

Effects of Political Campaign Materials on Party and Non-Party Voting Supporters

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Abstract

Political parties would normally claim that their campaign and communication materials have effects on voters, be it on their supporters or their opponents during election campaigns. However, such effects are assumed effects by the parties unless voters are themselves assessed about the effects of such materials on themselves. The supporters of the parties are likely to regard such campaign materials as congenial to them but this may not be so with the opposition supporters who would regard such materials as negative. Taking the third-person effect to analyze effects on the audience as the theoretical framework, this study posited that opposition members would regard the materials as negative and thus would claim that they would not have any effect on them but they would likely say that such campaign materials would have effects on own party supporters.

Davison (1983) posited that individuals will perceive that negative mediated messages would have their greatest impact not “on me” or “you” but on “them,”- the third person. Research suggests that people judge others to be more influenced than they are by media, advertising, libelous messages, media violence, pornography, and television drama. The theory referred to as the Third-person effect developed on the postulation that audience members would not admit that media had any direct effect on them, but would instead believe that the media influenced others, the third person (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004;

Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998). On the other hand, while people would discount the effects of negative or biased messages on themselves, they would, under the notion of the First Person Effect, readily admit to being influenced by such messages.

This study was based on studying the effects of political literature on party and opposition party supporters taking the messages to be positive to one group and biased and partisan to another group. The study focuses on the assumed effects of political literature on own party and opposition party supporters. It traces the degree of influence of Malaysia's largest political party, Barisan Nasional (BN) political communication literature on its own supporters and on non-BN party supporters. While the third-person effect assumes a null or minimal effect on one's self and some or strong effect on others, the question that arises are on welcoming favorable media effects on oneself and assuming unfavorable effects on others.

Keywords: public opinion, third-person effect, political communication, media effect.

Introduction

During election campaigns, political parties would normally claim that their campaign and communication materials have effects on voters causing their supporters or their opponents to vote for them. However, such claims are merely claimed effects by the parties unless voters are themselves assessed about the effects of such materials on themselves. The supporters of the parties are likely to regard such campaign materials as congenial to them but this may not be so with the opposition supporters who would regard such materials as negative. Taking the third-person effect to analyze effects on the audience as the theoretical framework, this study posited that opposition members would regard the materials as negative and thus would claim that these materials would not have any effect on them, but they would likely say that such campaign materials would have effects on own party supporters.

Researches on the effects of communication have examined individuals' perceptions of media messages and public opinion. Davison's (1983) third-person effect has generated research. Davison (1983) posited that individuals will perceive mediated messages to have their greatest impact not "on me" or "you" but on them, the third person. Research suggests that people judge others to be more influenced than they are by advertising, libelous messages, media violence, pornography and television drama (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004; Price, Tewksbury, & Huang, 1998). Early research on the third-person effect was limited to discussing the impact of media on the self and on others. It was then postulated that media had the greatest influence not on "me" or on "you" but on "them," the third person. Later research was to refine it to finding that people finding effects from negative media messages or undesirables if the self believes that the media message has more impact on others than on self. The self therefore tends to underestimate media effect while overestimating media impact on others.

This study explores the third-person effect among Malaysian voters during the 12 General Elections of 2008. The paper discusses the influence of party political

communication devices (brochures, pamphlets, publications, and speeches) on the different segments of the Malaysian voting population, that is the effects of such materials on self, family, party supporters, opposition supporters, and the undecided voters. It studies whether the groups, one of which would regard the message as partisan and the other as congenial, would impute influence on self and on the others.

In previous studies, negative messages would be taken for granted and the audience would be assessed on the effects of such messages. In line with the third-person effect, audience members would discount the effects of such negative messages on themselves but would admit that they would have effects on others. One has to distinguish between negative and bad news messages. Negative messages can be those that are undesirable or do not bring any benefits. Accordingly, pornography would be considered negative messages that do not contribute to the well-being of audience members. Hence the self would muster a defense and reject the message by saying that the effect would be minimal but that such messages would have a direct big impact on others.

However, there is another sort of news that one can term "bad." Ran Wei, Lo and Liu (2010) studied the effect of a tainted food product that took the lives of four infants and caused the government of Taiwan to recall more than 1650 products containing imported Chinese mill powder. Another instance of bad news was the coverage of avian flu. Such bad news would be well accepted by the self as beneficial and in their best interests to know although seemingly it is negative and it would also be beneficial to the third and second person. This therefore reflects the relevance of media messages. The study by Atwood (1994) on making their homes earthquake safe was due to the uncertainty of the news.

This particular study takes campaign materials and asks the voters to assess for themselves whether such materials were negative or congenial to them. We would assume that voters of the opposition parties would regard such materials as negative and would deny the effects of such materials on themselves but would admit that these messages would have an effect on the third-person voters. On the other hand, supporters of the party would accept the influence of such campaign materials as the messages are congenial to

them. In the final analysis, the matter is left to the audience to judge whether such materials were negative or positive at the initial stage

Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect is the perception that a persuasive communication will exert a stronger impact on others than on the self. The hypothesis contends that people are psychologically predisposed to overestimate the effects that communications have on others. People overestimate the effects that media have on others and underestimate the effect media have on themselves.

The third-person effect postulated that audience members would deny any direct media effect on them but would claim an effect on others, that is on the third person. Claiming that the media had an effect on others meant the media was an important source of effect (Tewksbury et al., 2004; Price et al., 1998). There would be instances of the usefulness of this theoretical approach. Parents would not admit that media had an effect on them, but would readily agree that violent content or pornographic materials did have an effect on their children. They would say that violent programs, such as violent cartoon programs or even high action programs, would negatively affect their children who are drawn to watch these programs. Parents would demand that authorities impose some kind of control on television stations to disallow showing such violent programs. Therefore, the third-person effect would likely have some behavioral consequences when there would be calls for the authorities to take action to safeguard children from the negative effects of such materials.

Media effects in political communication could also be viewed from the third-person effect theory. A meta-analysis of third-person effects, 1983-1992, found 13 out of 14 papers had evidence consistent with the third-person effect (Perloff, 1993), with two studies reporting a "reverse third-person effect." The term "reverse" meaning respondents perceived that they would be more influenced than others while there was evidence of the third-person effect for other messages and other respondents.

In their meta-analysis on 32 research studies on the third-person effect hypothesis, Paul, Salwen and Dupange (2000) found only moderate support (the overall mean r coefficient was .50 ($r^2=.25$)). Their analysis yielded three significant moderators, namely the type of sampling, type of respondent, and type of message, while source, country of research, desirability, and type of medium did not contribute significantly. Paul et al. (2000) said message desirability was an important variable worth studying. Message desirability is subjective: a negative message may be accepted as positive by another group. In this study, we allow supporters of two parties to estimate the influence based on the desirability of the message. We assume that supporters of the party from which the campaign messages emanate would consider such messages positive while the same messages would be considered negative by opposing party supporters.

To be more specific, Rucinski and Salmon (1990), for example, conducted a study on how political content in newspapers and television created a perception of effects among policymakers up to a point where they started to contemplate media censorship. This self-other discrepancy, according to Jensen and Hurley (2002), is now referred to as the perceptual hypothesis within the third-person effect research.

Besides media, people judge others to be more influenced than they are by advertising, libelous messages, media violence, pornography, and television drama. There is a lot of research on various media and message variables in connection with the third-person effect: an especially large effect is brought about by a low-credibility message and a highly obvious persuasive intention (Brosius & Engel' 1996, 143). Mason (1995, 610) states that "others" will be seen as more persuadable by a republished message than by an original message.

Several reasons are attributed as to why people underestimate media influence on self. One reason is cognitive in origin (Perloff, 1993). People believe that they have the information available to themselves or know more about the issue at hand, while assuming others are less knowledgeable. As others "do not know" and "we" know, the audience members are more likely to say they are not influenced by the persuasive message, but the

less knowledgeable others are likely to be influenced. People therefore perceive the effects of the mass media or messages in general to be greater on others than on themselves. Tiedge et al. (1991) termed them as discrepancy effects due to (1) perceived third-person effects or effects on others and (2) perceived first-person effects or effects on self.

Several studies have drawn on a variety of psychological theories to justify the third-person effect, but few have explicitly linked these theories to the third-person effect, such as ego involvement, social categorization theory, biased optimism and attribution theory (Paul et al., 2000). Paul, et al., 2000 alluded to the attribution theory and biased optimism as the theoretical framework in their analysis of the third-person effect.

While the third-person effect is at times seen to be a theory of perception, other studies have looked into its psychological origins for explanation. Researchers agree that several different psychological mechanisms might predict and cause the phenomenon (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Paul et al., 2000). Although scholars have categorized these mechanisms somewhat differently, they have similar indications. Some have termed these mechanisms as unrealistic optimism, impersonal impact, and generalized negative attitude towards media influence (Brosius & Engel, 1996), while others have referred to these mechanisms as biased optimism, involvement, and negative messages (Price & Tewksbury, 1996). Unrealistic optimism or biased optimism refers to the inclination of people to have a more positive image of themselves than of others. According to Brosius and Engel (1996), unrealistic optimism is related to people's attempt to enhance their ego whereby having a feeling that they have a better position to control media effects. However, anyone else other than the self is considered to have a lack of control and thus is influenced by the media.

This third-person effect is more visible when it is transmitted as behavioral. Davison (1996) cites examples of behavioral effects when explaining how advertising and public relations materials have perceived media effects on others. In addition, numerous scholars have cited media control and censorship as a visible example of a third-person effect (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Brosius & Engel, 1996; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990).

The self is considered as the first person or respondents in the study (Chapin, 2008). Self-categorization theory has been used to explain that the third-person effect will be accentuated if social identity is salient, and the other person is an out group member and the basis on which self and others are being compared (Reid & Hogg, 2005). Reid and Hogg (2005) found social comparisons produce differentiation between self and others.

The second mechanism, the impersonal impact or what Jensen and Hurley (2005) termed as a social distance effect, refers to how people find media effects to be more pronounced on others who are psychologically or socially different from them. Lambe and McLeod (2002) refer to this mechanism as the in-group/out-group condition. According to the study on respondents from two different age groups, they found that people from the same age group tend to predict a larger effect on those who are from a different age group. Lee and Tamborini (2005) also found this mechanism to be prominent in their third-person effect study on people from two different nationalities. Brosius and Engel (1996) assert that this may be the case because the mass media exert stronger control on the societal level, while the personal level is more influenced by interpersonal communication. Therefore, people who are from the same social group tend to believe that they have the same level of media-efficacy.

Further studies have indicated that the level of third-person effect increases when a person believes it is socially undesirable to be affected by the communication, especially with what Price and Tewksbury (1996) concluded as negative messages from the media. Consistent with this general explanation is the finding that the greater perceptions of media impact occur when the message presented is deemed to be negative. Price and Tewksbury (1996) cited that the third-person effect is magnified when the source of the message is overtly biased against its subject. Brosius and Engel (1996) strengthened this proposition with the claim that people strongly involved or people holding extreme attitudes see the media as hostile towards their own position, regardless of how the media really covered the issue. In a study on news coverage on the Clinton and O.J Simpson

scandals and research question order, Price and Tewksbury (1996) found evidences to support the existence of the three mechanisms on the third-person effect.

Other scholars have chosen to explain this phenomenon of perception on self-serving bias in the attribution theory (Paul et al., 2000; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). In general, attribution theory refers to the antecedent process people use before executing any form of behavior. The theory posits that people tend to attribute their behavior to the object world and attribute the behavior of others to personal characteristics. According to Paul et al. (2000), when applied to media messages, people may think that they understand the persuasive media messages better because others' dispositional flaws make them incapable of perceiving media persuasiveness. The underlying proposition of this theory has an explicit link to the three mechanisms identified by Brosius and Engel (1996).

The third-person effect has accounted for much when the contents were sourced as negative, such as pornography or violence. American scholars have used this theoretical framework to study media effects, but a limited number of studies have emerged in developing countries. Not many studies using the theory of third-person effects had been applied in analyzing election campaigns, at least not to the same extent as the theory of agenda setting. This study highlighted the results when the third-person effect was used in understanding the recent Malaysian elections.

The theory can contribute significantly to the study of political communication as it is able to provide scholars and practitioners insights into how voters perceive media influence and whether their voting behaviors are actually influenced by the media that they subscribe to. Therefore, this study aspires to contribute to the discourse of the third-person effect on political communication. This is especially so when such study is in an early stage here in the developing countries where media is continuously becoming one of the most powerful political tools.

Several issues become our central concern. One is the source of messages that had perceptual effects on receivers, and they in turn perceptually attribute effects on others. In

previous studies, the messages that brought effects on others were negative or undesirable messages. The third-person effect was most common when messages are associated with negative outcomes or were deemed biased (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997). Those involved who hold strong views on the topic see the coverage given by the media as biased against them and will likely say it would influence the neutral workers.

This study will assess the effects of a message emanating from one political party on two different recipients, one would be responding positively to the message as they are of the same political inclination and another group that would respond negatively to receive these messages as they are from a different political affiliation. One group would therefore deem the message congenial and the other group would deem the message to be negative, biased, or untoward.

Another issue of concern will be the concept of the distant other. Previous studies have not elaborated on the concept of the distant other except by differently categorizing them by age, socioeconomic status, or being from a different locale. In our study we provide forms of distant others: those different in political affiliation from the group being studied. In the group where BN supporters were the main recipients of messages, those against the group would be the political opponents (their opposition parties and the non-voters) and would be two categories of distant others. We would also include another form of self, namely their families, assessing whether they perceive their families to be influenced by this political literature.

Context of Study

A study, conducted in July after the 13 General Elections, on 1463 voter respondents drawn nation-wide sought their opinions on several matters arising during the elections held on 5 May 2013. Among the questions asked were their choice of parties, candidates, the time they decided on their choice of parties/candidates, the people that influenced them and also their assessment of information sources.

The conclusion is based on the findings of the study. Though the main objective of the study was to explore the existence of a classic third-person effect in voters' opinion pertaining to the BN party-controlled communication devices, the study has managed to indicate that there is some degree of influence by the BN political communication devices on the BN supporters and opposition party supporters. The study asked the voters to assess the effect of the campaign materials of the main governing political party, *Barisan Nasional*, on themselves, their family, political supporters, and the supporters of the opposition parties.

The 13th General Election in May 2013 saw a tough fight between the present government party, Barisan Nasional (National Front, hereafter BN) and Pakatan Rakyat (People's Party, hereafter PR). BN has been in power since Independence in 1957 and has won a two-thirds majority of seats in Parliament except for 2008 when it lost its two-thirds majority. In 2013, for the second consecutive time, BN lost its two-thirds majority of seats in Parliament due to the great challenge given by PR. It would therefore be worth investigating the effects the political campaigns had on the voters. We asked whether the campaign materials (brochures, pamphlets, speeches) had an effect on them and on others.

It was a tough campaign as top leaders crisscrossed the country addressing four or five rallies per day/night, besides meeting voters personally to urge them to vote for candidates standing in their constituencies.

We interviewed 1463 respondents selected by quota sampling of voters nationwide. Two parliamentary constituencies were randomly selected for each of the 13 states (except for the state of Perlis because of the limited number of parliamentary seats) and from these constituencies respondents were selected based on race, gender, and education, that also reflected the socio-demographic composition of voters in that constituency.

The face-to-face interview normally lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. A total of 100 enumerators and 12 supervisors were involved in the survey. Besides the social-

demographic profile of the respondents, respondents were asked about their media use, their political interest, the party they had voted for, and the assessment of the influence of the BN party communication on themselves, their families, on the respective party supporters and on the uncertain voters. On understanding the third-person effect, we asked respondents whether BN party communication materials had any influence on them (in terms of voting).

The study divided the total respondents into two categories by asking a question as to which party they would vote for if the elections were to be held “tomorrow.” Those who said they would vote for BN would be classified as supporters of BN and those who voted for PR would be classified as PR supporters. The study therefore had two categories of respondents, the BN supporters and the PR supporters. The first group, the supporters of BN were asked whether these BN campaign materials had any effect on them, their families, on supporters of BN, supporters of opposition parties, and uncertain voters.

The study then extracted from the total population those who would vote for the opposition party and asked them whether the BN campaign materials had any effect on them, their families, on supporters of BN, supporters of opposition parties, and uncertain voters.

Third Person Perception Index

The respondents were asked, “How much do the BN materials influence your own self and how do you perceive the effect of these materials on others, such as:

1. Your family members
2. Supporters of BN
3. Supporters of PR Opposition Parties; and
4. Uncertain Voters.

After an analysis was made on the general population of voters, an analysis was made by extracting respondents who would vote for BN and were therefore classified as

BN supporters. They were asked how much the BN materials affect their voting and how much they thought the BN materials affected:

1. Own self
2. Your family members
3. Supporters of BN
4. Supporters of PR Opposition Parties
5. Uncertain Voters.

Another analysis was made on respondents who would vote for the opposition parties if elections were to be held “tomorrow”. They were asked the same question as the respondents who would vote for BN., that is whether the BN materials affected their:

1. Own self
2. Your family members
3. Supporters of BN
4. Supporters of PR Opposition Parties
5. Uncertain Voters.

The results provided insight as to how the respondents perceived the materials had affected them, their family, the respective political parties, and the uncertain voters. To obtain the third-person effect, the scores on the first-person (self and family) individually were subtracted from the second scores. A resulting score of zero indicates no effect, while a negative score reveals the reverse third-person and a positive score reveals a third-person effect.

Findings of the Study

The current study asked respondents' views on the BN Political Communication Devices: brochures (brochures, pamphlets, publications, and leaflets), *ceramah* (speeches/lectures), and BN publications/reports. We had three groups, one the general population of voters, while the political parties under study were categorized into two groups that comprised of BN supporters and opposition party supporters (inclusive of PAS, DAP and PKR). The classic third-person effect was supported when studying the influence of the BN political communication devices on the opposition party supporters. A first-person party effect or reverse third-person effect was indicated when studying the perceived level of influence of the BN political communication devices on the BN supporters. The summary in Table 1 is based on the cross tabulations of the findings of the study. Generally, out of the total respondents (1463), an almost equal percentage of BN supporters (48 %) and opposition party supporters (52 %) were studied. From the study (Table 1), we can conclude that nearly half of the total respondents were Malay (Bumiputera) (49 %), while about two-fifths were comprised of Chinese (42 %), and less than ten percent were Indians (8 %). Most of the respondents belonged to the age group 21-50 years old. (In the last elections, May 2013, BN gained 47% while the Opposition Parties won 51% of the popular vote.)

Table 1

Demographics of Respondents (N= 1463)

Respondent Demographics (%)		
Gender	Male	53
	Female	47
Race	Malay/ Bumiputera	49
	Chinese	42
	Indian	8
Age Group	21-35 years	38
	36-50 years	38
	More than 51 years	24
Choice of Party	BN supporters (N=695)	48
	PAS supporters	12
	DAP supporters	25
	PKR supporters	16
	Total Opposition supporters (N=768)	52

In the past, it was found that there was a tendency for people to underestimate media or message impact on themselves and to overestimate the impact on others. People will perceive the effects of the negative message to be greater on others than on themselves in the form of the third-person effect. The more unlike the subjects the hypothetical “other” person is, the greater will be the perceived effect on others. Numerous individual differences were provided to distinguish between the first-person and the third-person effect. The more educated are more willing to perceive less media effects on themselves than on others. Likewise, people perceive supporters of different political parties as “others” and those who are with the “families” and “similar party supporters” as “self.”

Hypothesis Testing

People will likely accept the effects of a congenial message on themselves as they perceive it to be in tune with their own cognitive needs. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

the voters would claim that the BN campaign materials would have an effect on own self but would not affect the opposition party supporters.

- ✓ H1: **BN party supporters** would perceive that the BN Political Communication Devices: brochures (pamphlets and leaflets), ceramah (speeches) and BN publications would have **an influence on themselves** and would say that they had no influence among opposition supporters and undecided voters.

Logically positive messages received by the self would make them to say that socially distant others who are similar to them would also be likely to positively receive the messages. Similarly, distant others would be perceived to be favorable to receive the messages, but PR supporters would be perceived not to be influenced by them. Hence the hypothesis that:

- ✓ H2: **Other BN supporters** would be perceived **to be influenced** by the BN Political Communication Devices: brochures (pamphlets/leaflets), ceramah (speeches/lectures) and BN publications/reports as they are **similar others to the self** while PR supporters would not be perceived to be influenced by these BN materials.

People who receive negative or biased messages will discount the effects on themselves but will say that others would readily accept and be influenced by them. There it is hypothesized that:

- ✓ H3: **BN party supporters** would perceive that the BN Political Communication Devices: brochures (pamphlets/leaflets), ceramah (speeches/lectures) and BN publications/reports would have **an influence on others (opposition supporters and uncertain voters)**.
- ✓ H4: **The opposition party supporters** (PAS, DAP, PKR) would perceive that the BN campaign materials have **an influence on others (other BN supporters and uncertain voters)**.

The respondents were tested on the influence of the BN political communication devices on the respondents. Out of the total number of 1463 respondents, about 63% of the

respondents (inclusive of BN and opposition party supporters) claim to have been influenced slightly, moderately or highly by the BN political communication devices. On the other hand, 547 of the total respondents (37%) did not claim to be influenced by the BN political communication devices. A greater level of influence on self would indicate a lesser probability of a third-person effect and a greater probability of a “reverse” third-person effect. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceived influence of BN Political Communication Devices on respondents

		Perceived influence (%)	
		No Influence	Influence
On Self			
BN (N= 695)	BN supporters	12	88
Opposition Party (N=768)	PAS supporters	72	28
	DAP supporters	62	38
	PKR supporters	48	52
	Total Opposition party supporters	60	40
On Total Population (N= 1463)		37	63

No influence (1= not influenced at all, 2= not influenced)
 Influence (3= slightly influenced, 4= influenced, 5=highly influenced)

The study found that 88% of the respondents as a whole say that BN party supporters would be influenced by the BN political communication devices while only 12% say the materials would have no influence on themselves.

The first hypothesis is supported based on the fact that 88% respondents perceived an influence on BN party supporters. This somewhat high influence on self will hinder the implications of a third-person effect in the study. The third-person effect assumes that the self is perceived to have limited influence compared to the others. The high influence percentage on the BN party supporters triggers the possibility for a ‘reverse’ third-person

or first-person effect. This may be due to the perceived desirability of the BN message content to be credible or positive and thus people attribute more effects to self (Huh, Delorme, & Reid, 2004).

Accordingly we can conclude that a majority of 60% of the opposition supporters do not claim to be influenced by the BN political communication devices. This may be attributed to the perceived undesirability of the message on the PR party supporters (i.e., infer that the message may not be good for me). Undesirable messages are prone to trigger the third-person effect. Thus this lack of influence on the self by the PR party respondents indicates a classic third-person effect. In order to confirm the third-person effect theory, the present study regards similar others to the self. Thus the category self is regarded as the respondent and any person who is closely associated with the respondent, that includes their family, friends, those with similar traits and political orientation. The “others” in the study is understood as those who are socially distant from the respondent. Thus people who have similar attributes are likely to respond in the way that the self does than the others who are distant from the self (Table 3).

Table 3

Perceived influence of BN Political Communication Devices on Family and Like Party Supporters

Respondents (N= 1463)		Perceived influence (%) On Self (family)		Perceived influence (%) On Self (like party supporters)	
		No Influenced	Influenced	No Influenced	Influenced
BN (N= 695)	BN supporters family	12	88	9	91
Opposition Party (N= 768)	PAS supporters family	65	35	52	49
	DAP supporters family	57	43	52	48
	PKR supporters family	46	54	49	51
	Total Opposition party supporters	55	45	51	49

No influence (1= not influenced at all, 2= not influenced)
 Influence (3= slightly influenced, 4= influenced, 5=highly influenced)

Based on our findings, out of the total population that were influenced by the BN political communication devices, it was found that that the BN political communication devices indicate a significant level of influence on the BN party supporter's immediate family (88%) and other BN supporters (91%). The perceived influence may be attributed to the fact that people who are similar in age or other relevant traits will respond more similarly than others who are distant or have different traits (Andsagar & White, 2007). Similarly, the opposition party supporters claim that a higher percentage (55%) of their families are not influenced by the BN political communication devices while only a small percentage (45%) of the opposition party supporters claim that the BN messages had an impact on their families (PAS: 35%, DAP: 43% and PKR: 54%). Furthermore, the opposition voters believe that about 51% of those supporting other parties besides BN are not influenced by the BN political

devices. However they agree that 49% of the opposition supporters can be influenced by the BN political devices. This finding can be attributed again to the undesirability of the BN message on the opposition party respondents and accordingly on their families. The overall findings on perceived influence on the respondent's family support the second hypothesis. Supporters of BN perceive to be influenced by the BN political devices (91%) as they are closely associated with the respondent and have similar political orientation. Likewise, the opposition supporters predict a 49% influence of BN political devices on opposition party supporters and more than 50% believe that the BN political devices will not influence supporters of similar parties.

We extracted the two populations of BN supporters and PR supporters to test the influence of BN materials on them, on their families, BN Supporters, PR Supporters, and on the undecided voters.

Table 4

Perceived Influence of BN Materials on BN Respondents and their Perceived Influence on Own Families, on other BN supporters, on PR Supporters and Undecided Voters. (N=695)

		Diff	T-Value	Probability
Self	3.77 SD1.12			
Family	3.79 SD1.10	0.02	-0.592 ^{**}	NS
BN	3.98 SD1.06	0.19	-5.49	0.00
PR	3.28 SD1.10	0.49	11.084	0.00
Undecided	3.27 SD1.11	0.5	12.561	0.00

- ✓ H3: **BN party supporters** would perceive that the BN Political Communication Devices: brochures (pamphlets/leaflets), ceramah (speeches/lectures) and BN publications/reports would have **an influence on others (opposition supporters and uncertain voters)**.
- ✓ H4: **The Opposition party supporters** (PAS, DAP, PKR) would perceive that the BN campaign materials have **an influence on others (other BN supporters and uncertain voters)**.

The final stages of this study are the testing of the third and fourth hypotheses, whereby the influence of the BN political communication devices on the others or the “third” person is tested. The others for the respondents (BN party supporters and opposition party supporters) include the distant BN supporters according to the opposition voters and the undecided voters or the distant opposition voters according to the BN supporters and the undecided voters. It was expected that the perceived influence on the others would be greater than the perceived influence on self. The findings of the perceived influence on the others are presented in Table 4. And in Table 4, the third hypothesis was supported to an extent, whereby the BN party respondents perceived the BN political communication devices to have some level of influence on the distant others. This could be due to the fact that the BN political communication devices are considered to be credible and influential to them. Positive content is expected to be more influential and to have more beneficial outcomes for the individual than negative content (Duck, Terry & Hogg, 1995).

Table 4 shows that there are significant differences between self and others (the distant BN supporters according to the opposition voters, the distant opposition voters according to the BN supporters and the undecided voters). Hence, although there are significant differences, the differences need to be explained as there was a first-person effect between self and BN supporters, but there was a null effect between self and PR supporters and self and undecided voters. What is meant here is that the self (who were voters of BN) perceived that the BN materials would influence more BN supporters, but would not influence that many PR supporters and undecided voters.

In order to comprehend the implication of the third-person effect theory in the study, the two groups of the others (the distant BN supporters according to the opposition voters and the undecided voters or the distant opposition voters according to the BN supporters and the undecided voters) are merged into one variable as others (Table 4). The perceived influence of the BN party supporters and opposition party supporters are simultaneously compared and analyzed to highlight the essence of the third-person effect and the *reverse* third-person effect.

Table 5

Perceived Influence of BN Political Communication Devices on Others (Third Person)

On Distant Other		No Influence (%)			Influence (%)			Total (%) On Other (according to each party supporter)
		Other BN supporters	Opposition supporters	Uncertain voters	Other BN supporters	Opposition supporters	Uncertain voters	
BN	BN supporters	9	22	24	91	78	76	77
Opposition party supporters	PAS supporters	21	52	52	79	48	48	64
	DAP supporters	23	52	54	77	48	46	62
	PKR supporters	33	49	45	67	51	55	61
	Total Opposition party supporters	26	51	51	74	49	49	62

No influence (1= not influenced at all, 2= not influenced)
 Influence (3= slightly influenced, 4= influenced, 5=highly influenced)

The results (Table 5) of the BN political communication impact on distant others yielded some interesting results. The distant others was a total of the uncertain voters and opposition supporters of each respective party (BN and opposition supporters). As

expected, more than half of the BN party respondents believed that the BN political communication devices were likely to have an influence on their “distant” others (77%). Only about 22% of the BN party respondents felt that there could be no influence on the opposition supporters and about 24% felt that there could be no influence on uncertain voters. However, the majority of the BN supporters acknowledge that the BN political communication devices have an impact on the opposition party supporters (78%) and the uncertain voters (76%). This finding could be due to the presumed credibility of the source of the message. As Banning and Sweetser (2007) say, greater credibility could lead to a reduced possibility of a third-person effect or on the other hand, a greater possibility of a “reverse” third-person effect.

The others for the opposition supporters include the uncertain voters and BN supporters. Testing the fourth hypothesis, we find that more than half of the opposition voters believe that the BN political communication devices could have no influence over the uncertain voters (51%). Some 49% of the opposition supporters believe that the BN political communication devices could influence the uncertain voters. On the other hand, a majority of the opposition party respondents (74%) believe that the BN political communication devices could influence the other BN respondents that includes the PAS supporters (79%) the DAP supporters (77%) and the PKR supporters (67%). Thus, overall, the opposition party supporters perceive that the BN political communication devices greatly influence others (62%) that includes the other BN supporters (74%) and uncertain voters (49%). The findings of the perceived influence on distant others by the respondents (both BN party respondents and opposition party respondents) yielded interesting and somewhat conflicting results. The next section will provide a broader understanding of what transpired in the study.

Table 6

Perceived Influence of BN Materials on PR Respondents and Their Perceived Influence on Own Families, on Other BN Supporters, on PR Supporters, and Undecided Voters (N=768)

		Diff	T-Value	Probability
Self	2.39 SD 1.11			
Family	2.46 SD1.12	0.07	-2.630	0.00
BN	3.31 SD1.20	0.92	-19.63	0.00
PR	2.52 SD0.99	0.13	-3.752	0.00
Undecided	2.48	0.09	-2.598	0.00

Table 6 shows that there is a significant distance between self and the others (BN, PR supporters and the undecided voters). The biggest difference is between self and the other BN supporters. It is evident that PR supporters believed that BN materials had an impact on others although they discounted an influence on themselves.

Discussion on the Findings of the Study

The current study focuses on the influence of the BN political communication devices (brochures, speeches, and publications) on Malaysian voters. The study begins with a foundation on the third-person effects theory and understands that when a message has a low likelihood or perceived negative influence (undesirable), then the third-person effect is more obvious (Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999). Simply stated, the message will have a *least* or no influence on “me” (the first person) and a greater influence on “them” (the other BN voters, non-BN supporters and non-supporters of other parties). But the concept of others in this study is strained because the PR supporters are actually a close self and a self with the families. It is similar with the BN respondents when the other (BN supporters) are actually their self because of the political affinity.

However, the findings of the study yielded an interesting and somewhat conflicting result. It was found that when the message was perceived to be desirable by the respondents, there was a possibility of a self-assured “reverse” third-person effect. According to the “reverse” third-person effect, the self is assumed to be more receptive of the desirable message influence while “others” (family) are perceived to be either slightly positively influenced, negatively influenced to some degree less than the self or not influenced at all (Andsagar & White, 2007) . Simply stated, the message will have a *greater* influence on “me” (the first person i.e., BN Voters) and a *little* or no influence on “them” (the other BN voters, PR supporters and undecided of other parties). In our study, we have found that the BN respondents displayed an extraordinary level of confidence and indicated that there was a positive reverse third-person effect when influenced by the BN political communication devices. A summary of the findings is provided in Table 7 for a better discussion on the implication of the reverse third-person effect. The influence of the BN political communication devices on the respondents (BN party supporters and opposition party supporters) on self and others are summarized (Table 7).

Table 7

Perceived influence of BN Political Communication Devices on Self and Others

		Perceived level of influence (%)	
		On Self (respondents, respondent’s family, similar party supporters)	On Others (other party supporters (BN or non-BN supporters) and uncertain voters)
BN supporters		88	77
Opposition Party Supporters	PAS supporters	37	64
	DAP supporters	43	62
	PKR supporters	52	61
Total Opposition party supporters		44	62

Influence (3= slightly influenced, 4= influenced, 5=highly influenced)

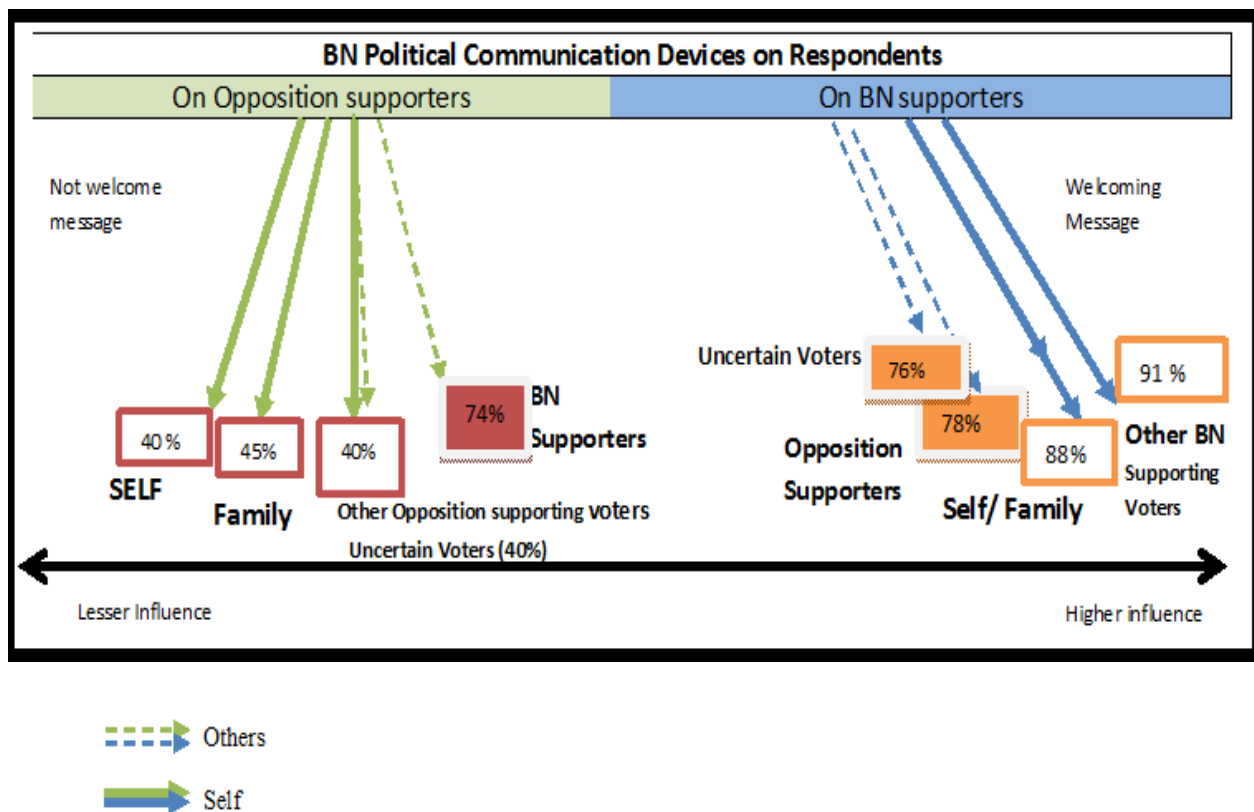
For the purpose of understanding the study, Table 7 has summarized the total findings of those respondents who claim to have been either influenced or greatly influenced by the BN political communication devices with respect to self and others. From the Table, it is understood that the perceived influence of the BN political communication devices on the BN party supporters indicate a *confident* “reverse” third-person effect that is positive. The BN supporters claim to have a greater influence on self (88%) compared to others (77%). The findings indicate that the BN political communication devices is considered to be a desirable message for the BN respondents and thus they believe that the message has a strong impact on self and others. As a result, the respondents perceive a positive influence on themselves and on those like or closest to them (family). However, the influence on the distant other is perceived to be comparatively less and this could be attributed to the social distance between the self and distant others or the level of message desirability. Thus, it could be understood that the BN party supporters are persuaded by the positive and credible message given by the BN political communication devices and subsequently the voters feel “*I am smart enough to recognize the value of the message*” (Huh et al., 2004). Therefore, the first person or BN respondents feel proud and contented when exposed to their party communication devices and they felt that the others and distant others should also share a similar sentiment. This understanding is further elaborated based on the *reverse* third-person effect model proposed by Andsagar and White (2007).

To better understand the finding, we test the influence of the BN political communication devices based on a continuum of highly influenced to least influenced. Using Andsagar and White’s (2007) model to test the influence of the BN political communication devices on BN party supporters, we find that the respondents level of perceived influence on self and others (Figure 1) are positioned at different levels of positive influence. Amazingly, the findings illustrate that the BN party supporters believed that the BN political communication devices had a positive influence on them (self), their family (self) and also a significant level of positive influence on distant others (non-BN supporters, non-supporters of other parties). The BN voters are happy that their BN materials had an influence beyond the self and extend to the others.

However, the significance given to self, others, and distant others are derived based on comparing the different levels of positive influence yielded. The model illustrates that the BN party supporters (the self, family, and other BN supporters) are positioned further in the continuum towards the positive influence and the arrow to the self indicates that a strong level of influence is on the respondent to indicate a greater perceived level of positive influence following exposure to the BN political communication devices. The broken lines from the undesirable message indicate the respondent's estimation of the influence that the same content will have on those others (non-supporters of the respondent's party and uncertain voters).

Figure 1

Third person effects on BN Political Communication Devices (adopted from Andsagar, 2009)



This “reverse” third-person model indicates that the BN party supporters perceived the BN political communication device to be credible and positive and thus increase the

likelihood of message influence on the self and those closest (self and family (88%)), and other supporting voters (91%) than on the others (uncertain voters (76%), opposition supporters (78%)). These findings support the earlier research on “reverse” third-person effect or first-person effect, that message desirability plays a key role in persuasion and positive influence on self and others (Duck et al., 1995; Day, 2006; Lewis, Watson & Tay, 2007; Spinda, 2009; Lewis, Watson, & White, 2008). The study indicates that the BN respondents display a high confidence in predicting the influence of the BN political communication devices on self, others, and distant others.

Initially the study was undertaken to explore the existence of a classic third-person effect on voter’s opinion pertaining to the BN party controlled communication devices. In support of the early groundwork of the current study, a classic third-person effect was found to occur in the study of the perceived influence of the BN political communication devices on opposition party supporters (PAS, DAP, PKR). According to the classic third-person effect, when a message is considered to be undesirable, the participants will assume that “others” are more influenced by the message than themselves. Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn and Huges (2009) call this understanding the “economy of effect perception,” whereby the negative sides of a message are ascribed to others while the positive sides are ascribed to oneself (pp. 89). In this case, the BN political communication messages are ascribed as negative by the opposition party supporters, and they do not value the credibility or ideology of the message. Therefore, they ascribe a greater negative influence to distant others compared to themselves.

Using Andsagar and White’s (2007) model to illustrate our findings, we assume that the BN political communication campaign is looked upon as an “undesirable” message by the opposition parties. It must be noted that when the message is perceived as undesirable, we understand that the message is considered to be not good for the receiver. Thus subsequently, the negative impact of the message will trigger a possible classic third-person effect. Figure 1 on the opposition party respondents indicates a limited perceived influence on themselves (40%) as the “self” and a moderate perceived influence on the

opposition party supporter’s family (45%). This finding could be attributed to the fact that the respondents feel that they are on the same level of thinking as their close ones. However, the findings of the perceived influence on the other BN supporters (74%) was greater compared to the perceived influence on self and family. This finding correlates with the classic third-person effect theory whereby the perceived influence on the distant others are higher than the perceived influence on self. Thus the opposition respondents feel that distant others are more influenced by the undesirable message than themselves. This finding is better understood by using the third-person effect model (Figure 1).

In Table 8 another presentation is given on the average scores obtained on self, family members, BN supporters, PR members and the undecided members among the PR respondents (who had said they would vote for PR if elections were to be held tomorrow).

Table 8

Perceived Influence of BN Materials on PR Respondents and Their Perceived Influence on Own Families, on Other BN Supporters, on PR Supporters and Undecided Voters (N=768)

		Diff	T-Value	Probability
Self	2.39 SD 1.11			
Family	2.46 SD1.12	0.07	-2.630	0.00
BN	3.31 SD1.20	0.92	-19.63	0.00
PR	2.52 SD0.99	0.13	-3.752	0.00
Undecided	2.48 SD1.00	0.09	-2.598	0.00

The self is expected not to admit that the BN materials influenced them as they had considered the message to be biased and not credible. But the respondents who would vote for PR if elections were held tomorrow admitted that the BN materials would influence

their families, BN supporters, other PR supporters and the undecided voters more than they would influence them.

In summary we would provide the following tables to show the differences among the perceived effect of BN materials on the voters of BN and voters of PR and the perceived influence of BN materials on their families, on other BN supporters, on other PR supporters and on the undecided voters.

1) Influence on self

There was a significant difference between BN and PR supporters with regard to the influence of BN materials on their selves ($t=20.35, p<.05$). The influence of BN materials is more on the BN supporters ($M=3.77$) than the opposition supporters ($M=2.39$). (Table 9).

Table 9

Independent Sample T-Test Between BN and PR Supporters with Regard to the Influence of BN materials on self.

Group	N	M	SD	t	P-value
BN	695	3.7741	1.12063	20.35	Significant
PR	768	2.3945	1.11143		

The higher mean score suggests that more BN respondents deemed the BN materials to have an influence on their decision than the PR respondents who deemed the BN materials to be biased and not credible. The difference between the two means is significant.

2) Influence on family

The results in Table 10 show significant differences between government and opposition supporters with regard to the influence of BN materials on family members. The difference

($t=19.83$) was significant at .05 level. BN supporters ($M=3.79$) believed that BN materials have more of an influence on their family members than the family of PR supporters ($M=2.46$).

Table 10

Independent Sample T-Test Between BN and PR Supporters with Regard to the Influence of BN Materials on Family

Group	N	M	SD	t	P-value
BN	695	3.7914	1.09673	19.83	Significant
PR	768	2.4609	1.11808		

3) Influence on BN supporters

There was a significant difference between BN and PR supporters in terms of BN materials' influence on BN supporters (Table 11). BN supporters ($M=3.96$) perceive that BN materials influence BN supporters more than the PR supporters (3.31). The BN respondents were more confident that the BN materials reached the BN supporters and influenced them while the PR respondents perceived that the materials would reach and influence the BN supporters, but the number would be less.

Table 11

Independent Sample T-Test Between BN and PR Supporters with Regard to the Influence of BN Materials on BN Supporters

Group	N	M	SD	t	P-value
BN	695	3.9597	1.05802	10.59	Significant
PR	768	3.3073	1.9946		

4) Influence on PR supporters

There was a significant difference between BN and PR supporters in terms of BN materials' influence on the opposition supporters (Table 12). BN supporters (M=3.28) believed that the BN's materials influenced the opposition supporters, while the PR supporters did not believe that the influence would be that much (M=2.52).

Table 12

Independent Sample T-Test Between BN and PR Supporters with Regard to the Influence of BN Materials on PR Supporters

Group	N	M	SD	t	P-value
BN	695	3.2849	1.09597	13.24	Significant
PR	768	2.5247	.99249		

5) Influence on undecided voters

There was a significant difference between BN and PR supporters with regard to BN materials' influence on independent voters (Table 13). The influence of BN materials on these voters was high as perceived by BN supporters (M=3.27) compared to PR supporters (2.48). The PR respondents did not believe that the BN materials would be able to influence a high number of undecided voters.

Table 13

Independent Sample T-Test Between BN and PR Supporters with Regard to the Influence of BN Materials on Independent Voters

Group	N	M	SD	t	P-value
BN	695	3.2691	1.11104	13.53	Significant
PR	768	2.4805	1.00176		

Summary

An independent sample t-test was calculated for the party supporters with regard to the five variables (BN materials' influence on self, family, BN, PR, and independent voters). There were significant differences between BN supporters and opposition supporters in terms of the above variables. BN supporters said that the BN materials influenced their selves, their family, other BN supporters, PR supporters, and independent voters as compared to the PR supporters who said that these materials had less influence or had no influence at all their selves, their families, other PR supporters, and independents voters. It is observable that the PR supporters said that these materials had a big influence on BN supporters.

Overall it meant that supporters of the partisan message will be likely to say that the messages will influence them and the distant others. While the anti-partisan group admits that the message will influence the "others" by discounting the influence on themselves, and the level of influence they admit was less.

While BN supporters perceive that the BN materials had a big influence on the opposition members, in reality the influence as admitted by the PR respondents is lower than what is being perceived. This indicates the overestimation of the BN supporters.

Conclusion

The conclusion is formulated based on the findings of the study and testing the hypothesis. Though the main objective of the study was to explore the existence of a classic third-person effect in voters' opinions pertaining to the BN party controlled communication devices, the study has managed to indicate that there is some degree of influence by the BN political communication devices on the BN supporters and the opposition party supporters.

The high acceptance of the BN respondents that the BN political communication devices have a positive influence on themselves, family, and supporters has led the researcher to unearth the presence of a *confident* "reverse" third-person effect in the study. This theory has shed light on the importance of desirable messages or welcomed messages and the influence they can have on the respondents or others. The opposition party supporters on the other hand have depicted a classic third-person effect and agree to some level of influence on themselves and others.

Furthermore, the study has contributed to the media studies literature by studying the third-person effect and *reverse* third-person effect within the context of an election coverage. The study has further managed to establish a relationship between the third-person effect and voter perceptions or the reverse third-person effect and voter perceptions by using the third-person effect model and reverse third-person effect model. The study was based only on the impact of the BN political communication devices on Malaysian voters. However, it is predictable that the same kind of effects (third-person, reverse third-person effects, or *confident* reverse third-person effects) will be relevant on the study of the impact of the opposition political communication devices on BN supporters and opposition supporters.

Nevertheless, the unveiling of the *confident* reverse third-person effect has enabled us to better understand the current political scenario of Malaysia and has given scope to broaden the understanding of the future election studies.

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