



## Need for Orientation and Third-Person Effects of the Televised Debates in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Ran Wei, Ven-Hwei Lo & Yicheng Zhu


To cite this article: Ran Wei, Ven-Hwei Lo & Yicheng Zhu (2019) Need for Orientation and Third-Person Effects of the Televised Debates in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, *Mass Communication and Society*, 22:5, 565-583, DOI: [10.1080/15205436.2019.1601227](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1601227)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1601227>



Accepted author version posted online: 01 Apr 2019.  
Published online: 22 Apr 2019.



[Submit your article to this journal](#) 



Article views: 134



[View related articles](#) 



[View Crossmark data](#) 



# Need for Orientation and Third-Person Effects of the Televised Debates in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Ran Wei and Ven-Hwei Lo

*School of Journalism and Communication  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

Yicheng Zhu

*School of Journalism and Communication  
Beijing Normal University*

The televised debates in the 2016 presidential election took place between two controversial candidates, Hillary Clinton and her opponent, Donald Trump, who faced a deeply divided electorate of highly opinioned voters that had already decided on their supported candidates. How did viewing the debates influence them? Would the debates reinforce their existing opinion, or provide them with useful information about the candidates? Drawing on Davison's third-person effect hypothesis, this study aims to shed light on the question of how viewing the debates influences voters relative to others in the era of social media. The study

---

**Ran Wei** (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1995) is a professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, and professor emeritus of mass communications at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. His research interests include media effects, communication technology, and mobile communication.

**Ven-Hwei Lo** (Ph.D., University of Missouri, Columbia, 1985) is a research professor at the School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. His research interests include news media performance and the effects of mass media.

**Yicheng Zhu** (Ph.D., University of South Carolina, 2018) is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China. His research interests include effects of political communication at national and transnational levels.

Correspondence should be addressed to Yicheng Zhu, School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University, 19 Xijiekou Outer St., Beijing, China. E-mail: [yicheng@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:yicheng@bnu.edu.cn)

focuses on the need for orientation as a predictor of debate exposure and the behavioral consequences of debate exposure for electoral engagement on social media. Findings show that partisans are not impacted by viewing the debates, but respondents perceived Independents to be most vulnerable. Further, need for orientation moderated the relationship between debate exposure and perceived effects of the debates on self, which prompted respondents to mobilize support for the candidate of their choice and to vote for their supported candidates.

## INTRODUCTION

Televised presidential debates, which provide a stage for candidates to face off live in front of a national audience, represent an event of national importance in elections. They are likened to the Super Bowl of American democracy with potential impacts on voters, especially the undecided voters. Three televised debates between Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, the first woman presidential candidate from one of the two major political parties, and her Republican opponent, Donald Trump, a successful businessman, were staged in the fall of 2016. Attracting 84 million viewers nationwide, the first debate set a ratings record and went down history as the most watched nonsports live television event in America.

The 2016 presidential debates took place between two controversial and divisive candidates who faced a deeply divided electorate, which meant that highly opinioned voters had already decided on their supported candidates. Under these circumstances, how did viewing the debates influence them? Would the debates reinforce their existing opinion (Chaffee & Miyo, 1983), or provide viewers with useful information about the candidates (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012)? And what would they think about the impact of the debates on Independents?

Drawing on Davison's (1983) third-person effect hypothesis—the tendency to perceive mass media messages as having a greater effect on others than on themselves—the present study aims to illuminate these questions concerning the relationship between exposure to the televised debates and consequences of exposure for electoral participation among U.S. college students. The third-person effect hypothesis underscores the critical role of perception in assessing media performance and inferring its impact on the public (Lo, Wei, Lu, & Hou, 2015; Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009). The robust third-person effect research (Lo, Wei, & Lu, 2017; Perloff, 2015), however, has paid little attention to the perceptual and behavioral effects of the televised debates in presidential elections. By expanding research on political messages to the presidential debates, findings of this study help fill the void in the literature.

Furthermore, no study has explored the role of need for orientation (i.e., an individual's need to familiarize him- or herself with their physical and cognitive surroundings; see Weaver, 1980) in modifying third-person effects. This study expands the third-person effect research by examining the influence of need for

orientation on perceived effects of the televised debates. The consideration was informed by a study by Chang, Wei, and Lo (2014), which showed that voters of ambivalence (undecided) tend to need political information to become univalent (decided), and they are more open to persuasion by political messages than are univalent (decided) voters. Because young citizens lack the experience of participating in presidential elections, the especially controversial 2016 election created a strong need for orientation about it among this segment. Analytically, this study explores the role of the need for orientation as a key predictor of exposure to the televised debates, as well as perceived effects of the debates on self and on others, which then lead to different participative actions in the election.

Finally, past research (Banning, 2006; Eisend, 2017) suggests that one of the most conceptually useful characteristics of the third-person effect hypothesis is the direction between perceptions of effects on self versus perceptions of effects on others. The literature also shows that third-person perceptual effects affect various types of behavioral intentions, and the direction and size of the effects depend on whether these behaviors are other or self-directed. Theoretically, by incorporating the need for orientation into the framework, direction of perceived effects can be linked to this key yet untested concept to ascertain motivations and cognitions underlying perceptions of media effects and their behavioral consequences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW, HYPOTHESES, AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Davison's (1983) third-person effect hypothesis is widely observed in mass communications and has received broad empirical support (Perloff, 2009). The third-person effect was applied primarily in political communication (Tal-Or et al., 2009), shedding light on the power of the media in politics through the understanding of perceptions of media effects on voters.

### Third-Person Effects of Political Messages

Focusing on campaign messages in presidential or federal elections, past research (Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995; Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Salwen, 1998) showed consistently that voters perceived a greater influence of campaign messages on others than on themselves among general or Republican voters. Similar results were reported in studies of perceived effects of election polls (Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011) and election ads (Cohen & Davis, 1991). Those studies laid the groundwork for the first hypothesis concerning the perceptual effects of

the televised debates between Clinton and Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

H1: Respondents will perceive the televised debates to have greater effects on other voters than on themselves.

### Debate Exposure, Need for Orientation, and Third-Person Perception

What factors contribute to the self–other perceptual discrepancy? Past research (Oh, Park, & Wanta, 2011; Perloff, 2009) has identified multiple mechanisms that mediate the process of social judgment about media influence on self and others, including patterns of media use. Higher level of media exposure, such as television viewing, reading magazines, and listening to radio drama, was found to be related to greater perceived effects on oneself and on others (Gunther & Storey, 2003; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). Others (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Wei & Lo, 2007) reported that exposure to specific media content such as rap music, attack ads, and election polls was a stronger predictor of the third-person perceptual effect than general media exposure.

Because news media, television in particular, are the primary source of information about politics, Salwen (1998) suggested that the learning effect from news media means that people who are knowledgeable about media content would believe greater effects of the content on self and on others. The second hypothesis was advanced to test the relationship between exposure to the televised debates between Clinton and Trump in the 2016 presidential election and perceived effects of the debates on self and others.

H2: Exposure to the televised debates will be positively related to perceived effects of the debates on oneself and on others (i.e., Democrats, Republicans, and Independents).

### Need for Orientation and Third-Person Perceptual Effect

Does viewing presidential debates matter to voters? The debate literature suggests that debates on national live television can provide voters with “more or better information on which to base their decision” (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003, p. 336). Past research has shown the positive effects of exposure to debates on voters’ knowledge about election issues (Lemert, 1993; Zhu, Milavasky, & Biswas, 1994), as well as candidate personas (Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998; Pfau & Eveland, 1994).

Moreover, among the young voters, McKinney and Rill (2009) found that exposure to the 2008 presidential debates on both television and YouTube increased their political information efficacy; they became more confident in

their political knowledge after watching the debates. In short, exposure to debates can have positive learning effects on voters and enhance their confidence. At the same time, viewing debates helps undecided voters to make their voting decision. In addition, recent research that incorporates social media content and effects related to debate viewing (Jungherr, 2016), especially studies about the “dual-screen” phenomenon (Gil de Zuniga & Liu, 2017), documented voter engagement on social media. Freelon and Karpf (2015) analyzed 1.9 million tweets from the 2012 presidential debates and reported that both elites and ordinary citizens opined on national politics and candidates in the social media sphere. Kirk and Schill (2011) found that viewing presidential debates prompted discussions on YouTube.

Furthermore, the 2016 presidential election that featured two polarizing candidates created a great deal of anxiety among American voters. According to a poll reported in *Time*, half of the voters experienced election-related stress. In an uncertain circumstance, Matthes (2005) suggested that voters’ need for orientation, which accounts for a psychological reason for why people tune to news media to cope with uncertainty, would rise, prompting them to engage in information seeking. As McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014) suggested, need for orientation consists of two components: political relevance (interest in an issue) and political uncertainty (uncertainty about issues or candidates). Evidence from past research validates need for orientation as a significant determinant that accounts for individuals’ media use and learning effects (Camaj, 2014; Camaj & Weaver, 2013).

More important, Paek, Pan, Sun, Abisaid, and Houden (2005) argued that the third-person effect phenomenon tends to occur as a result of social judgments under varying degrees of uncertainty. Uncertainty that leads to a high need for orientation triggers the behavior of seeking media messages actively and processing them thoroughly. The more thoroughly that individuals process messages, the greater effects of the messages they would perceive on self and on others. Conversely, when need for orientation is low, people will not be motivated to seek political messages and process the messages thoroughly and will be less likely to acknowledge that the message influences them and others.

Applying ambivalence theory to examine the third-person effects of election news, Chang et al. (2014) reported similar findings: Undecided voters who tend to need political information to reach a decision are more open to persuasion from political media than are decided voters. Thus, those undecided voters were found to infer greater influence of election news on themselves than on others.

Accordingly, need for orientation provides another key mechanism that accentuates the third-person effect process of political messages. Because young citizens, mostly first-time voters in a presidential election, had a strong need for orientation about the 2016 election between a female

candidate and a political outsider, it is logical to propose that need for orientation would function as a predictor of watching the debates and would impact the perceived effects of the debates.

H3: Need for orientation about the 2016 presidential election will be positively related to exposure to the televised debates.

H4: Need for orientation about the 2016 presidential election will be positively related to perceived effects of the televised debates on oneself and on others.

In addition if, as hypothesized, need for orientation will enhance media exposure and perceived effects on self and others, it is plausible that it will moderate the link between debate exposure and perceived effects of the debates. To explore *whether* and *how* need for orientation affects the relationship between debate exposure and perceived effects on self and on others, the following research question was advanced:

RQ1: How does need for orientation affect the relationship between exposure to the televised debates in the 2016 presidential election and perceived effects of the debates on self?

### Perceived Effects of TV Debates and Political Behavior

Thanks to attempts by scholars (Perloff, 2009; Tal-Or et al., 2009) to theorize the behavioral outcomes of perceived effects of political messages on self and on others, the third-person effect research is robust. In the context of elections, past research (Banning, 2006; Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011) has explored a variety of voter behaviors, including candidate choice, voting intentions, political activism, and support for restrictions on negative political messages. These studies indicate that perceived effects of campaign messages have real-life behavioral consequences.

Several studies have explored the behavioral effects of perceived influence of media messages on political engagement, which refers to a variety of activities, such as expressing opinion online, discussing politics with others, and mobilizing support (Oh et al., 2011). In general, voluntary action taken by voters is consistent with the third-person hypothesis concerning behavior triggered by third-person perceptual effects. Also, past research on debate effects focusing on the perceptual and cognitive effects of the debates suggested that exposure to debates could alter their vote preference (Geer, 1988). As discussed earlier, for nonpartisan or independent voters, exposure to debates might affect their voting intentions (Benoit, McKinney, & Lance Holbert, 2001; Benoit et al., 2003).

However, perceived effects of political messages on self and on others were found to be better behavioral predictors than the third-person perception because third-person perception does not distinguish between those who perceived political messages to have a greater influence on themselves and on others and those who perceived the messages to have less influence on themselves and on others (Eisend, 2017; Lo & Wei, 2002).

Recent third-person effect studies of news found that it was the perceived effect of news on self that prompted people to take corrective actions (Lo et al., 2015) and participate in civil protests (Lo et al., 2017). Lin (2009) found that the magnitude of the third-person perceptual gap was negatively related to the intention to discuss the televised debates with others in a presidential election in Taiwan. Empirically, previous research has shown that the more voters believed election polls in the 2008 U.S. presidential election had influenced themselves, the stronger their intention to seek information about the polls and to discuss them with others (Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011).

Therefore, in the context of the 2016 presidential election, it is anticipated that perceived effects of the debates on self would be a stronger correlate of electoral engagement in terms of discussing the debates on social media, mobilizing support for the candidate they support and intention to vote for supported candidates than would perceived effects on others. The last hypothesis was advanced to examine the consequence of the perceptual effects of the televised debates for voter engagement.

- H5: Perceived effects of the televised debates on oneself will be a better predictor of electoral engagement in terms of (a) discussing the debates on social media, (b) mobilizing support for the candidate of one's choice, (c) intention to vote for Clinton, or (d) intention to vote for Trump than will perceived effects on others.

## METHODS

### Sampling and Data

This study sampled a combination of millennials (13% of the sample) and what Pew (2018) called post-millennials (86.8%) as respondents. Thanks to their demographic and political diversity, America's young voters had a significant role to play in the 2016 presidential election. The present study targeted college students in drawing a sample for data collection. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by Institutional Review Boards.

Specifically, a stratified sampling strategy was used to draw a probability sample from a large public university in the Southeast. Courses were stratified by subject (e.g., science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] vs. humanities/



social sciences courses). Two classes from a list of STEM humanities-social science courses were randomly selected. The sampling plan yielded a total sample of 1,061 students. The self-administered survey was distributed to the selected classes from October 10 to October 20, 2016, right after the second televised presidential debate ended. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Of the 1,061 respondents, 818 completed the survey. An 88.1% of response rate was achieved.

Of the sample, 46.6% were males. The mean age was 19.83 years ( $SD = 2.20$ , range = 17–41). The sample had more freshmen (35%) and sophomores (33.1%) than juniors (21.5%) and seniors (10.8%). Of the sample, 83.5% were White, 6.9% were African Americans, 2.4% were Hispanics, and 5.7% were Asians. In terms of party affiliation, almost one third (28.9%) reported as strong or moderate Democrats and 48.4% as strong or moderate Republicans. Independents accounted for the rest (27.7%).

## Measurement

*Exposure to Presidential Debates.* Respondents were asked to report how much they watched (in chronological order) (a) the first presidential debate, (b) the vice presidential debate, and (c) the second presidential debate. A 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*all of it*) was used. Results of an exploratory factor analysis showed a single-factor solution, indicating the three items measured the same underlying concept (Eigenvalue = 1.85, accounting for 61.64% of the variance). A composite scale of *exposure to presidential debates* was built by averaging the three items ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ,  $\alpha = .69$ ).

*Need for Orientation.* Using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with these statements: (a) It is important for me to instantly learn about major issues in the 2016 presidential election, (b) I want to know about all aspects of major issues in the 2016 presidential election, (c) I want to have in-depth understanding of major issues in the 2016 presidential election, and (d) I am interested in how other people comment on major issues in the 2016 presidential election. Results of an exploratory factor analysis showed a single-factor solution, suggesting that these four items measured the same concept (eigenvalue = 3.07, explaining 76.65% of the variance). A composite scale was created by averaging them ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

*Perceived Effects of Televised Debates on Self and Others.* Respondents were asked to rate how much the debates affected the voting decisions of (a) their own, (b) Democratic supporters, (c) Republican supporters,

and (d) independent voters. The scale ranged from 1 (*no influence at all*) and 5 (*a great deal of influence*). Based on these measures, four third-person perceptual effect variables were created: *perceived effects on self* ( $M = 2.52, SD = 1.39$ ), *perceived effects on Democratic supporters* ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.39$ ), *perceived effects on Republican supporters* ( $M = 2.94, SD = 1.32$ ), and *perceived effects on independent voters* ( $M = 3.19, SD = 1.14$ ).

#### *Discussing the Presidential Debates with Others on Social Media.*

Using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*), respondents were asked to indicate how often they discussed the debates (a) on Facebook, (b) on Twitter, and (c) on any other social media in the 2016 presidential election. Results of an exploratory factor analysis of the three items showed a single-factor solution (eigenvalue = 2.29, explaining variance = 76.23%). Using the average, a composite measure of *discussing the debates with others on social media* was constructed ( $M = 1.58, SD = .94, \alpha = .84$ ).

*Mobilization on Social Media.* The first measure of electoral engagement consisted of three items, which asked respondents how often they engaged in asking friends (a) on Facebook to vote for the candidate you support, (b) on Twitter to vote for the candidate you support, and (c) on other social media to vote for the candidate you support in the 2016 presidential election. The 5-point response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The items were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis, from which a single-factor solution emerged (eigenvalue = 2.58, accounting for 86.03% of the variance). A composite measure of *mobilization on social media* was generated ( $M = 1.30, SD = .74, \alpha = .92$ ).

*Intention to Vote.* The second measure of electoral engagement consisted of two separate items. On a 5-point scale from 1 (*not likely*) to 5 (*very likely*), respondents were requested to indicate their intention to vote for Clinton ( $M = 2.37, SD = 1.49$ ) or Trump ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.46$ ) after viewing the debates.

## RESULTS

H1 predicted that respondents would perceive the televised presidential debates between Clinton and Trump to have a greater effect on others than on themselves. Results of paired  $t$  tests in Table 1 supported the baseline hypothesis. In the pooled sample, the results showed  $t(806) = -7.96, p < .001$ , for self versus other Democrats;  $t(806) = -8.17, p < .001$ , for self versus other Republicans;  $t(806) = -14.00, p < .001$ , for self versus other Independents. In the Democratic sample, the results showed  $t(188) = -3.88, p < .001$ , for self versus other

TABLE 1  
 Mean Estimates of Perceived Effects of the 2016 Televised Presidential Debates on Self  
 and Perceived Effects on Third-Person Comparison Groups

<i>Samples</i>	N	<i>Self</i>	<i>Comparison Groups</i>		
			<i>Other Democrats</i>	<i>Other Republicans</i>	<i>Other Independents</i>
All	807	2.52 (1.39)	2.77 (1.39)	2.94 (1.32)	3.19 (1.14)
Democrats	189	2.60 (1.49)	2.79 (1.49)	3.07 (1.32)	3.23 (1.11)
Republicans	380	2.46 (1.31)	2.71 (1.37)	2.90 (1.33)	3.18 (1.11)
Independents	217	2.53 (1.40)	2.83 (1.35)	2.88 (1.31)	3.16 (1.19)

*Note.* Figures in parentheses are standard deviations. All differences between self and the two comparison groups are significant at the  $p < .001$  level.

Democrats;  $t(188) = -3.83$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Republicans;  $t(188) = -6.06$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Independents; in the Republican sample, the results showed  $t(379) = -7.96$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Democrats;  $t(379) = -8.17$ ,  $p < .001$ , for self versus other Republicans;  $t(379) = -14.00$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Independents; finally in the independent sample, the results showed  $t(216) = -3.57$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Democrats;  $t(216) = -3.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , for self versus other Republicans;  $t(216) = -7.070$  at  $p < .001$  for self versus other Independents.

In sum, respondents believed that others, regardless of whether Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, as being more vulnerable than themselves to the influence of the presidential debates. Moreover, Independents were thought to be most vulnerable to the debates among the three comparison groups. H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that exposure to the debates would be positively related to perceived effects of the debates on self and on others. To test it, four hierarchical regression analyses were conducted in which demographics were entered first, followed by need for orientation and debate exposure. The dependent variables were perceived effects on self, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. As anticipated, debate exposure was a significant predictor of perceived effects on self ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and on Independents ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .001$  see columns 2 and 4 in Table 2), indicating that as exposure to the debates increased, the perceived effects of the debates on self and on Independents also increased. But exposure was not a significant predictor of perceived effects on Democrats or Republicans. H2 was partially supported.

H3 predicted that need for orientation would be positively related to debate exposure. To test it, another hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with debate exposure as the dependent variable. Predictors were demographics and need for orientation. As results in Table 2 (column 1) show, need for

TABLE 2  
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Debate Exposure, Perceived Effects of the Debates on Self, on Democrats and on Republicans

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Debate Exposure</i>	<i>Perceived Effects on Self</i>	<i>Perceived Effects on Democrats</i>	<i>Perceived Effects on Republicans</i>	<i>Perceived Effects on Independents</i>
<b>Block 1: Demographics</b>					
Gender	.10**	-.17***	-.20***	-.20***	-.12**
Age	.04	.02	.03	.03	-.02
Race (White)	.01	-.08*	-.05	-.04	-.02
Political affiliation (Democrat)	-.00	-.03	-.07	.01	-.03
Political affiliation (Republican)	.04	-.05	-.06	-.01	-.05
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	3.2%	2.4%	3.8%	3.4%	0.3%
<b>Block 2: Cognitive mechanism</b>					
Need for orientation	.54***	.13**	.11**	.12*	.16***
Incremental adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	28.4%	4.0%	1.1%	1.3%	6.0%
<b>Block 3: Debate exposure</b>					
Debate exposure	—	.11*	.00	-.00	.16***
Incremental adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	—	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%
<b>Block 4: Interaction effect</b>					
Need for Orientation × Watching Debates	—	-.12**	-.02	-.02	-.02
Incremental adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	—	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	31.6%	8.0%	4.8%	4.5%	7.9%

*Note.* Betas are from final regression model with all variables in the regression equation.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

orientation was a significant and positive predictor of exposure to debates. In fact, it was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ); thus, the higher the need of orientation, the more viewing of the debates. H3 was supported.

H4 further predicted that need for orientation would be positively related to perceived effects of the debates on self and on others. Four regression analyses were conducted to test it. As Table 2 (columns 2–5) shows, need for orientation was a significant and positive predictor of all the dependent variables in the equation, indicating that as respondents’ need for orientation about the 2016 presidential election increased, the perceived effects of the debates on self, on Democrats, on Republicans, and on Independents also increased. H4 was supported.

The moderating role of the need for orientation in the relationship between debate exposure and perceived effect on self, the concern of RQ1, was tested using the PROCESS macro (Model 1). This moderated procedure used bootstrapped 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals to test the moderating effects in the model at the 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentile values of the hypothesized moderator. As shown in Table 3, there was a significant but negative interaction between debate exposure and need for orientation ( $\beta = -.12, p < .001$ ), indicating that the effect of exposure on perceived effect on self was moderated by the need for orientation. In terms of the direction of the moderation, need for orientation diminished the effect of debate exposure on perceived debate effects on self. Such a result means that the relationship between exposure to debates and perceived effects on self became stronger as the level of need for orientation decreased. Conversely, the relationship between exposure to debates and perceived effects on self became weaker as the level of need for orientation increased.

As results of interaction effects in Figure 1 show, the effect of debate exposure on perceived debate effects on self depends on the magnitude of need for orientation. When the level of need for orientation was high (surpassing exactly 3.8 units using our measurement), exposure was no longer significantly related to perceived

TABLE 3  
Conditional Effects of Exposure on Perceived Effects on Self

<i>NFO Strength</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
2.20	0.35	0.09	3.97	.00	[.18, .53]
3.00	0.23	0.06	3.62	.00	[.11, .35]
3.80	0.11	0.05	2.02	.04	[.003, .21]
4.40	0.02	0.06	0.26	.79	[-.10, .14]
5.00	-0.08	0.08	-0.97	.33	[-.23, .07]
3.82	0.10	0.05	1.96	.05	[.00, .21]

*Note.* Values shown for moderator are 10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th percentiles, and when  $p = .05$  for Exposure’s effect on Perceived Effects on self. NFO = need for orientation.

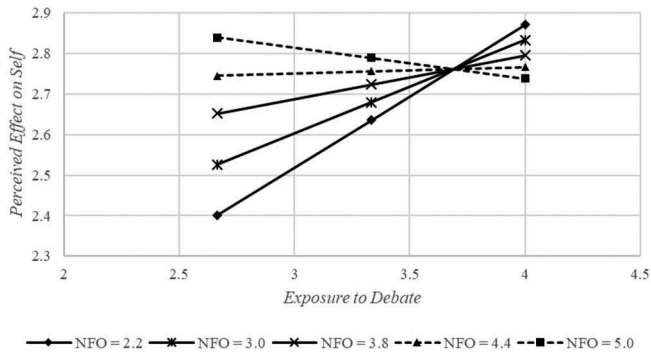


FIGURE 1 Moderation effect of need for orientation on the relationship between exposure and perceived effects of debate on self.

Note. Dotted lines mean insignificant relationship between exposure and perceived effect of debate on self.

debate effects on self, losing its predictive power over perceived effects (the Johnson-Neyman technique showed that cases with need for orientation that were 3.82 or greater were existent in the sample). When this happens, need for orientation was a stronger predictor of perceptions of effect. When the level of need for orientation was low, exposure predicted perceived effects on self, sustaining its relationship with perceptions of debate effects. Then, the effect of need for orientation on the relationship evaporated.

Taken together, these results validated the conditional effects of need for orientation on the relationship between debate exposure and perceived effects of the debates on self. In a broader sense, it seems that the circumstance in which media exposure predicts perceived effects of political messages depends on the level of need for orientation.

It was anticipated in H5 that perceived effects of the debates on self would be a stronger correlate of engagement in the election in terms of (a) discussing the debates on social media, (b) mobilizing support for the candidate of one’s choice, (c) intention to vote for Clinton, or (d) intention to vote for Trump than would perceived effects on others. To test it, four final hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with discussion of the debates on social media, mobilization on social media, intention to vote for Clinton, and intention to vote for Trump as the dependent variables. Predictors entered in the equation were, respectively, demographics, need for orientation, and debate exposure. The final block entered perceived effects on self, on Democrats, on Republicans, and on Independents.

As Table 4 shows, perceived debate effects on self was a significant and consistent predictor of discussing the debates on social media ( $B = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ), mobilizing support on social media for the candidate of their choice

TABLE 4  
 Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Electoral Engagement on Social Media  
 Among Young Voters

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Discussing the Debates</i>	<i>Mobilizing Support</i>	<i>Vote for Clinton</i>	<i>Vote for Trump</i>
Block 1: Demographics				
Gender	-.01	.08*	-.11***	.06
Age	-.08	-.05	.03	.03
Race (White)	-.08*	-.06	-.05	-.00
Political affiliation (Democrat)	.06	-.02	.38***	-.18***
Political affiliation (Republican)	.01	.01	-.34***	.42***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.9%	0.3%	44.7%	30.0%
Block 2: Cognitive mechanism				
Need for orientation	.14***	.08*	.06	.09*
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	6.5%	2.9%	0.7%	1.3%
Block 3: Debate exposure				
Debate exposure	.18***	.13**	.00	.03
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	2.2%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Block 4: Perceived effects on				
Self	.09*	.16***	.10**	-.07*
Democrats	.05	-.00	-.01	.03
Republicans	.02	.04	.02	.01
Independents	-.00	-.05	.03	.09*
Incremental adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	1.0%	1.9%	1.0%	0.4%
Total adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	10.6%	6.2%	46.4%	31.7%

Note. N = 818. Betas are from final regression model with all variables in the regression equation. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

(B = .16, p < .001), intention to vote for Clinton (B = .10, p < .01), and intention not to vote for Trump (B = -.07, p < .05). That is, the more respondents perceived the debates’ impacted themselves, the more frequently they engaged in discussion of the debates and mobilization on social media and were more likely to vote for Clinton but less likely to vote for Trump. As anticipated, neither perceived effects on Democrats nor on Republicans was a significant predictor. On the other hand, perceived debate effects on Independents was a significant predictor of intention to vote for Trump. H5 was basically supported.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Applying the robust third-person effect theoretical framework, the present study seeks to shed light on the dynamics of televised presidential debates that featured two controversial candidates, beliefs about impacts of the debates,

and intention to vote in the 2016 presidential election. In doing so, it incorporated need for orientation and tested its moderating role in examining the perceptual and behavioral effects of the 2016 presidential debates. Consistent with the expanding literature, third-person effect was found in assessing the impact of the televised presidential debates. From the perspective of the respondents, others, regardless of Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, were believed to be influenced more by the debates than themselves.

Because the televised debates provided an opportunity for voters to compare candidates' attributes, issue positions, and policy preferences, findings show that respondents who watched the debates reported that the debates influenced them. These results make sense because exposure to televised debates, unlike undesirable messages such as attack ads, appeared to be informative and relevant to the curious or undecided voters. Thus, the respondents admitted to having been influenced by the record-breaking televised debates—an acknowledgment that posed no social threat to their egos. These results further validate the notion that the third-person effect is a context-specific phenomenon (Eisend, 2017).

Further, the respondents also believed that the name calling between the two bickering candidates on live television had affected swing voters the most. On the other hand, viewing the debates was found to have no effect on partisans, whether Democrats or Republicans. These patterns of viewing the debates and discussing them on social media and then mobilizing for support of candidate of their choice suggest that the effect of viewing the presidential debates motivated partisans and reinforced their commitments to their candidates.

Moreover, the results indicate that need for orientation played a significant role in moderating the linkage between debate exposure and perceived effects of the debates on self. Those with a higher level of need for orientation were more likely to have a higher level of exposure to the debates. In addition, those with a higher level of need for orientation were more likely to acknowledge the influence of these debates on themselves. As a result, need for orientation strengthens the link between debate exposure and perceived effects on self. These results are consistent with previous research (Lo et al., 2015; Salwen, 1998), which suggests that cognitive variables tend to lead to greater perceived effects on self. Thus, by incorporating need for orientation into the third-person effect hypothesis as well as demonstrating how this variable affects the process of rendering of perceived effects of political messages on self relative to others and subsequent behavioral responses, this study contributes to the literature.

Finally, the consequences of exposure to the televised presidential debates in the 2016 presidential election were evident in the significant role of perceived debate effect on self and voter engagement. It is worth noting that only the perceived effects



of the televised debates on self consistently predicted discussing the debates and mobilizing support for one's supported candidate on social media, indicating that it is the perceived effect on self that prompted people to participate in the 2016 presidential election. Such a theoretical insight is in line with Golan and Day's (2008) argument that perceived effects of political messages on self would be a better and a stronger predictor of political action than perceived effects on others, who may not be influenced enough.

In conclusion, these results underscore three contributions of the study: (a) It is the first to test third-person effects of televised presidential debates in U.S. elections, (b) it is the first to incorporate need for orientation into the third-person effect hypothesis as a cognitive mechanism to account for the perceptual effects, and (c) it clarifies that the perceived effect of political message on self is a reliable and stronger predictor of participative political behavior.

The implications of these contributions are that need for orientation is a key moderator in the relationship between media exposure and perceived effects on self, which plays a critical role in impacting participation in elections. Therefore, the third-person effect phenomenon in political communication may not be the same as in other domains of communication, in which others are thought to be affected more and the concern of vulnerable others triggers restrictive or protective type of behavioral responses. Future research should seek to ascertain these contextual effects of political messages. Also, the findings indicate that watching the debates predicted young people's discussions of the debates on social media. As Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman (2012) warned, in using social media for discussing politics, users tended to be motivated by a confirmation bias. However, due to a limited research design, this study did not analyze if and how social media contribute to polarize the electorate. The issue merits future study.

Limitations of the study in design and execution need to be acknowledged. For example, all significant relationships reported in the study are noncausal because of the one-shot nature of the study. They should be interpreted as correlational associations only. Also, although the sample size was suitable for the purpose of this study, using a student sample from a single university limits the generalizability of the results to the millennial electorate in the U.S. population.

## REFERENCES

- Banning, S. A. (2006). Third-person effect on political participation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83, 785–800. doi:10.1177/107769900608300404
- Benoit, L., Hansen, J., & Verser, M. (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing US presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, 70(4), 335–350. doi:10.1080/0363775032000179133

- Benoit, L., McKinney, S., & Lance Holbert, R. (2001). Beyond learning and persona: Extending the scope of presidential debate effects. *Communication Monographs*, 68(3), 259–273. doi:10.1080/03637750128060
- Benoit, L., Webber, D., & Berman, J. (1998). Effects of presidential debate watching and ideology on attitudes and knowledge. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 34, 163–172.
- Camaj, L. (2014). Need for orientation, selective exposure, and attribute agenda-setting effects. *Mass Communication and Society*, 17(5), 689–712. doi:10.1080/15205436.2013.835424
- Camaj, L., & Weaver, H. (2013). Need for orientation and attribute agenda-setting during a US election campaign. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 22.
- Chaffee, S., & Miyo, Y. (1983). Selective exposure and the reinforcement hypothesis: An inter-generational panel study of the 1980 presidential campaign. *Communication Research*, 10(1), 3–36. doi:10.1177/009365083010001001
- Chang, C., Wei, R., & Lo, H. (2014). Ambivalent versus univalent voters: Perceived media influences and third-person perceptions. *Media Psychology*, 17(4), 420–450. doi:10.1080/15213269.2014.924420
- Cohen, J., & Davis, R. (1991). Third-person effects and the differential impact in negative political advertising. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 68(4), 680–688. doi:10.1177/107769909106800409
- Davison, P. (1983). The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47(1), 1–15. doi:10.1086/268763
- Duck, M., Terry, J., & Hogg, A. (1995). The perceived influence of AIDS advertising: Third-person effects in the context of positive media content. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 17(3), 305–325. doi:10.1207/s15324834baspl703\_2
- Eisend, M. (2017). The third-person effect in advertising: A meta analysis. *Journal of Advertising*, 46(3), 377–394. doi:10.1080/00913367.2017.1292481
- Eveland, P., Nathanson, I., Detenber, H., & McLeod, M. (1999). Rethinking the social distance corollary: Perceived likelihood of exposure and the third-person perception. *Communication Research*, 26(3), 275–302. doi:10.1177/009365099026003001
- Freelon, D., & Karpf, D. (2015). Of big birds and bayonets: Hybrid Twitter interactivity in the 2012 presidential debates. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(4), 390–406. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2014.952659
- Geer, G. (1988). The effects on presidential debates on the electorate's preference on candidates. *American Politics Quarterly*, 16, 486–501. doi:10.1177/004478088016004005
- Gil de Zuniga, H., & Liu, J. (2017). Second screening and political persuasion on social media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 61(2), 193–219.
- Golan, G., & Day, A. (2008). The first-person effect and its behavioral consequences: A new trend in the twenty-five year history of third-person effect research. *Mass Communication and Society*, 11(4), 539–556. doi:10.1080/15205430802368621
- Gunther, A., & Storey, D. (2003). The influence of presumed influence. *Journal of Communication*, 53(2), 199–215. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb02586.x
- Hoffner, C., & Rehkoff, R. (2011). Young voters' responses to the 2004 US presidential election: Social identity, perceived media influence, and behavioral outcomes. *Journal of Communication*, 61(4), 732–757. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01565.x
- Jungherr, A. (2016). Twitter use in election campaigns: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 13(1), 72–91. doi:10.1080/19331681.2015.1132401
- Kirk, R., & Schill, D. (2011). A digital agora: Citizen participation in the 2008 presidential debates. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(3), 325–347. doi:10.1177/0002764210392167
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Kleinman, S. (2012). Preelection selective exposure: Confirmation bias versus informational utility. *Communication Research*, 39(2), 170–193. doi:10.1177/0093650211400597

- Lemert, J. B. (1993). Do televised presidential debates help inform voters? *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 37, 83–94. doi:10.1080/08838159309364205
- Lin., S. (2009). The third-person effect of the presidential debate in Taiwan 2008. *Journalism and Communication Research*, 101, 45–88.
- Lo, V. H., & Wei, R. (2002). Third-person effect, gender, and pornography on the Internet. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 46(1), 13–33. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem4601\_2
- Lo, V. H., Wei, R., & Lu, H. Y. (2017). Issue importance, third-person effects of protest news, and participation in Taiwan's sunflower movement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(3), 682–702. doi:10.1177/1077699016670122
- Lo, V. H., Wei, R., Lu, H. Y., & Hou, H. Y. (2015). Perceived issue importance, information processing, and third-person effect of news about the imported US beef controversy. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 27(3), 341–360. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edu039
- Matthes, J. (2005). The need for orientation towards news media: Revising and validating a classic concept. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 18(4), 422–444. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edh118
- McCombs, M., Shaw, D., & Weaver, H. (2014). New directions in agenda-setting theory and research. *Mass Communication and Society*, 17(6), 781–802. doi:10.1080/15205436.2014.964871
- McKinney, S., & Rill, A. (2009). Not your parents' presidential debates: Examining the effects of the CNN/YouTube debates on young citizens' civic engagement. *Communication Studies*, 60(4), 392–406. doi:10.1080/10510970903110001
- Oh, J., Park, J., & Wanta, W. (2011). Exploring factors in the hostile media perception: Partisanship, electoral engagement, and media use patterns. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88(1), 40–54. doi:10.1177/107769901108800103
- Paek, H. J., Pan, Z., Sun, Y., Abisaid, J., & Houden, D. (2005). The third-person perception as social judgment: An exploration of social distance and uncertainty in perceived effects of political attack ads. *Communication Research*, 32(2), 143–170. doi:10.1177/0093650204273760
- Perloff, R. (2015). A three-decade retrospective on the hostile media effect. *Mass Communication and Society*, 19(5), 701–729. doi:10.1080/15205436.2015.1051234
- Perloff, R. M. (2009). Mass media, social perception, and the third-person effect. In J. Bryant & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effect: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 252–268). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pew. (2018, March 1). *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and post-Millennials begin*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/defining-generations-where-millennials-end-and-post-millennials-begin/>
- Pfau, M., & Eveland, P. (1994). Debates versus other communication sources: The pattern of information and influence. In D. B. Carlin & M. S. McKinney (Eds.), *The 1992 presidential debates in focus* (pp. 155–173). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Rucinski, D., & Salmon, T. (1990). The 'other' as the vulnerable voter: A study of the third-person effect in the 1988 US presidential campaign. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2(4), 345–368. doi:10.1093/ijpor/2.4.345
- Salwen, B. (1998). Perceptions of media influence and support for censorship: The third-person effect in the 1996 presidential election. *Communication Research*, 25(3), 259–285. doi:10.1177/009365098025003001
- Tal-Or, N., Tsfati, Y., & Gunther, C. (2009). The influence of presumed media influence: Origins and implications of the third-person perception. In R. L. Nabi & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of media processes and effects* (pp. 99–112). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weaver, H. (1980). Audience need for orientation and media effects. *Communication Research*, 7(3), 361–373. doi:10.1177/009365028000700305

- Wei, R., Chia, S. C., & Lo, V. H. (2011). Third-person effect and hostile media perception influences on voter attitudes toward polls in the 2008 US presidential election. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 23(2), 169–190. doi:[10.1093/ijpor/edq044](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edq044)
- Wei, R., & Lo, V. (2007). Third-person effects of political attack ads in the 2004 presidential election. *Media Psychology*, 9(2), 367–388. doi:[10.1080/15213260701291338](https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260701291338)
- Wei, R., Lo, V. H., & Lu, H. Y. (2011). Examining the perceptual gap and behavioral intention in the perceived effects of polling news in the 2008 Taiwan presidential election. *Communication Research*, 38(2), 206–227. doi:[10.1177/0093650210365536](https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210365536)
- Zhu, J., Milavasky, R., & Biswas, R. (1994). Do televised debates affect image perception more than issue knowledge? *Human Communication Research*, 20, 302–333. doi:[10.1111/j.1468-2958.1994.tb00325.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1994.tb00325.x)