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# Social Media Activism in Response to the Influence of Political Parody Videos on YouTube

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## Abstract

Grounded in scholarship on both the perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect, the present experimental study examined the effects of perceived impact of political parody videos on self and on others, by varying the perceived intent of the video producer and perceived level of exposure. Building on previous research on the behavioral consequences of such presumed influence, we tested a hierarchical regression model to show how perceived influence on others predicted individuals' willingness to engage in social media activism (i.e., corrective actions). Results demonstrated that participants in our study showed greater perceived influence of the political parody video when it was presented by a source of highly persuasive intent than by a source of low persuasive intent. Unlike our prediction for the effect of perceived exposure, we did not find the effect of perceived level of exposure on the presumed influence on others. Finally, the results of a hierarchical regression analysis showed that the perception of influence on others was positively associated with participants' willingness to take a corrective action—the likelihood of engaging in political social media activism.

## Keywords

behavioral consequences, influence of presumed influence, perceived exposure, source intent, third-person effect

In his seminal study on the third-person effect, Davison (1983) noted his own experience of receiving a political leaflet and feeling motivated to do some campaigning as a result. Like the sociologist who engaged in leafleting as a way of corrective behaviors, people

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these days are engaging in a variety of reactive actions to counterbalance the potential influence of diverse online political campaigns on public opinion (Rojas, 2010). In particular, there is increasing concern about political parody videos that mask the true identity of producers or sponsors, which may have a negative impact on the viewers' perceptions about the issue and candidates (Lim & Ki, 2007). Such a sneaky campaign often generates controversy as in the case of Hillary 1984 (Wolcott, 2007) and the YouTube Penguin Army scandal (Regalado & Searcey, 2006), but the impact on viewers is unknown.

Politically oriented videos, once under the domain of a few elite producers, can now be produced by ordinary citizens and instantly shared on YouTube and other social media platforms. While the online user's political engagement with social media holds great potential for democratization of political content production and distribution, it also poses many challenges and risks affiliated with unethical practices and political misinformation. The current study investigated the perceived influence of such political parody videos and the potential that such perceptions may have on political social media activism. We note that the social desirability of the genre of political parody itself cannot be discussed clearly as is the case of reality television shows examined in Sun, Shen, and Pan's (2008) study. When social desirability of the presumed influence of media content is mixed or somewhat ambiguous, the behavioral consequence is less of restrictive and more of corrective actions (Rojas, 2010; Sun, Shen et al., 2008). The goals of the present study are twofold: (a) To examine the perceptual component of the third-person effect (TPE) by comparing presumed influence of political parody videos when the perceived source intent and perceived likelihood of exposure vary; (b) To examine how an increased level of perceived influence on others is associated with an increased willingness to take corrective actions to communicate one's positions and compensate for potential bias. In regard to the second goal of this study, Rojas (2010) argued that citizens would be likely to engage in "corrective actions" on and offline based on perceptions of negative campaign messages that may exert a disproportionate influence on public opinions.

Grounded in scholarship of both the perceptual and behavioral components of the third-person effect (Chia, Lu, & McLeod, 2004; Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunter, 1988; Davison, 1983; Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & Mcleod, 1999; Gunther, 1991; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Rojas, 2010; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Sun, Shen, et al., 2008), our study aims to investigate the effect of presumed influence (Tal-Or, Cohen, Tsfat, & Gunther, 2010) of political parody videos on viewers' and individuals' willingness to engage in online activism as a response to such influence.

## Literature Review

### *Political Parody Videos in the Age of Social Media*

Recent election years have generated numerous citizen ad makers who are perpetually engaged in producing new variations of well-known works with deliberate exaggeration for a comic effect. This action has resulted in the inundation of political parody videos in social media. These political parody videos are increasingly popular ever since JibJab

made a mega-hit parody "This is my land" during the 2004 United States presidential election campaign (Baumgartner, 2007). But it was the emergence of YouTube that made this genre increasingly popular and opened the dawn of the so-called *YouTube Election* (Lizza, 2006). These political parodies were argued to have a potential influence on candidate evaluations among younger viewers (Baumgartner, 2008).

While the incorporation of user-generated videos into public discourse may contribute to the democratization process, some scholars have pointed out issues related to the mass distribution of political disinformation. A trend has been identified with professionally made videos that were produced by well-funded public relations firms but disguised and misrepresented as amateurish user-generated videos (Freeman & Chapman, 2007; Lim & Ki, 2007). The current study examines how viewers evaluate the perceived influence of such a campaign parody video disguising true identity of the producer on other citizens as well as on themselves.

### *The Third-Person Effect and Source Intent to Persuade*

As noted by Perloff (1999), previous research on the third-person effect has demonstrated consistent support for the perceptual difference hypothesis that predicts individuals will perceive socially undesirable media content to be more influential on others than on themselves. This perceptual gap between self and others is often referred to as third-person perceptions (TPP). One factor that may influence the degree of TPP may be perceived source bias (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2010). Indeed, Cohen et al. (1988) found that the more negatively perceptions were perceived about the source bias, the greater the discrepancy between the perceived estimates of the message's impact on others and on self.

To date, however, most studies that examined the effect of communicative intent on the third-person perceptions have focused on what Gunther and Thorson (1992) referred to as the intention-to-influence inherent in different types of content (e.g., news vs. advertising). They explained that audiences generally understood that the purpose of a newspaper is to inform while the purpose of advertising is to persuade.

From the intention-to-influence perspective, Gunther and Thorson (1992) argued that advertisements differ from other forms of media content due to their inherent persuasive intent. The authors predicted and found support for the notion that the persuasive purpose of advertisements would yield greater estimates of perceived influence on others. Several studies examined the different types of persuasive content and found evidence of third-person effect in such persuasive content as brand advertisements (Golan & Banning, 2008), direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising (Huh, Delorme, & Reid, 2004), controversial product advertising (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999; Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), and political advertising (Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, & Houden, 2005; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999).

Unlike previous studies focused on the persuasive intent of media content itself, Cohen and his colleagues (1988) examined the effect of presumed source intent on the third-person perception in the case of a defamatory newspaper article. Their study examined one particular type of media content (a libelous newspaper article) under three different source conditions (positively biased source, negatively biased source, and anonymous). Results of

Cohen et al.'s (1988) study demonstrated that the perceived bias in the defamatory communication yielded greater discrepancy of influence between on oneself and on others.

Following Cohen et al.'s (1988) seminal study, this current study examines the presumed intent of the source/producer in a different content setting. This differentiation is of particular salience when considering that new media platforms such as YouTube videos can be highly ambiguous in both their "intention to influence" and in the identification of their source. Worth and Gross (1974) explicated different types of interpretive strategies and stated that individuals catch the meaning of the symbolic events using the so-called "attributional strategies" (p. 34) that were formed from the development stage of human beings. Thus, a doctor in a car accident scene is generally described as a "good man" among children regardless of what he did at that scene, because the doctor was expected to help others in the general social knowledge or in the so-called "role attributes" (p. 36). On the basis of Worth and Gross' study, we reason that symbolic cues that portray a lobbying firm could elicit a different sort of perception of influence as opposed to cues that describe a college student from conventional role attributes.

One of the goals of this current study is to seek an answer regarding how the individuals' inference about source intent to persuade affects their perception about the parody video's influence on others. To achieve this goal, we compared the effect of the same political parody video when the content is presented by different producers of high- or low-perceived intent to persuade. Before testing the effect of perceived source intent to persuade, we tested the traditional perceptual gap hypothesis as follows:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Participants will perceive greater influence of political parody videos on others than on themselves.

In addition, on the basis of previous research that indicates persuasive source intent could lead to overestimates of influence on others, we predict that

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Participants will perceive greater influence of the political parody video on others when it is presented by a source with high persuasive intent than by a source with a low persuasive intent.

### *The Third-Person Effect and the Likelihood of Exposure*

Another important consideration in accounting for the perceived media effects on others is perceived media reach (Christen & Huberty, 2007) or the likelihood of exposure (Eveland et al., 1999; Rojas, 2010). Youn, Faber, and Shah (2000) argued that third-person effects of undesirable advertising might be built on the "unconfirmed fears of media influence rather than the actual impact of media" (p. 647). The perceived reach of the media often magnifies the unconfirmed fears of media influence. People tend to have a sense of pervasive exposure by which they feel their own sample of media coverage is what most others are also exposed to, which reflects an assumption that media by definition have a broad reach and the capacity to convey information to virtually anyone who has an eye or an ear (Gunther, 1998).

Eveland et al. (1999) argued that perceived media exposure may be a key predicting variable for third-person effect such that the more one perceived that others watch or read the material, the greater the presumed influence would be. McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland (2001) further examined the influence of perceived exposure on third-person perception. The authors found that while perceived exposure had no impact on evaluations of media effect on self, it was strongly related to perceived influence on others. Lambe and McLeod (2005) examined the relationship between perceived media exposure and third-person perceptions. Survey participants in their study were asked to indicate how often college-age students and adults were exposed to nine forms of socially undesirable media expressions. The authors found that perceived exposure was a significant predictor of participants' evaluation of media influence on others. Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) examined the role of perceived exposure on the third-person perceptions. Their meta-analysis of 73 third-person effect studies showed that the likelihood of exposure by referent other was associated with larger self-other perceptual gaps.

A recent experiment by Tal-Or et al. (2010) examined the influence of perceived exposure on perceived media influence. The authors found that participants in the "front page" condition were more likely to report perceptions of media influence than those participants in the "internal page" condition. However, as the authors suggested, their experimental condition could have been confounded by the perceived issue salience and thus the aforementioned finding needs to be read with caution.

From the literature on the TPE that examined the effect of perceived exposure, we learned that the third-person effect could be construed in at least two different types of "perceived exposure" situations. The first has to do with the perceived breadth of exposure that may result in what Gunther and Storey (2003) referred to as an "unintended audience" (p. 203). Gunther (1998) explained that people often assume that the media, by definition, has a broad reach and the capacity to convey information to virtually anyone who has an eye or an ear. Gunther stated that the overestimation of exposure regarding socially undesirable or persuasive content has indeed been linked to higher perceptions of media influence.

A second way to measure the perceived exposure is the likelihood of exposure identified by Eveland et al. (1999). Eveland and his colleagues (1999) analyzed the results of the McLeod et al.'s (1997) study and argued that most people would objectively agree that youth in Los Angeles and in New York City are more likely to be exposed to rap music than are other people in the United States. The authors argued that the concept of likely exposure is based on the assessment of individuals' inference of "relationships between certain types of media content and certain types of people" (p. 281).

Such assessments may have a significant impact when it comes to the highly unregulated sphere of social media. Individuals' coding of magnitude information for social media's possible exposure may result in increased estimates of negative influences of the political parody videos on others. On the basis of previous research that relates estimated media exposure of harmful contents with third-person effects, the current study posits the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Participants will perceive greater influence of the political parody video on others when the video is presumed to have a higher likelihood of exposure.

### *Social Media Activism as a Consequence of the TPE*

In recent years, third-person effect scholars expanded their inquiry beyond the well-documented perceptual component and toward its behavioral component (Gunther & Storey, 2003). A recent study by Tal-Or et al. (2010) equated the behavioral component of the third-person effect with the influence of presumed influence (IPI) arguing, "Studies that focus on the behavioral component of the third-person effect are generally called 'the influence of presumed media influence'" (p. 803).

According to Gunther (1991), when the apparent malicious intention of the message source or unduly manipulative intent is detected, perceivers may consider themselves to be ready to take appropriate actions while they underestimate such ability of others to do so. Many studies (Gunther, 1991; Paek et al., 2005; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Salwen, 1998; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wei et al., 2011) that examined the behavioral consequences of the TPE have generally focused on a self-other difference in explaining the relationship between the third-person perception and the support for censorship. However, Gunther and Storey (2003) argued that perceived influence on others, analyzed separately, provides a broader theoretical model and allows for a wider array of the so-called *behavioral outcomes*. They argued that the influence of the presumed influence (IPI) model is relatively free from the negative-influence corollary that constrained research on the third-person effect with regard to attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. While the mediating variable—perceived influence on others instead of a self-other difference—is by no means settled in the literature of the TPE, the perceived effect of negative content on self is not necessarily a part of predicting some attitudinal or behavioral consequences in the IPI model. This IPI model is especially useful to explain people's voluntary reactions to the perceptions of media influence regardless of whether these perceptions are accurate or whether the media message is harmful (Cohen & Tsftati, 2009; Huh & Langteau, 2007; Park, 2005).

The concept of an individual's rectifying behaviors as a consequence of the presumed media influence was explicated by Sun, Shen, et al. (2008). In their study, behavioral consequences of TPP were differentiated in three different types as a function of different message types. When the media content was negative, as in the case of Internet pornography, survey participants rated a greater likelihood of taking restrictive actions. For the media content of which social desirability cannot be judged clearly as in the case of reality television shows, levels of increased perceived TPE led to increased likelihood of taking corrective actions. Finally, increased perceptual disparity in the exposure to public service announcements (PSAs) was positively associated with the likelihood of engaging in promotional behaviors.

As noted by Golan and Day (2008), the majority of published studies on the behavioral component of the TPE have focused on the restrictive actions identified as support for censorship or urging government regulation. However, in recent years, more diverse measures have been used in the behavioral domain of the TPE, such as voting intention (Cohen & Tsftati,

2009), political participation (Banning, 2006), the likelihood to engage in socially desirable actions (Golan & Banning, 2008), and corrective actions (Rojas, 2010; Sun, Shen, et al., 2008).

The current study in examining the behavioral component of the TPE builds on two current studies (Rojas, 2010; Sun, Shen, et al., 2008) that examined individuals' willingness to take corrective actions as a way to communicate one's voice or to counterbalance the perceived influence of the media contents that cannot be regulated or restricted. We assume that individuals who perceive others to be negatively influenced by political parody videos may engage in the so-called *social media activism*. We predict that increased levels of perceived influence on others are closely related to one's willingness to engage in social media activism such that they are more likely to leave comments on the video sharing sites (i.e., YouTube) and even produce a video that counters the validity of the content. Thus, we posit that

*Hypothesis 4 (H4):* The perceived influence of the political parody video on others will be a significant predictor of the likelihood to engage in social media activism.

## Method

### Overview of the Experiment

To test the hypotheses proposed, an experiment was conducted. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions in a 2 (perceived producer's persuasive intent: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (perceived likelihood of exposure: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. As noted by Tal-Or et al. (2010), an experimental design is the most appropriate method for establishing "the theoretical validity of the presumed influence hypothesis" (p. 802). Participants were 115 undergraduate students enrolled in media planning and public relations principles courses at a large U.S. public university who were given extra credit for their voluntary participation.

### Stimuli

*Video spoof.* The video spoof,<sup>1</sup> which originally appeared on YouTube.com, was downloaded and saved to a separate website using the Adobe Flash video format. The spoof opens by showing a faux Newsweek cover with a quote from Eleanor Clift saying, "If you liked *March of the Penguins*, you'll love *An Inconvenient Truth*." The first scene of the video shows a "grossly overweight," umbrella-wielding caricature of Al Gore. Featuring a group of Tux penguins, the mascot of the open-source operating system, Linux, the video spoofed Gore's global warming presentation. The Tux penguins were portrayed as either bored or surprised. In one scene, the Tux Penguins fell asleep and began to snore audibly. The spoof then tried to create the audience's impression that Al Gore's global warming message is neither logical nor appealing. Extreme slippery-slope type claims were used to portray Al Gore attributing clearly unrelated events (e.g., the Boston Red Sox winning the World Series, Lindsay Lohan's skinniness, and so on) to global warming. The video also

insinuated that Gore hypnotizes people. Finally, the video solicited support from Republicans by indicating that nobody is interested in Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, by showing the Tux penguins sleeping in a "Red State Theater."

## Procedures

The experiment was conducted in a media design lab, with all the experimental stimuli and questionnaires posted on the web. Each participant partook in one of four different versions of experimental conditions, 2 (perceived producer's persuasive intent: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (the likelihood of exposure: high vs. low). Participants in all conditions were given a pretest in which they indicated their level of involvement in the issue of global warming. On completion of the pretest, participants were informed that they would view a video clip that has been played on YouTube. Before viewing the video, participants were informed that they would see information about how many times it has been viewed and who produced the video. Participants in the high-perceived exposure condition were informed that the video recorded 4,848,181 views. Those who were in a low-perceived exposure condition were given a message that the video was viewed 181 times. The number of views appeared in the center of the screen with a "next" button showing up at the bottom of the screen. When the participants clicked the "next" button, they were led to the next manipulation condition—a high- vs. a low-perceived source intent to persuade. In a high-perceived source intent condition, participants read the information about a lobbying company in Washington, DC portraying it as "a strategic public affairs and global issues management firm." The company was featured with its logo and introduced as using "a campaign-style approach to help corporations, trade associations, and nonprofit organizations address their most critical communications and public policy challenges." In a low-perceived source intent condition, the producer was introduced as "a 21-year-old college student living in a small town in Arkansas" who likes "old cars, music, movies, video games, and gambling."

After viewing the 2-minute parody video, participants were led to the posttest webpage in which they were asked to fill out questions that assessed perceived influence of videos on "your (vs. other students') attitude toward Al Gore" and "your (vs. other students') attitude toward global warming." There were additional questions to measure postattitudes toward Gore, perceived reach of the presented videos to users on YouTube, likelihood to engage in online activism, evaluation of information in terms of misleading, and participants' level of engagement with YouTube videos.

## Measures

*Involvement.* Involvement in this study was defined as the "extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance." To measure participants' involvement in the global warming issue, the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) by Zaichkowsky (1985) was adopted as follows: Insignificant-significant, does not-does matter to me, unimportant-important, of no concern-of much concern, serious-not serious, and

irrelevant-relevant. This six-item scale resulted in a high reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ) with mean of 4.53 and standard deviation of 1.53.

**Attitudes toward Al Gore.** Participants reported their attitudes toward Al Gore on a series of semantic differential scales, ranging from 1 to 7, with the following anchors: dishonest-honest, unbelievable-believable, unfavorable-favorable, unintelligent-intelligent, wrong-right, foolish-wise, and ridiculous-reasonable. On each scale, higher numbers indicated more favorable attitudes. Internal consistency was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ), and responses were averaged to form a composite index of attitudes ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ).

**Engagement with YouTube videos.** Six items on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *extremely often*) were used to assess participants' levels of engagement with YouTube, asking how often they, on a regular basis, watch [send a link of, share, rate, post a comment on, upload] YouTube videos. Mean and standard deviation were 2.01 and .77, respectively. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for these six items was .77.

**Perceived producer's intention to mislead.** Perceived producer's intention was measured by asking participants to rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale whether the producer has an intention to mislead,  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ .

**Perceived likelihood of exposure.** An index of perceived magnitude of exposure was created based on the mean of two items that asked participants to rate the likelihood (1 = *not likely at all*, 7 = *very likely*) that nonregular/regular YouTube users have viewed the parody video;  $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ .

**Perceived influence.** As Cohen and Tsfaty (2009) argued, measurement of the influence of presumed influence is not yet conclusive. The standard approach to measuring the IPI has been to use self-other difference scores.

In our study, we used the commonly applied (see Banning, 2006) standard measures of perceived influence on self and others as separate measures. Perceived influence was measured with questions asking "how much do you think that watching this kind of parody video on YouTube will influence your [others'] attitude toward Al Gore [global warming]?" each being a 7-point scale anchored by 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*.

**Likelihood to engage in online activism.** To assess the behavioral component of the third-person effect, likelihood to engage in online activism was measured in two questions: "how likely would you be to leave a negative comment on this kind of parody video on YouTube?" and "how likely would you be to—if you had the capability—produce and post a countering video to such a parody video on YouTube?" Based on the mean of these two items, a dependent variable of likelihood to engage in social media activism was created ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ).

## Results

### Manipulation Checks

**Perceived source intent to persuade.** A manipulation check for participants' perceived source intent examined whether different levels of a producer's intent conditions generated different perceptions about video editing, professional look, and intention to mislead.

The first two items were employed based on the assumption that participants would associate professionally produced videos with advertisements and other forms of persuasive broadcast content that they might encounter on a regular basis. The last item of the video producer's intention to mislead was a more direct question to assess the different levels of persuasive intent from the producer.

Asked about their agreement with the statement that the video editing was amateurish, participants in a high-intent-to-persuade condition indicated less agreement than did those who were in a low-intent-to-persuade condition, ( $\text{Mean}_{\text{low intent}} = 3.98, SD = 1.88; \text{Mean}_{\text{high intent}} = 2.89, SD = 1.46, t = 3.45, df = 113, p < .001$ ).

Another manipulation check item (i.e., degree of agreement for the statement that the video seems to be professionally produced) also yielded a significant mean difference between a high- vs. a low-persuasive intent condition. Participants who were in a high-intent-to-persuade condition tended to consider the video as more professionally produced than did those who were in a low-intent condition, showing higher agreement with the item ( $\text{Mean}_{\text{high intent}} = 5.21, SD = 1.76; \text{Mean}_{\text{low intent}} = 3.88, SD = 1.86, t = 4.94, df = 113, p < .001$ ).

Finally, there was a significant difference of means between a low-persuasive intent ( $\text{Mean} = 3.40, SD = 1.34$ ) and a high-persuasive intent condition ( $\text{Mean} = 4.14, SD = 1.32$ ) regarding the intention to mislead ( $t = 3.01, df = 113, p < .01$ ).

*Perceived likelihood of exposure.* To validate the experimental conditions of perceived levels of exposure, we measured participants' estimates of the likelihood of exposure to the video among YouTube users with a composite index of perceived magnitude of exposure aforementioned in the measurements section.

We confirmed a strong discrepancy of the estimates of the likelihood of exposure by numbers of view manipulation. Participants in the approximately 5-million-views condition estimated a significantly greater perceived exposure than did counterparts in the 181-views condition ( $\text{Mean}_{\text{high exposure}} = 4.75, SD = 1.20; \text{Mean}_{\text{low exposure}} = 2.97, SD = 1.39, t = 7.34, df = 113, p < .001$ ).

## Test of H1

In H1, it was predicted that participants would perceive greater influence of a political parody video on others than on themselves. To test this hypothesis, we compared the means and standard deviations of the perceived impact on self versus on others by employing a paired sample *t* test.

As expected, there was a significant difference of means for the impact of a parody on attitudes toward Al Gore ( $M_{\text{self}} = 2.36, SD = 1.45; M_{\text{others}} = 3.90, SD = 1.59, t = 9.55, df = 114, p < .001$ ). There was also a statistically significant difference of perceptions of a parody on attitudes toward the global warming issue ( $M_{\text{self}} = 2.31, SD = 1.41; M_{\text{others}} = 3.92, SD = 1.51, t = 10.18, df = 114, p < .001$ ). Thus, H1 was supported.

## Test of H2

H2 predicted that participants would perceive greater influence of the political parody video on others when it was presented by a source with high-persuasive intent rather than

by a source with a low-persuasive intent. To test H2, the perceived third-person perceptions were compared between two different producer intent conditions. As predicted, participants perceived greater impact of such parody videos on others when they perceived a high intent of the producer of the video than when they perceived a low intent of a producer. Asked about the impact of the video on others' attitudes toward Al Gore, participants in a high-source intent condition reported greater impact than those in a low-source intent condition,  $M_{\text{high intent}} = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ;  $M_{\text{low intent}} = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ,  $t(113) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ . As for the impact of the video on others' attitudes toward global warming, those who were in the high-source intent condition ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) rated greater negative impact than their counterparts in the low-intent condition ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ),  $t(113) = 4.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . There were no statistical differences for the impact on selves between high-versus low-persuasive intent conditions. Thus, H2 was supported.

### Test of H3

In H3, we proposed that participants would perceive greater influence of the political parody video on others when the video was presumed to have a higher likelihood of exposure.

To test H3, we compared the means and standard deviations of perceived influence on others in two different exposure conditions—high versus low levels. The test of this hypothesis employing an independent  $t$  test did not yield any significant differences of the influence of parody videos on others. So H3 was not supported.

In order to better understand the lack of significance of H3, a supplementary paired  $t$  test was performed using the traditional TPP measure of presumed influence on self and on others. We wanted to ensure that the lack of significance was not a function of our measurement that focused exclusively on influence on others. Whereas most studies on the third-person effect link behavioral consequences to third-person perceptions (self-other perception gap), research on the influence of presumed influence (see Cohen & Tsfaty, 2009; Gunther & Storey, 2003) typically focuses on perceived influence on others. The results of this paired  $t$  test produced a significant difference of TPP under the high level of perceived exposure condition regarding the attitudes toward Al Gore ( $M_{\text{self}} = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ;  $M_{\text{others}} = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ;  $t = 5.26$ ,  $df = 56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was also a significant difference of TPP on attitude toward Al Gore in a low level of perceived exposure condition ( $M_{\text{self}} = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ;  $M_{\text{others}} = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ;  $t = 7.88$ ,  $df = 57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results indicate that our current study did not find any significant relationship between perceived exposure and perceived influence of parody videos.

### Test of H4

In H4, we predicted that the perceived influence of the political parody video on others would be a significant predictor of the likelihood to engage in social media activism. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the participants' perceptions of negative impact on others were related to likelihood to engage in social media activism. Table 1 displays the results of each block of the hierarchical models.

In the first block of this analysis, participants' engagement with YouTube contributed to predicting the dependent variable ( $\beta = .25, p < .01$ ). The dummy variable of party identification was negatively associated with the Social Media Activism Index ( $\beta = -.24, p < .05$ ). The first model explains 12% of total variance ( $R^2 = .12, F(3, 103) = 4.40, p < .01$ ).

In the second block of this hierarchical regression, participants' attitudes toward Al Gore and issue involvement were entered along with perceived exposure and perceived producer's intention to mislead. In this analysis, the association between engagement with YouTube and the dependent variable remained significant ( $\beta = .18, p < .05$ ). Respondents' postattitudes toward Gore ( $\beta = .26, p < .05$ ) and issue involvement in global warming ( $\beta = .33, p < .01$ ) were positively associated with likelihood to engage in social media activism. In other words, the more positive a person was toward Al Gore, the more he or she wanted to act on the politically suspicious parody video by leaving a negative comment on it or even producing a countering video. However, the significant role of party identification in explaining social media activism disappeared in the second block of the analysis. Since the dummy-coded Republican variable is strongly correlated with both issue involvement in global warming ( $r = -.501, p < .001$ ) and attitude toward Al Gore ( $r = -.493, p < .001$ ), it is likely that the Republican variable is eclipsed by these variables when entered in the second model. Indeed, a partial correlation ( $r = -.20, p < .05$ ) in the first block of the hierarchical models between the dummy variable of Republican and the dependent variable was drastically reduced (partial  $r$  in the second model =  $-.07, p = \text{n.s.}$ ) when these attitudes and involvement variables were entered in the second model.

In the second model, it was assumed that the perceived magnitude of exposure and perceived producer's intent to mislead could make an impact on the dependent variable—likelihood to engage in social media activism. Of two variables of perceived magnitude of exposure and perceived producer intent, perceived exposure had a marginal effect on the dependent variable ( $\beta = .17, t = 1.82, p < .10$ ). Variables entered in this Block 2 made the most significant  $R^2$  change, accounting for 19.6% of total variance explained ( $p < .001$ ).

Results of the final model (i.e., Block 3) demonstrated that presumed influence on others was positively associated with participants' intentions to engage in social media activism ( $\beta = .20, p < .05$ ). In other words, the increment in users' perceived negative impact on others led to the increase in the likelihood to engage in social media activism on YouTube. Thus, H3 was supported. It is noteworthy that the effect of engagement with YouTube on the dependent variable became nonsignificant in the full model of the hierarchical analysis. A significant  $R^2$  change in the final model was  $.063 (p < .05)$ .

## Discussion

In a meta-analysis of published third-person effect studies, Sun, Pan, et al. (2008) posed a need for research that is devoted to theory development considering theoretically explicated relationships among different components of the third-person effect. Following Sun, Pan, et al. (2008) suggestion, we investigated how the same political parody videos on YouTube, depending on the presumed source intent and the perceived likelihood of exposure, could yield differential perceived influence on others, and how such presumed

**Table 1.** Hierarchical Regression: The Effect of the Presumed Influence on Likelihood to Engage in Social Media Activism

Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	t	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Block 1</b>					
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.43	.38	-.11	1.14	.114**
Political ID <sup>b</sup>	-.81	.31	-.24	2.58*	
Engagement with YouTube	.54	.20	.25*	2.65*	
<b>Block 2</b>					
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.13	.35	-.03	0.36	.196***
Political ID <sup>b</sup>	.16	.35	.05	0.47	
Engagement with YouTube	.37	.19	.18*	2.15*	
Attitude toward Gore	.30	.12	.26*	2.44*	
Issue involvement	.36	.12	.33**	3.16**	
Perceived source intent	.16	.11	.13	1.48	
Perceived likelihood of exposure	.17	.09	.17	1.82	
<b>Block 3</b>					
Gender <sup>a</sup>	-.04	.35	-.01	0.12	.063*
Political ID <sup>b</sup>	.16	.34	.05	0.48	
Engagement with YouTube	.30	.19	.14	1.60	
Attitude toward Gore	.33	.12	.28**	2.64**	
Issue involvement	.37	.11	.34**	3.25**	
Perceived source intent	.11	.10	.09	1.06	
Perceived likelihood of exposure	.19	.09	.15	1.72	
Perceived impact on selves	.01	.11	.01	0.01	
Perceived impact on others	.21	.09	.20*	2.26*	

Note: Engagement with YouTube was indexed with six items that assessed participants' frequencies of watching, linking, sharing, rating, posting comments, uploading videos online.

a. 1 = male (dummy variable).

b. 1 = Republican (dummy variable).

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

influence may explain online users' likelihood to engage in social media activism. We argue that the assessment of a source's intention is very important in the social media setting where basic information about the source is often limited or not available.

We examined whether or not the covert persuasive intent hidden in a political parody video could produce a different perceptual gap of influence on others when people receive different sources of intent cues. In presenting the different source cues that could convey different levels of persuasive intent, we proposed two hypotheses—one for traditional perceptual gap hypothesis based on self-other difference (H1) and another for perceptual hypothesis based on the different perceived source intent (H2). The current study followed Gunther and Storey's (2003) measure of perceived influence on others as a separate measure of assessing the presumed influence of parody videos.

Building on the seminal study of Cohen et al. (1988), our study demonstrated perceived persuasive intent of a source (e.g., high vs. low intent) yielded different evaluations on others (H2) despite the fact that they were exposed to the same video. Participants perceived more influence of parody video on others when its producer had a higher perceived intent to persuade. There was no significant difference for the perceived influence on self by different levels of source intent.

In addition to source intent to persuade, the current study also examined the effect that perceived exposure might have on perceived media influence. Building on research by Eveland et al. (1999), we identified two potential ways of measuring the effect of perceived exposure—the perceived breadth of exposure and the likelihood of exposure. We predicted that the manipulation of the likelihood of exposure would generate differential perceptual influence on others. Unlike our prediction, however, the results of our hypothesis test did not support the effect of perceived level of exposure on the presumed influence on others as well as on TPP. One possible explanation for the nonsignificant results may have to do with the lack of specific referent others to which participants may have linked potential exposure. Unlike the examples provided by Eveland et al. (1999) of female audiences and romantic comedies or the example in McLeod et al. (1997) of a New York audience and hip hop, the participants in our experiment were not provided with a description of referent others who may have been exposed to political parody videos on YouTube.

While our study did not find perceived exposure to be a significant predictor of perceived influence on others, a recent experiment by Tal-Or et al. (2010) demonstrated that perceived exposure was positively associated with participants' perceived influence on others that eventually mediated the effect of the exposure variable on their reactions to the news story of shortage of sugar. We suggest future research further investigate the relationship between exposure and the TPE but it should also explicate referent others in their research design (see Reid & Hogg, 2005).

One of the important findings of our study was a behavioral consequence of presumed influence on others regarding political parody videos. Perception of influence on others was a good predictor in explaining participants' willingness to take a corrective action—the likelihood of engaging in political social media activism. As discussed earlier, our study in examining the behavioral component of TPE builds on recent studies (Rojas, 2010; Sun, Shen, et al., 2008) that expanded the research of behavioral effects beyond such restrictive actions as supporting censorship and/or government regulation. Even when users on YouTube found bias or potential manipulative intent on political parody videos, their reactions were considerably constrained by the nature of political parody—relatively unregulated content in which freedom of speech reigns. Our study provides practical implications for that situation. When users in social media detect any manipulative intent or perceived bias, they are more likely to be wary of the influence and to engage in a variety of reactive actions to counterbalance the potential influence as argued by Rojas (2010).

One of the methodological issues that we raised in the current study deals with measurements of behavioral consequences of presumed influence. We note that the majority of behavioral TPE studies measure the association between third-person perceptions (i.e.,

self-other perception gap) and behavioral consequences (for example, Rojas, 2010; Sun, Shen, et al., 2008) while an alternative stemming from Gunther and Storey (1993) is to use perceived influence on others and self as separate predictors for behavioral consequences. While many published articles report the self-other perceptual gap as a strong predictor of support for subsequent behavioral intentions (see Sun, Shen, et al., 2008), little is known as to which of the two between perceived impact on self and others will be more associated with individuals' willingness to take either corrective or restrictive actions. For instance, perceived impact of parody videos on others was a significant predictor for the intention to engage in corrective actions in our study, whereas perceived impact on self was not. But it was opposite in Chia et al.'s (2004) study—that is, perceived impact of the sex disc on self was a strong predictor for a censorship attitude, whereas the perceived impact on others was not. We encourage future research to address this issue and examine whether different types of behavioral intentions—for instance, corrective versus restrictive actions—could be predicted with either perceived impact on self or on others, or both.

One key limitation of our study is the manner in which we operationalized social media activism. With limited research regarding this concept, we presented two operational variables—that of the likelihood to leave a negative comment and that of the likelihood of producing and posting a counter video—to measure the social media activism. While these two variables were positively correlated to each other, the level of difficulty to engage in each of these indicators may require users to use a disproportionate amount of time and skills. Nonetheless, these variables offer unique characteristics of social media activism that could be distinguished from traditional online engagement indices (e.g., Rojas, 2010). Future studies should incorporate other potential measures of social media activism that may include, but are not limited to, intention to rate or subscribe to the video channel, distribute the video, offer negative commentary on microblogging and social network sites as well as further measures of willingness to create and produce countering videos.

Future research on the influence of presumed influence may replicate the current study by varying the different types of source intent. Then future studies built on the current study may test the moderating effect of the perceived source intent with more variations as Cohen et al. (1988) did—that is, positively biased, negatively biased, anonymous, and neutral. Another of the applications of perceived source intent is to apply the perceived source intent to the different types of suspicious media content such as innuendo headlines in an op-ed piece, negative political attack ads, and viral videos on YouTube.

Video sharing websites such as YouTube will play an important role in the democratic process for years to come by providing a highly unregulated platform for political video distribution. Therefore, we suggest more researchers expand their inquiry into the domain of political parody or viral videos and the potential influence of perceived influence that may result from political video exposure.

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## Note

1. This video can be viewed at <http://youtu.be/IZSqXUSwHRI>

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