alignments. Data on Obama's supporters were used to test the third-person effect on recipients of undesirable content; meanwhile, data on Romney's

supporters were used to test the third-person effect on recipients of desirable content. Data on independents and other party members was not concerned in testing this hypothesis. Thus the valid number of participants for this hypothesis is 66, with 39 Obama supporters versus 27 Romney supporters.

The scale score of assumed knowledge gaining of “a third person” about a candidate was subtracted from the scale score of a participant’s assumed knowledge about the same candidate. A negative resulting number indicated this individual believed other audiences learned less than him or herself; A zero resulting number produced a near-zero self-other assumption gap; A positive resulting number showed that this audience supposed others learned more than him or herself through the debate. In a similar way, the score of an assumed attitude change of “a third person” toward a candidate was subtracted from the score of a participant’s own assumed attitude change toward the same candidate. If the resulting score is less than 0, this participant assumed other people to be more negatively influenced than oneself with regards to their attitude towards a candidate following the debate. Conversely, if the resulting score is larger than 0, it means this participant assumed other people to hold more positive attitudes than himself toward a candidate following the debate.

Firstly, a general percentage of self-other knowledge gaining and attitude change gap was calculated. In terms of the assumed knowledge gain gap between selves and others, there was not a significant percentage difference between Obama supporters and Romney supporters, regarding the knowledge gaining about Obama or about Romney (Table 6). If we compare it with the data of all the participants’ assumed self-other knowledge gain gap about Obama and Romney (Table 2), we can find that in the assumed knowledge gain gap with

regards to Obama, the percentage numbers that participants supposing themselves gained less or the same knowledge as others were roughly the same in Table 2 and Table 6. However, both groups of supporters had a smaller percentage claiming others learned more than themselves (Obama supporters' 38.5% and Romney supporters' 37 % in Table 6 versus 47.2% in Table 2, which included all participants). Besides, in terms of the assumed knowledge gain gap toward Romney, the proportions of both Obama and Romney supporters that assumed others learned less than themselves in Table 6 (partisan groups only) were about the same with the respective percentage number in Table 2, which included all participants (10.3 % of Obama supporters and 11.1% of Romney supporters in Table 6 versus 13.0% in Table 2). However, more Obama and Romney supporters sensed no knowledge gain gap (53.9% of Obama supporters and 59.3% of Romney supporters in Table 6) compared to the complete sample (34.3% in Table 2). Fewer partisans sensed others learned more than themselves (35.9% of Obama supporters and 29.6% of Romney supporters in Table 6) compared to the complete sample (52.8% in Table 2).

Table 6. Number and Percentage for Two Kinds of Supporters Assumed Self-other Knowledge Gain Gap About Obama and Romney After the Debate.

	Obama Supporters **			Romney Supporters ***		
	Less Than Self	Same	More Than Self	Less Than Self	Same	More Than Self
About Obama	4 (10.3%)	17 (43.6%)	15 (38.5%)	3 (11.1%)	14 (51.9%)	10 (37.0%)
About Romney	4 (10.3%)	21 (53.9%)	14 (35.9%)	3 (11.1%)	16 (59.3%)	8 (29.6%)

** Total N=39;

***Total N=27.

Regarding the assumed attitude change gap between selves and others, there was not a significant difference between Obama supporters and Romney supporters who supposed their

attitudes changed as much as the others'. Sixty-four percent of Obama supporters sensed others would harbor a negative attitude toward Obama, after the debate, and 0.0% of Romney's supporters assumed others would perceive a negative attitude towards Romney (Table 7). Correspondingly, few Obama supporters sensed others gained a more positive attitude towards Obama than themselves (7.7%), and an overwhelming part of them believed others would have a more positive attitude towards Romney than themselves (79.5%). Interestingly, Romney supporters were not as confident and optimistic about Romney. Compared with 64.1% of Obama's supporters, only 22.2% of Romney supporters believed others developed a more negative attitude toward Obama than themselves; Compared with 0.0% of Obama supporters, 59.3% of Romney supporters still worried that the others' attitude toward Romney were more negative than themselves. Also, there was a much bigger percentage of Romney supporters than Obama supporters believing that others held a more positive attitude toward Obama (44.5% of Romney supporters versus 7.7% of Obama supporters), and a much smaller percentage of Romney supporters than Obama supporters assuming that others held a more positive attitude towards Romney (18.5% of Romney supporters versus 79.5% of Obama supporters).

Table 7. Number and percentage for two groups of supporters' assumed self-other attitude change gap about Obama and Romney after the debate.

	Obama Supporters **			Romney Supporters ***		
	Negative Than Self	Same	Positive Than Self	Negative Than Self	Same	Positive Than Self
Towards Obama	25 (64.1%)	11 (28.2%)	3 (7.7%)	6 (22.2%)	9 (33.3%)	12 (44.5%)
Towards Romney	0 (0.0%)	8 (20.5%)	31 (79.5%)	16 (59.3%)	6 (22.2%)	5 (18.5%)

** Total N=39;

***Total N=27.

A two-way t-test was conducted to ascertain whether the differences observed in Table 7 were statistically significant. The T-test for perceived knowledge differences between Obama and Romney supporters indicated no significant difference (Table 8). To be specific, both Republicans and Democrats generally assumed others learned more than themselves, which was consistent with the percentage numbers in the larger sample (Table 6). H2A, which predicted that the receivers of undesirable content will perceive a higher self-other knowledge gap compared to the receivers of desirable content, was not supported.

Table 8. *t*-Test for Perceived Knowledge Differences Between Republican Participants and Democratic Participants.

	Means		t-Value
	Obama Supporters	Romney Supporters	
About Obama	.54	.52	.07
About Romney	.41	.37	.16

In terms of the perceived self-other attitude gap, Obama's supporters believed that other people would have more negative opinions than themselves ($M = -.66$), and Romney's assumed that other audiences held a more positive attitude toward Obama than themselves ($M = .22$). Moreover, the extent of Obama supporters' perception of other voters' negative attitude towards Obama was greater (.66) than the extent of Romney supporters' perception of other voters' positive attitude towards Obama (.22), as shown in Table 9. The same conclusion stood when comparing how the third-person effect worked on the two groups of participants with regards to their attitude towards Romney. Obama's supporters believed that other voters held a more positive opinion than themselves concerning Romney ($M = 1.33$), and Romney's supporters still felt that other voters' attitude toward Romney was more negative than themselves ($M = -.44$). The extent of Obama supporters' perceived more

positive opinion of other voters was greater than that of Romney supporters' perceived more negative opinion of other voters (with Obama's 1.33 versus Romney's .44). Results in Table 9 indicate a significant difference between Obama and Romney supporters regarding their perceived self-other attitude gap.

Table 9. *t*-Test for Perceived Attitude Differences Between Republican Participants and Democratic Participants.

	Means		t-Value
	Obama Supporters	Romney Supporter:	
Towards Obama	-.66	.22	-3.964**
Towards Romney	1.33	-.44	6.923**

** $p < .001$

Hypothesis 2B was additionally tested by comparing both Obama and Romney supporters' perceived attitude towards their own preferred candidates. Data showed that both of the two comparisons supported Hypothesis 2, with the absolute value of $M = -.66$ (Obama supporters' third-person effect toward Obama) bigger than that of $M = -.44$ (Romney supporters' third-person effect toward Romney), and the absolute value of $M = 1.33$ (Obama supporters' third-person effect toward Romney) bigger than that of $M = .22$ (Romney supporters' third-person effect toward Obama) (Table 9). The H2B, predicting that the receivers of undesirable content will perceive a higher self-other attitude gap compared to the receivers of desirable content, was supported.

Results for Hypothesis 3. The third hypothesis set, which explored a potential difference between strong partisans and weak partisans were tested from three perspectives, those being voting choice differences, assumed self-other knowledge gaining gap, and assumed self-other attitude change gap. As mentioned in the literature review, two dimensions were employed to determine if the individual was a partisan with strong or weak political wills

and opinions: political affiliation and political ideology. The former one offered an opportunity for participants to claim a party preference by themselves, and the latter one allowed researchers to gauge participants' party inclination. A participant was defined as having strong partisanship only when this individual claimed a party preference and this party preference was in accord with his party inclination. In this way, the data was grouped into two: the Republicans claiming to be conservative and the Democrats who claimed to be liberal were defined as participants with strong partisanship; the other participants, including liberal Republicans, conservative Democrats, and those with no party preference, were defined as participants with weak partisanship. As a result, 55 participants were classified as having strong partisanship and 53 participants were classified having weak partisanship.

To test H3A, that the debate had less impact on the strong partisans' voting choices compared to weak partisans, participants' voting choices ranged from 1 to 4, meaning Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and Others; while their final vote ranged from 1 to 4, meaning Obama, Romney, Others and Not Voting. Participants' voting choices and their final vote were compared, much like in the previous hypotheses, and shaped into a variable labeled as "voting change." It is worth mentioning that besides the easily-gauged voting choice change among strong partisans, voting choice was not regarded as changed unless an individual who was an independent or supported a third candidate voted for Obama or Romney in the end. Then a two-way t-test was conducted by the voting change data of the group with strong partisanship was compared with that of the group with weak partisanship. Hypothesis 3A was supported, with an absolute mean value of $M=.07$ for strong partisans voting change, and an absolute mean value of $M= 1.02$ for weak partisans (Table 10). The

difference is statistically significant.

Table 10. *t*-Test for the Different Voting Changes Between Participants with Strong Partisanship and Participants with Weak Partisanship.

	Means		t-Value
	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	
Voting Changes	.07	-1.02	6.76**

****P < .001**

Hypothesis 3B and 3C, which predicted voters with stronger partisanship would have stronger third-person effect regarding assumed knowledge gaining and attitude change gap respectively, were not supported. Compared with Hypothesis 3A, Hypothesis 3B and 3C were concerned with the difference in magnitudes of the third-person effect, instead of the influence of the debate on the voters, between participants with stronger partisanship and those with weaker partisanship. As before, the perceived knowledge and attitude of the participants were measured on a 5-point scale. Then the assumed knowledge gaining and attitude change of “a third person” towards a candidate was subtracted from a participant’s self-assumed knowledge gaining and attitude change towards the same candidate.

As in the testing of the first two hypotheses, a general calculation of number and percentage of participants with different perception was conducted. Regarding perceived knowledge gaining of self and others, both strong and weak partisans mostly assumed others learned the same or more than themselves following the debate (Table 11).

Table 11. Number and Percentage for Strong and Weak Partisans' Assumed Self-other Knowledge Gain Gap About Obama and Romney following the debate.

	Strong Partisans **			Weak Partisans ***		
	Less Than Self	Same	More Than Self	Less Than Self	Same	More Than Self
About Obama	7 (12.7%)	26 (47.3%)	22 (40%)	4 (7.5%)	25 (47.2%)	24 (45.3%)
About Romney	7 (12.7%)	30 (54.5%)	18 (32.7%)	7 (13.2%)	26 (49.1%)	20 (37.7%)

** Total N= 55;

*** Total N=53.

In contrast, regarding perceived self-other attitude gap, both strong and weak partisans overwhelmingly perceived other's attitude would be more negative than themselves towards Obama, and more positive than themselves towards Romney. However, a larger percentage of strong partisans believed others would hold a more negative attitude towards Romney than themselves (27.3%) in comparison to weak partisans (7.5%), which meant strong partisans were not as optimistic as weak partisans about Romney. On the other hand, a bigger percentage of strong partisans (27.3%) believed other would hold a more positive attitude towards Obama than that of weak partisans (3.7%), which meant strong partisans were not as pessimistic as weak partisans about Obama (Table 12).

Table 12. Number and Percentage for Strong and Weak Partisans' Assumed Self-other Attitude Change Gap About Obama and Romney following the Debate.

	Strong Partisans **			Weak Partisans ***		
	Negative Than Self	Same	Positive Than Self	Negative Than Self	Same	Positive Than Self
Towards Obama	24 (43.6%)	16 (29.1%)	15 (27.3%)	32 (60.4%)	19 (35.8%)	2 (3.7%)
Towards Romney	15 (27.3%)	13 (23.6%)	27 (49.1%)	4 (7.5%)	14 (26.4)	25 (47.2%)

** Total N= 55;

*** Total N=53.

After getting a general sense from the descriptive data, a two-way t-test was conducted to check significant statistic differences between strong and weak partisans. T-test for perceived knowledge differences between strong and weak partisans indicated that there was no significant difference (Table 13). In other words, both strong and weak partisans generally assumed others learned more than themselves. H3B that predicted strong partisans will perceive a higher self-other knowledge gap than weak partisans was not statistically supported.

Table 13. *t*-Test for Self-Other Perceived Knowledge Gain Gap Between Participants with Strong Partisanship and Participants with Weak Partisanship.

	Self-Other Gap Means		t-Value
	Strong Partisans**	Weak Partisans***	
About Obama	.49	.43	.31
About Romney	.38	.26	.62

** Total N=55;

*** Total N=53.

When comparing the different perception of other people's attitude change with the attitude change of themselves, we found the average difference in strong partisans' perception of attitude change toward Obama (Mean=-.22) was smaller than that of weak partisans' (Mean=-.72), which meant generally, the third-person effect was weaker for strong partisans. When we looked into the responses concerning people's attitude change towards Romney, we obtained the same conclusion that the magnitude of third-person perception from strong partisans (Mean= .51) was smaller than that from weak partisans (Mean=1.02). T-value in Table 14 indicated these differences were statistically significant, thus H3C, which predicted strong partisans would perceive a higher self-other attitude gap than weak partisans, was statistically supported.

Table 14. *t*-Test for Self-Other Perceived Attitude Change Gap Between Participants with Strong Partisanship and Participants with Weak Partisanship.

	Self-Other Gap Means		t-Value
	Strong Partisans	Weak Partisans	
Towards Obama	-.22	-.72	2.75*
Towards Romney	.51	1.02	-2.11*

* $P < .05$

Results for Research Question 1. To answer the first research question, which aimed to investigate gender differences in terms of self-other knowledge, attitude, and voting intentions gaps, we grouped the participants by gender. As a result, we attained 57 male participants and 51 female participants.

A two-way t-test indicated no significant difference of third-person effect between the two genders across all variables under scrutiny: self-other knowledge, attitude, or voting intentions gaps. In terms of perceived self-other knowledge gain, data showed that both female and male voters assumed others learned more than themselves about both candidates. Women's perceived self-other knowledge gap about Obama was slightly larger than that about Romney; meanwhile there was no such difference among male voters. Thus there was no significant difference found between female and male voters about perceived self-other knowledge gain gap about Obama or Romney (Table 15).

Table 15. *t*-Test for Self-Other Perceived Knowledge Gain Gap Between Female Participants and Male Participants.

	Self-Other Gap Means		t-Value	P-Value
	Female Voters**	Male Voters***		
About Obama	.41	.51	.52	.603
About Romney	.18	.46	1.48	.141

** Total N= 51;

*** Total N= 57.

The two-way t-test on the perceived self-other attitude indicated that both male and

female participants' perceived others to hold more negative attitudes toward Obama than themselves after the debate, while perceiving others as having more positive attitudes towards Romney than themselves. As shown in Table 16, the women's perceived self-other attitude gap towards Obama (Mean= -.51) was slightly larger than that of men's (Mean=-.42); meanwhile women's third person effect towards Romney (Mean= .61) was smaller than that of men's (Mean= .90). However, no statistically significant difference was detected between genders (Table 16).

Table 16. *t*-Test for Self-Other Perceived Attitude Gap Between Female Participants and Male Participants.

	Self-Other Gap Means		t-Value	P-Value
	Female Voters**	Male Voters***		
Towards Obama	-.51	-.42	.47	.638
Towards Romney	.61	.90	1.17	.245

** Total N= 51;

*** Total N= 57.

The two-way t-test for perceived voting intention gap suggested that both female and male voters assumed the others would mostly change their voting intentions. The perceived gap from male voters, with the mean as 1.65, was slightly larger than that from female voters, with the mean as 1.26. However, the t-value did not suggest a statistical significance between female and male voters in their perceived self-other voting intention gap (Table 17).

Table 17. *t*-Test for Self-Other Perceived Voting Intention Gap Between Female Participants and Male Participants.

	Self-Other Gap Means		t-Value	P-Value
	Female Voters**	Male Voters***		
Perceived Voting Intention Change	1.26	1.65	1.76	.081

** Total N= 51;

*** Total N= 57.

Results for Research Question 2. The second and final research question focused on the behavioral component of the third-person effect, seeking to compare participants' estimation of others people's voting change with the estimation of their own voting change. Data was collected on a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 standing for impossible to change, 6 standing for certainly to change, and 3 standing for not sure. If the resulting score is bigger than 0, this individual was defined to perceive other people as more likely than oneself to change their voting choices; if the score is smaller than 0, this individual was believed to assume that he was more likely to change his mind than others.

About 77.1% of the respondents perceived that other people were more likely to change their final voting choices. The two-way t-test result further suggested that when estimating their own voting changes, the participants generally believed they would not change (Mean= 1.24). However, when estimating other people's voting changes, the data showed that the respondents were not sure (Mean= 2.7). T-tests found a significant difference and thus verified the existence of third-person effect when people compare assumed behaviors of others to those of themselves (Table 18).

Table 18. *t*-Test for the Perceived Voting Changes Gap Between Others and Selves.

	Means			t-value
	Self	Others	Difference	
Perceived Voting Change	1.24	2.7	-1.463	-4.956**

****P< .001**

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Justifications of Results and Contributions to Theory

Overall, the study results in the current thesis essentially buttressed the third-person effect theory. This thesis aims to test and explore the third-person effect theory, as proposed by Davison in 1983, with regards to the first Presidential Debate in the 2012 Presidential Election. The investigation started by analyzing the general self-other perception gap of viewers, and further examined other decisive factors including message desirability, and viewers' partisanship and gender.

As reviewed in Chapter Two, most researchers did not hold a positive opinion regarding the influence of the presidential debate on voting choices (e.g., Abramowitz, 1978; Geer, 1988; Benoit & Hansen, 2006). Abramowitz (1978) observed that 77% of the respondents to his survey claimed to have watched the 1976 first presidential debate, which was consistent with the findings of the national survey of 1976 presidential election. Among these viewers, 57% watched the entire debate; meanwhile 43% watched only part of the debate. Among the 43 non-viewers in his survey, 12 of them claimed to be aware of the candidates' positions, which might be a result of previous exposure to reports and personal conversations. He further concluded that the debate produced very little change in candidate preferences; the change that did occur was unrelated to the differing political stances of the candidates.

In our study, we observed a viewer rating of nearly 60% in the student sample. It was noted that this percentage was relatively high, considering the fact that generally young

people are much more apathetic when it comes to politics (Berelson & Lazarsfeld, 1986). Among the 194 participants, 71 changed their choice of candidate during the time between the first presidential debate and Election Day. Of those 71 participants who changed their mind, only three were Democrats and another three were Republicans. The other 65 participants to change their voting choice were all undecided voters, including voters who supported a third candidate and voters who cared little for the election. This result is consistent with Geer's conclusion (1988) that the presidential debate was more likely to change voting choices among the weakly committed supporters. It also supports the "decline of parties" in contemporary American politics as suggested by Smith (1988). However, we also found that the viewer ratings of the voters who changed their final votes and of the voters who did not change their final votes were both about 50%, challenging Berelson and Lazarsfeld's (1986) doubts of the presidential debate being an effective campaign method.

This study added another layer of support to the validity of the third-person effect from the perspective of politics, which was rarely investigated in previous studies. The presidential debate provides a unique opportunity to test the third-person effect. First, the debate per se is not a socially desired or undesired issue that can be judged with a single value. This provided the possibility for the current study to use the same stimuli material to test effects on the third-person effect for both desirable and undesirable messages at the same time. Duck and Mullin (1995) conducted a study to explore how message desirability affects third-person effect. They prepared several stimulus materials, of which some were socially undesired messages and others were socially desired messages. The current study employed the presidential debate as the only stimulus material to test message desirability, which is

different from all the previous studies that focused on the message desirability variable. Second, different from the previous studies on controversial issues (e.g., Price & Tewksbury, 1996; Price et al., 1997; Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Salwen & Dupagne's, 2003), the controversial effect of the presidential debate was not derived from a social common value, but rather from the individual's partisanship, which helped to explore partisanship as a mediating factor. Third, the great contrast of unified and overwhelming remarks about Obama's unexpected disappointing performance on the presidential debate in 2012 and his promisingly leading position before the debate made it possible for the researchers to test the third-person effect in a presidential debate context, which has been rarely done before. Fourth, a significant popularity of Obama among female voters noticed by reporters in 2012 (e.g., Marcotte, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Bassett, 2012) inspired the exploration of gender variable's effects on the third-person effect.

The first hypothesis essentially supported the third-person effect, and was consistent with previous studies. After Davison's (1983) proposal and trials of the third-person effect, there has been a growing body of research examining said effect. When testing the third-person effect, the current study went beyond the attitudinal and behavioral components and explored the knowledge layer of the effects. Data showed that participants believed other people learned more knowledge than themselves from or following the debate, and that negative attitude towards Obama and positive attitude towards Romney were growing faster in other audiences' mind than in their own minds. The result that self-other knowledge gap was in accord with self-other attitude gap was consistent with previous studies that generally believed that as knowledge increases, the perceived harm of negative media content increases.

Participants' belief that others learned more knowledge also might be because people usually arrogantly believe themselves as experts, as Lasora (1989) and Atwood (1994) found in their studies. On the contrary, one might argue that since people think themselves as smarter than others, they might believe others would learn less than themselves from a certain message. This might be true for most newly issued messages and information, but not true for presidential debates, which occurred after significant amounts of information about candidates had been sent out from political campaign organizations.

The second hypothesis, inspired by Duck and Mullin's research in 1995, differentiated the message content into negative and positive categories, according to receivers' partisanships. There was no significant difference between Obama and Romney supporters about their perceived self-other knowledge gain gap. However, when we compared the percentage of the partisans who believed others learned more than themselves to the percentage of all the participants who believed others learned more than themselves, we found much fewer people in partisan groups believed they learned less than others (Obama supporters' 38.5% and Romney supporters' 37.0% in Table 6 versus 47.2% in Table 2). This might also be explained by Lasora (1989) and Atwood's (1994) conclusions that people tend to believe themselves as experts.

The attitude layer of Hypothesis 2 was supported. Compared to 64.1% of Obama's supporters, only 22.2% of Romney supporters believed others developed a more negative attitude towards Obama than themselves; Compared to 0.0% of Obama supporters, up to 59.3% of Romney supporters still worried that the others' attitude towards Romney were more negative than themselves. Also, there was a much bigger percentage of Romney supporters

than Obama supporters believing that others held a more positive attitude towards Obama (44.5% of Romney supporters versus 7.7% of Obama supporters), and a much smaller percentage of Romney supporters than Obama supporters assuming that others held a more positive attitude towards Romney (18.5% of Romney supporters versus 79.5% of Obama supporters). The following two-way t-test further determined that the receivers (Democrats) of undesirable content will perceive a higher self-other attitude gap compared to the receivers (Republicans) of desirable content. In the context of the 2012 first presidential debate, it is equivalent to the notion that Democrats would worry about other people's decreased support for Obama and increased support for Romney, but not about themselves (the third-person perception). Whereas Republicans thought people's gaining support for Romney and reducing support for Obama was less than their own (the first-person perception).

The results for Hypothesis 3A further reinforce the concept that partisanship holds an integral role in influencing voting decisions in political campaigns. As reviewed in Chapter Two, the effect of election campaigns is conditional. It is generally agreed, and also supported in the current survey, that early voting deciders seldom change their mind. Early-voting deciders refuse to follow undesirable news, and always attempt to view their favored candidate in a favorable light regardless of any negative news. This can help explain why Obama's supporters did not discontinue their support for Obama, following his disappointing performance in the first presidential debate.

Testing of the H3B and H3C provided more information regarding the relationship between partisanship and the third-person effect. There are currently not many in-depth studies involving partisanship and the third-person effect. However, studies on personal

expertise and knowledge as a variable of investigating third-person effect can be a starting point for analyzing the influence of partisanship on the magnitude of the third-person effect. It has been reviewed that individuals who evaluate themselves as knowledgeable tended to overestimate others' susceptibility to be influenced by media. By extrapolating from this statement, with regards to the presidential debate, it can be concluded, via the results from Hypothesis 3B and 3C, that individuals who consider themselves to be more knowledgeable of politics and the candidates tended to overestimated others' susceptibility to be negatively influenced by Obama's poor performance in the 2012 first presidential debate.

However, the results of Hypothesis 3B and 3C did not indicate a statistically significant difference in the self-other gap between participants with strong partisanship and participants with weak partisanship. To be specific about self-other perceived knowledge gain gap, both strong and weak partisans mostly believed they learned less than others. Interestingly, they might hold different excuses. The strong partisans might take themselves as political experts thus they had already known enough before the debate; The weak partisans might take others as smarter political learners than themselves since they knew less about politics.

To be specific about self-other perceived attitude change gap, a larger percentage of strong partisans believed others would hold a more negative attitude towards Romney than themselves (27.3%) in comparison to weak partisans (7.5%), which meant strong partisans were not as optimistic as weak partisans about Romney. Conversely, strong partisans (27.3%) believed others would hold a more positive attitude towards Obama than weak partisans (3.7%), which meant strong partisans were not as pessimistic as weak partisans about Obama

(Table 12). The two-way t-test refuted expectation that voters with stronger partisanship would assume a larger self-other gap regarding attitudes toward Obama and Romney. When perceiving attitude towards Obama, strong partisans estimated other voters might hold a more, but not that much more, negative attitude towards Obama (Difference=-.22); while, weak partisans had a self-other gap of -.72. When it came to the attitude towards Romney, both strong partisans and weak partisans assumed others held a more positive attitude than themselves towards Romney. However, the self-other gap of weak partisans was, again, larger than that of strong partisans (1.02 versus .51).

These results might be because the strong partisans were more cautious and conservative in judging election trends. Also, Romney's supporters might contribute a big proportion to strong partisans about their "not that optimistic about Romney"-- as mentioned before (Table 7), 59.3% of them assumed others to hold a more negative attitude towards Romney. Similarly, Romney's supporters might contribute a big proportion to strong partisans about their "not that pessimistic about Obama" -- as mentioned before (Table 7), 44.5% of them assumed others to hold a more positive attitude towards Obama. In this way, it might not be proper to take partisanship as a proxy variable to that of personal expertise and knowledge in third-person effect studies. No matter the reason behind this phenomenon, further studies testing partisanship are needed. Future studies can also look into political efficacy as a mediating factor.

The exploration of gender as a mediating factor of the third-person effect indicated that there was no significant difference between the third-person perception size of female and male voters. Therefore, the commonly observed phenomenon that Obama was more

popular than Romney among female voters resulted due to other reasons, such as Obama's political stances, campaign strategies, and/or his personal charm, leaving potential for further studies. The insignificance of gender did not come as a major surprise, however, as gender as a variable has never shown consistent patterns in previous third-person effect studies.

Most studies aiming to test the behavioral component of the third-person effect stop at "willingness of doing" instead of testing actual behaviors. Likewise, the current study did not manage to correct this limitation due to several constraints, such as the ability to conduct a pre-debate survey and a post-debate survey. Instead, when scrutinizing the second research question, we compared participants' estimation of others people's voting change with the estimation of their own voting change, and tried to build a foundation for future studies on the behavioral component of the third-person effect. The result was that 77.1% of the respondents perceived that other people were more likely to change their final voting choices. The self-other gap of perceiving the possibility that others would change their voting choices was -1.463, as on average, it was believed by 77.1% of the respondents that other people are 1.463 (nearly two points on a six-point scale) more likely to change their final voting choices. Behavioral intentions can help researchers to predict actual behaviors, which can be a new dimension of defining behavioral component of the third-person effect in future studies.

In fact, the comparison of intentions is nearly the best job we can do for the current study. According to Davison (1983) and Perloff's (1999) definition of the behavioral component of the third-person effect, the behavioral component of the third-person effect is an actual action resulting from the perceptual component. However, we could not collect data on how participants planned to vote right after the debate, due to realistic constraints (the IRB

approval process delayed the start of the data collection). Many possible conditions, such as inter-personal communication, between the time of the debate and that of answering the questionnaire might have affected participants' voting choices. What the researchers can do in current study, for achieving a more accurate results, is to compare people's perceived voting intentions of others with their own voting intentions, instead of comparing people's pre-debate voting choices to their actual votes after watching the debate. To evaluate people's perceived self-other action intention can be a way to test the behavioral component in future third-person effect studies, since for most time, it is not realistic to measure the third-person effect right after the event under scrutiny occurred, which is the best time-point according to Davison's (1983) theoretical frame. Once respondents are exposed to new related information, such as inter-personal communication and the publication of public opinion surveys, the measurement of the third-person effect is diminished.

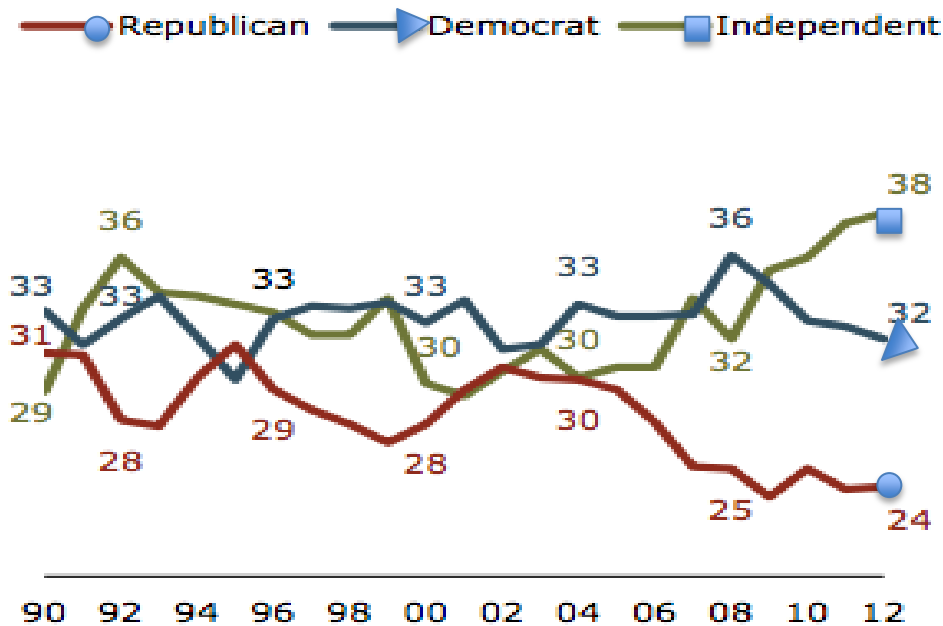
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that future research can address. This study could have produced more precise results if the researcher had expected a U-turn of the two candidates' favorability in the first presidential debate. In that vein, a pre-test could be conducted for a better cognition of voters' pre-debate voting intentions, instead of judging participants' voting intentions by their political affiliations. Due to IRB constraints, the questionnaires were disseminated one month after the first presidential debate, which could wan the accuracy of responses. During those 30 days, inter-personal talk, published news articles and survey results, human forgetting, and other possible factors might have diminished the accuracy of the answers.

The request for participants sent out to 3,000 people received only 200 responses, indicating a potentially biased sample. Fortunately, the sample was heterogeneous enough to proceed with the data analysis. To ensure the accuracy of responses, the online survey link was closed on the 45th day after the debate, thus the sample size was not big enough to be stratified for some further tests, such as to investigate the interaction of the gender and the partisanship variables. Different understanding of the political concepts of “conservative” and “liberal” between the researchers and the participants in this study might also have led to reduced response accuracy. Another limitation of this study could be dishonest answers from the respondents who did not want to make known their final votes, although they were told the survey was anonymous.

A significant proportion of the participants in this survey (33%) were independent. Future studies could try to capture a more representative sample, with increased representation of Republican and Democrat supporters. As reviewed, a “decline of parties” is broadly acknowledged in contemporary American politics (Smith, 1988; Greenberg & Page, 1997; Wilson, 2002). According to a long-term observation of Pew Research Center (2012d) from the year 1987 to 2012, party divisions have been widened and number of independents is growing (Figure 1). The latest survey indicated that 38% participants claimed themselves as independents, which is the highest proportion in past two decades (Pew Research Center, 2012d). Moreover, the number of Democrats or the lean Democratic stay nearly the same over 20 years (from 33% to 32%), and maintain advantage; Meanwhile, the number of Republicans or the lean Republican has gone down from 31% to 24% (Pew Research Center, 2012d).

Figure 3. Trends of Partisanship Breakdown from 1990 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012d).



Besides the partisans, independents might also be a good entry point for future studies, according to the trends in the partisanship breakdown. As the number of independents is growing, they are becoming a major group of voters that research should pay attention to; meanwhile, it has been widely acknowledged that independents should be the target for political campaigns. As a result, how the independents judge the campaign events and how to manipulate their judgments can be a new focus in future studies on the third-person effect.

It can be concluded that the third-person effect is a phenomenon that occurs solely within people's minds, which is unlike most other communication phenomena motivated by people's interactions. Thus the third-person effect is a fragile, easily disturbed phenomenon that is extremely difficult to test. Once people begin to talk to each other about their thoughts, or read articles pertaining to a situation, thus knowing each others' opinions, the accuracy of any test for the third-person effect would decrease. But the ideal condition of testing the third-person effect, in which no one talks to each other about their thoughts, is nearly

impossible to achieve. To limit this difficulty, study of the third-person effects is better to be conducted right after the objective event occurs.

One solution of this fragile nature of the third-person effect is to test the third-person effect in conjunction with other communication theories, as concluded in the “model of the third-person effect” (Perloff, 1993), and other disturbing factors observed by other scholars (Tiedge et al., 1991; Mutz, 1989; David & Johnson, 1998; Duck, Hogg et al., 1995). Especially in the current study, it would be helpful to have the interpersonal communication and participants’ media use involved. Further studies could also focus on how long the third-person effect lasts, by administering several surveys over a longer period of time after the objective event happens. The results can benefit political campaign managers and public relations workers in arranging their campaign schedules. For example, the shorter the time is between Election Day and such a U-turn debate, or other U-turn events, the more powerful the third-person effect on last-minute voters is likely to be.

Leaving the third-person effect aside, we can hardly make any conclusion about how the 2012 first presidential debate influenced people’s voting choices. First, we designed the questionnaire for testing the third-person effect other than the debate influence. In this way, we essentially attempted to track a self-other gap of how participants perceived the influence of the debate on selves and others, instead of a pre-post knowledge, attitude, and voting intentions change of participants. Second, the period between the 2012 first presidential debate and the questionnaire dissemination contributed to stories including unpredictions and uncertainties. In other words, Obama’s being elected alone cannot indicate a useless debate. Especially when we lack the data of how Obama and Romney were supported, such as how

much more Obama were supported than Romney and how steady were Romney's supporters, before the debate by the participants, it is reckless and too early to ignore the debate's credits.

Ultimately, this study found empirical evidence that the third-person effect existed among the public after the 2012 first presidential debate. This occurrence may have been a catalyst for other actions of the public, such as being persuaded and starting to persuade others. Other results showed that the third-person effect has no power in changing final voting decisions of people with strong partisanship, which indicates consistency with other communication research. Still, further study is needed to explore other aspects of the third-person effect, in order to better understand it and allow us to make predictions after various more or less desirable political events.

REFERENCES

- Abramowitz, A. I. (1978). The impact of a presidential debate on voter rationality. *American Journal of Political Science*, 680-690.
- Alicke, M. D., Klotz, M. L., Breitenbecher, D. L., Yurak, T. J., & Vredenburg, D. S. (1995). Personal contact, individuation, and the better-than-average effect. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 68(5), 804.
- Andsager, J. L., & White, H. A. (2007). *Self versus others: Media, messages, and the third-person effect*. Routledge.
- Atwood, L. E. (1994). Illusions of media power: The third-person effect. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 71(2), 269-281.
- Bandura, A. (1971). Social learning theory.
- Bartels, L. M. (2000). Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952-1996. *American Journal of Political Science*, 35-50.
- Bassett, L. (2012, November 7). Gender Gap In 2012 Election Aided Obama Win. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/07/gender-gap-2012-election-obama_n_2086004.html
- Benoit, W. L., McKinney, M. S., & Holbert, R. L. (2001). Beyond learning and persona: Extending the scope of presidential debate effects. *Communication Monographs*, 68(3), 259-273.
- Benoit, W. L., & Hansen, G. J. (2004). Presidential debate watching, issue knowledge, character evaluation, and vote choice. *Human Communication Research*, 30(1), 121-144.
- Berelson, B. R., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & McPhee, W. N. (1986). *Voting: A study of opinion formation in a presidential election*. University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, J. D. (1986). Evaluations of self and others: Self-enhancement biases in social judgments. *Social Cognition*, 4(4), 353-376.
- Box-Steffensmeier, J. M., & Kimball, D. (1999). The timing of voting decisions in presidential campaigns. In *Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association*, Chicago.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1980). *The american voter*. University of Chicago Press.

- Carlin, D. B. (1992). A rationale for a focus group study. *The*, 3-19.
- Chaffee, S. H., & Choe, S. Y. (1980). Time of decision and media use during the Ford-Carter campaign. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 44(1), 53-69.
- Chapin, J. (2002). Third-person perception and school violence. *Communication Research Reports*, 19(3), 216-225.
- Cheng, H., & Riffe, D. (2008). Attention, perception, and perceived effects: Negative political advertising in a battleground state of the 2004 presidential election. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11(2), 177-196.
- Chia, S. C., Lu, K. H., & McLeod, D. M. (2004). Sex, lies, and video compact disc a case study on third-person perception and motivations for media censorship. *Communication Research*, 31(1), 109-130.
- Cohen, J., Mutz, D., Price, V., & Gunther, A. (1988). PERCEIVED IMPACT OF DEFAMATION AN EXPERIMENT ON THIRD-PERSON EFFECTS. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 52(2), 161-173.
- Cohen, J., & Davis, R. G. (1991). Third-person effects and the differential impact in negative political advertising. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 68(4), 680-688.
- Dalton, R. J., Beck, P. A., & Huckfeldt, R. (1998). Partisan cues and the media: Information flows in the 1992 presidential election. *American Political Science Review*, 111-126.
- David, P., & Johnson, M. A. (1998). The role of self in third- person effects about body image. *Journal of Communication*, 48(4), 37-58.
- Davidson, A. R., Yantis, S., Norwood, M., & Montano, D. E. (1985). Amount of information about the attitude object and attitude-behavior consistency. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 49(5), 1184.
- Davison, W. P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 1-15.
- Dina, L. G., Borzekowski, J. A., & Flora, E. F. (1999). The perceived influence of cigarette advertisements and smoking susceptibility among seventh graders. *Journal of Health Communication*, 4(2), 105-118.
- Dority, B. (1989). Feminist Moralism, "Pornography", and Censorship. *Pornography: Private Right or Public Menace*, 111, 112.

- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2004). Right about others, wrong about ourselves? Actual and perceived self-other differences in resistance to persuasion. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(4), 585-603.
- Duck, J. M., & Mullin, B. A. (1995). The perceived impact of the mass media: Reconsidering the third person effect. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 25(1), 77-93.
- Duck, J. M., Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. J. (1995). Me, us and them: Political identification and the third- person effect in the 1993 Australian federal election. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 25(2), 195-215.
- Eveland, W. P., Nathanson, A. I., Detenber, B. H., & McLEOD, D. M. (1999). Rethinking the Social Distance Corollary Perceived Likelihood of Exposure and the Third-Person Perception. *Communication Research*, 26(3), 275-302.
- Fabrigar, L. R., Petty, R. E., Smith, S. M., & Crites Jr, S. L. (2006). Understanding knowledge effects on attitude-behavior consistency: The role of relevance, complexity, and amount of knowledge. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(4), 556.
- Finkel, S. E. (1993). Reexamining the 'minimal effects' model in recent presidential campaigns. *Journal of Politics*, 55(1), 1-21.
- Fournier, P., Nadeau, R., Blais, A., Gidengil, E., & Nevitte, N. (2004). Time-of-voting decision and susceptibility to campaign effects. *Electoral Studies*, 23(4), 661-681.
- Geer, J. G. (1988). The effects of presidential debates on the electorate's preferences for candidates. *American Politics Research*, 16(4), 486-501.
- Golan, G. J., Banning, S. A., & Lundy, L. (2008). Likelihood to Vote, Candidate Choice, and the Third-Person Effect Behavioral Implications of Political Advertising in the 2004 Presidential Election. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(2), 278-290.
- Gopoian, J. D., & Hadjiharalambous, S. (1994). Late-deciding voters in presidential elections. *Political Behavior*, 16(1), 55-78.
- Griswold, W. F. (1994, August). Third-person effects and voting intentions in a presidential primary election. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, Atlanta, GA.
- Gunther, A. (1991). What we think others think cause and consequence in the third-person effect. *Communication Research*, 18(3), 355-372.

- Gunther, A. C., & Thorson, E. (1992). Perceived Persuasive Effects of Product Commercials and Public Service Announcements Third-Person Effects in New Domains. *Communication Research*, 19(5), 574-596.
- Gunther, A. C., & Mundy, P. (1993). Biased optimism and the third-person effect. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 70(1), 58-67.
- Gunther, A. C., & Hwa, A. P. (1996). Public perceptions of television influence and opinions about censorship in Singapore. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8(3), 248-265.
- Greenberg, E., & Page, B. (1997). *The Struggle for Democracy* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Hillygus, D. S., & Jackman, S. (2003). Voter decision making in election 2000: campaign effects, partisan activation, and the Clinton legacy. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(4), 583-596.
- Hitchon, J. C., Chang, C., & Harris, R. (1997). Should women emote? Perceptual bias and opinion change in response to political ads for candidates of different genders. *Political Communication*, 14(1), 49-69.
- Hoffner, C., Plotkin, R. S., Buchanan, M., Anderson, J.D., Kamigaki, S.K., Hubbs, L.A., Kowalczyk, L., Silberg, K., & Pastorek, A. (2001). The Third-Person effect in perceptions of the influence of television violence. *Journal of Communication*, 51(2), 283-299.
- Hofstetter, C. R., & Buss, T. F. (1980). Politics and last-minute political television. *The Western Political Quarterly*, 24-37.
- Huh, J., Delorme, D. E., & Reid, L. N. (2004). The third-person effect and its influence on behavioral outcomes in a product advertising context: The case of direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising. *Communication Research*, 31(5), 568-599.
- Innes, J. M., & Zeitz, H. (1988). The public's view of the impact of the mass media: A test of the 'third person' effect. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18(5), 457-463.
- Jackson, D. (2012, November 9). Obama, Romney split votes by age, race, gender, exit poll shows. Retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2012/11/09/obama-romney-gallup-gender-gap/1695565/>
- Jamieson, K. H. (1987). *Television, presidential campaigns, and debates*. In J. L.

- Jensen, J. D., & Hurley, R. J. (2005). Third-person effects and the environment: Social distance, social desirability, and presumed behavior. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 242-256.
- Kaid, L. L., McKinney, M. S., & Tedesco, J. C. (2000). *Civic dialogue in the 1996 presidential campaign: Candidate, media, and public voices*. Hampton Pr.
- Kallgren, C. A., & Wood, W. (1986). Access to attitude-relevant information in memory as a determinant of attitude-behavior consistency. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 22(4), 328-338.
- Katz, E. (1973). *Platforms and windows: broadcasting's role in election campaigns*. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 48 (2), 304-314.
- Lambe, J. L., & McLeod, D. M. (2005). Understanding Third-Person Perception Processes: Predicting Perceived Impact on Self and Others for Multiple Expressive Contexts. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 277-291.
- Lasorsa, D. L. (1989). Real and Perceived Effects of " Amerika.". *Journalism Quarterly*, 66(2), 373-78.
- Lee, B., & Tamborini, R. (2005). Third-Person Effect and Internet Pornography: The Influence of Collectivism and Internet Self-Efficacy. *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), 292-310.
- Lo, V. H., & Paddon, A. (2001). Third- person effect, gender differences, pornography exposure and support for restriction of pornography. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 11(1), 120-142.
- Lo, V. H., & Wei, R. (2002). Third-person effect, gender, and pornography on the Internet. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(1), 13-33.
- Lowry, D. T., & Sundararaman, K. H. (2003). Population validity and subject selection bias in eight marketing and mass communication journals: A critical review. Paper presented to the *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, Kansas City, MO.
- Marcotte, A. (2012, October 22). Women are for Obama, men are for Romney. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/10/22/the_gender_gap_women_support_obama_more_than_romney_for_economic_reasons.html
- McLeod, D. M., Eveland, W. P., & Nathanson, A. I. (1997). Support for Censorship of Violent and Misogynic Rap Lyrics An Analysis of the Third-Person Effect. *Communication Research*, 24(2), 153-174.

- Mulder, R. D. (1978). The political effects of the Carter-Ford debate: An experimental analysis. *Sociological Focus*, 11(1), 33-45.
- Mutz, D. C. (1989). The influence of perceptions of media influence: Third person effects and the public expression of opinions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1(1), 3-23.
- Paek, H. J., Pan, Z., Sun, Y., Abisaid, J., & Houden, D. (2005). The Third-Person Perception as Social Judgment An Exploration of Social Distance and Uncertainty in Perceived Effects of Political Attack Ads. *Communication Research*, 32(2), 143-170.
- Paul, B., Salwen, M. B., & Dupagne, M. (2000). The third-person effect: A meta-analysis of the perceptual hypothesis. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3(1), 57-85.
- Paxton, M. A. (1995). The third-person effect and attitudes toward expression. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee.
- Perloff, R. M. (1999). The third person effect: A critical review and synthesis. *Media Psychology*, 1(4), 353-378.
- Petty, R. E., & Krosnick, J. A. (1995). *Attitude strength: Antecedents and consequences*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Pew Research Center. (2012a, September 19). Obama Ahead with Stronger Support, Better Image and Lead on Most Issues. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/19/obama-ahead-with-stronger-support-better-image-and-lead-on-most-issues/>
- Pew Research Center. (2012b, October 8). Romney's Strong Debate Performance Erases Obama's Lead. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2012/10/08/romneys-strong-debate-performance-erases-obamas-lead/>
- Pew Research Center. (2012c). 2012 Election Voter Preferences. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/obama-romney-voter-preferences/#charts>
- Pew Research Center. (2012d, June 4). Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2012/06/04/section-9-trends-in-party-affiliation/>
- Pfau, M., & Eveland, W. P. (1992). Debates versus other communication sources: The pattern of information and influence. *The*, 155-173.

- Price, V., Huang, L. N., & Tewksbury, D. (1997). Third-person effects of news coverage: Orientations toward media. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74(3), 525-540.
- Price, V., & Tewksbury, D. (1996). Measuring the third-person effect of news: The impact of question order, contrast and knowledge. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8(2), 120-141.
- Rojas, H., Shah, D. V., & Faber, R. J. (1996). For the good of others: Censorship and the third-person effect. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8(2), 163-186.
- Rucinski, D., & Salmon, C. T. (1990). The 'other' as the vulnerable voter: A study of the third-person effect in the 1988 US presidential campaign. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2(4), 345-368.
- Salwen, M. B. (1998). Perceptions of Media Influence and Support for Censorship The Third-Person Effect in the 1996 Presidential Election. *Communication Research*, 25(3), 259-285.
- Salwen, M. B., & Driscoll, P. D. (1997). Consequences of third-person perception in support of press restrictions in the OJ Simpson trial. *Journal of Communication*, 47(2), 60-78.
- Salwen, M. B., & Dupagne, M. (1999). The Third-Person Effect Perceptions of the Media's Influence and Immoral Consequences. *Communication Research*, 26(5), 523-549.
- Salwen, M. B., & Dupagne, M. (2001). Third_Person Perception of Television Violence: The Role of Self_Perceived Knowledge. *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 211-236.
- Salwen, M. B., & Dupagne, M. (2003). News of Y2K and experiencing Y2K: Exploring the relationship between the third-person effect and optimistic bias. *Media Psychology*, 5(1), 57-82.
- Scharrer, E. (2002). Third-Person Perception and Television Violence The Role of Out-Group Stereotyping in Perceptions of Susceptibility to Effects. *Communication Research*, 29(6), 681-704.
- Schmitt, K. M., Gunther, A. C., & Liebhart, J. L. (2004). Why partisans see mass media as biased. *Communication Research*, 31(6), 623-641.
- Shah, D. V., Faber, R. J., & Youn, S. (1999). Susceptibility and Severity Perceptual Dimensions Underlying the Third-Person Effect. *Communication Research*, 26(2), 240-267.

- Smith, H. (1988). *The power game: How Washington works* (pp. 139-46). New York: Random House.
- Sun, Y., Pan, Z., & Shen, L. (2008). Understanding the Third- Person Perception: Evidence From a Meta- Analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 58(2), 280-300.
- Tiedge, J. T., Silverblatt, A., Havice, M. J., & Rosenfeld, R. (1991). Discrepancy between perceived first-person and perceived third-person mass media effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 68(1-2), 141-154.
- Wei, R., & Lo, V. H. (2007). The third-person effects of political attack ads in the 2004 US presidential election. *Media Psychology*, 9(2), 367-388.
- Wei, R., Lo, V. H., & Lu, H. Y. (2011). Examining the perceptual gap and behavioral intention in the perceived effects of polling news in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election. *Communication Research*, 38(2), 206-227.
- Weinstein, N. D. (1980). Unrealistic optimism about future life events. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 39(5), 806.
- White, H. A., & Dillon, J. F. (2000). Knowledge about others' reaction to a public service announcement: The impact on self persuasion and third-person perception. *Journalism & Mass communication quarterly*, 77(4), 788-803.
- Wills, T. A. (1981). Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological bulletin*, 90(2), 245.
- Wilson, W. (2002). *Congressional government: A study in American politics*. Transaction Pub.
- Wood, W. (1982). Retrieval of attitude-relevant information from memory: Effects on susceptibility to persuasion and on intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42(5), 798.
- Youn, S., Faber, R. J., & Shah, D. V. (2000). Restricting gambling advertising and the third-person effect. *Psychology and Marketing*, 17(7), 633-649.

Appendix A
SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Voters' perception of the 2012 first presidential debate's effects

I. Political Engagement

1. What is your political affiliation?

- (1) Democrat
- (2) Republican
- (3) Independent
- (4) Other

2. How is your political ideology?

Extremely conservative

Extremely liberal

____:____:____:____:____:____:____

3. Did you follow the first presidential debates this year on Oct. 3rd, moderated by Jim Lehrer of the PBS, focusing on domestic policy?

- (1) Yes
- (2) No

II. Perception of Effects

4. How much more did you learn about Obama from the first presidential debate?

Nothing more

Much more

____:____:____:____:____

5. How much more did you learn about Romney from the first presidential debate?

Nothing more

Much more

____:____:____:____:____

6. How much more do you think the other people have learned about Obama from the first presidential debate?

Nothing more

Much more

____:____:____:____:____

7. How much more do you think the other people have learned about Romney from the first presidential debate?

Nothing more

Much more

____:____:____:____:____

8. How did you change your previous attitude toward Obama according to the first presidential debate?

Negative

stay the same

Positive

____:____:____:____:____

9. How did you change your previous attitude toward Romney according to the first presidential debate?

Negative

stay the same

Positive

____:____:____:____:____

10. How do you think the other people change their previous attitude toward Obama according to the first presidential debate?

Negative

stay the same

Positive

____:____:____:____:____

11. How do you think the other people change their previous attitude toward Romney according to the first presidential debate?

Negative

stay the same

Positive

____:____:____:____:____

12. How much did the first debate change your voting choice for Obama/Romney?

Not change

will change

____:____:____:____:____

13. How likely do you think the other people were to be changed their voting choice for Obama/Romney by this debate?

Not change

will change

____:____:____:____:____

14. Who did you actually vote for in the end?

(1) Obama

(2) Romney

(3) Other

(4) I did not vote

III. Demographic information

15. What is the highest formal education you have completed?

- (1) Less than high school graduate
- (2) High school graduate
- (3) Vocational school/ technical school/ junior college
- (4) Undergraduate education
- (5) Graduate education and higher

16. What was your age on your last birthday? _____ years

17. What is your gender?

- (1) Male
- (2) Female

Thank you for participating in this study!

APPENDIX B

Code Book: Voters' perception of the 2012 first presidential debate's effects

Question No.	Variable name	Variable label	Values	Missing values
	Id	Respondent id number		9999
1	Paff	People's identification of their partisanship	1=Democratic 2=Republican 3=Independent 4=Others	9
2	Pid	People's perception of their own ways to look at things	1= Extremely Conservative 2= Conservative 3= Almost Conservative 4= neutral 5= Almost Liberal 6= Liberal 7= Extremely Liberal	9
3	Follow	If people have followed televised presidential debate.	1=Yes 2=No	9
4	SfKnO	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect their previous knowledge of Obama.	1=Nothing more 2=A little more 3=A lot of 4=Kind of much 5=Much more	9
5	SfKnR	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect their previous knowledge of Romney.	1=Nothing more 2=A little more 3=A lot of 4=Kind of much 5=Much more	9
6	OthKnO	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect others' previous knowledge of Obama.	1=Nothing more 2=A little more 3=A lot of 4=Kind of much 5=Much more	9
7	OthKnR	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect others' previous knowledge of Romney.	1=Nothing more 2=A little more 3=A lot of 4=Kind of much 5=Much more	9
	SfAtO	How much do people	1=Negative	9

8		think the first presidential debate affect their previous attitude of Obama.	2=Kind of negative 3=Stay the same 4=Kind of positive 5=Positive	
9	SfAtR	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect their previous attitude of Romney.	1=Negative 2=Kind of negative 3=Stay the same 4=Kind of positive 5=Positive	9
10	OthAtO	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect others' previous attitude of Obama.	1=Negative 2=Kind of negative 3=Stay the same 4=Kind of positive 5=Positive	9
11	OthAtR	How much do people think the first presidential debate affect others' previous attitude of Romney.	1=Negative 2=Kind of negative 3=Stay the same 4=Kind of positive 5=Positive	9
12	PsbSf	How likely do people think they are going to change their voting choice for Obama/Romney.	1=Impossible to change 2=Might not change 3=Not sure 4=Might change 6=Certainly to change	9
13	PsbOth	How likely do people think the others are going to change their voting choice for Obama/Romney.	1=Impossible to change 2=Might not change 3=Not sure 4=Might change 6=Certainly to change	9
14	FinalV	Who did the participant vote for in the end.	1= Obama 2= Romney 3= Other 4= I did not vote.	9
15	educ	Highest formal education completed	1=less than high school 2=high school graduate 3=vocational school/technical school/junior college 4=undergraduate degree 5=graduate education and higher	9
16	age	Age on last birthday	Enter age	99

17	gender	Gender	1=male 2=female	9
----	--------	--------	--------------------	---

Appendix C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

Date: 12/6/2012

To: Ge Wang
3414 Orion Dr #240
Ames, IA 50010

CC: Dr. Raluca Cozma
118 Hamilton Hall
Qi Chen
3414 Orion Dr #240

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Voters' Perception of the Effects on Themselves and on the Other Voter about Presidential Debate in USA

IRB ID: 12-572

Study Review Date: 12/5/2012

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
 - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
 - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my major professor, Dr. Raluca Cozma, who inspired my research proposal idea and developed my interests in political communication in her class. She devoted a lot of time and effort in guiding me forward, it was a pleasant experience to study and work with her. She was and continues to be a productive teacher and a lovely friend.

Another show of appreciation goes to Dr. Eric Abbott, who was always a good mentor. Every talk with him aroused my curiosity in pursuit of new knowledge and stimulated me to further efforts. I really enjoyed the inspiring conversation with him in my defense, and I still remember his last question to me: Did you sleep last night? I also would like to thank Dr. Cindy Yu, who built up my confidence in learning Stats in her statistics class of survey methods, and gave me guidance regarding the statistics portion of my thesis.

Qi Chen was a great life-long friend to share ideas with and lightened me up whenever I was frustrated. He drove me to school in the early winter morning, cooked me fresh hometown food for lunch, and kept me focused on my work. He greatly motivated me to write my thesis and kept it from getting boring.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Andres Glasener, who was never tired of helping me with my thesis wording and continuously encouraged me; Kun Chen, who patiently tutored me in statistics and helped me during the early stages of my survey, and all my friends in Ames of whom composed my school life there.

Last but not least, I would like to give my biggest thanks and love to my family, my parents Guoqi Wang and Jiyan Zhan, whom I can only meet online during the past two years. I

could never hope to have written my thesis without their infinite support and love. They helped me chase my dream of pursuing my ideal life, and I hope that the day that I can realize their dreams will come soon.