

# PERCEPTION OF U.S. MEDIA INFLUENCES ON SELF AND OTHERS AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH

EZHAR TAMAM

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the third-person perception effect of mediated U.S. culture and violence on self and others among Malaysian youth. A total of 425 university students participated in the survey. As expected, most respondents believed that the U.S. media have negative effects on people in Malaysia and that others are more heavily influenced than the respondents themselves. The third-person perception effect of U.S. media was not influenced by respondents' level of exposure to U.S. media. The third-person perception effect of mediated U.S. culture seemed to be more pronounced among Muslim than non-Muslims. However, no differences emerged between the Muslim and non-Muslim on perception of third-person effect of mediated U.S. violence. Overall, the findings support the conclusion that the third-person effect hypothesis observed in studies in the west can be applied to perceptions of U.S. media influence abroad.*

*Key words:* U.S. culture, U.S. media influences, Malaysian youth

## INTRODUCTION

Davison's (1983) third-person effect hypothesis states that people attribute greater media effects to others rather than to themselves. This hypothesis has been tested and supported in the west. The present analysis attempts to validate the third-person effect hypothesis beyond what has been observed in studies in the west by examining how young Malaysian perceived the impact of United States media on themselves and others. Perception of impact of western media on non-western audience is an important issue because the perception has an influence on audience opinion and attitude regarding the foreign (western) country and culture (Chapin, 2008).

Much attention has been given on the media effect. Emmers-Sommer and Allen (1999), based on their meta-analysis of media effect studies, reaffirmed the claim that mass media are a significant source of learning and can influence attitude and behaviour. The media effect issue is even more pertinent in the context of trans-cultural media consumption and cultural imperialism debate. Cultural Imperialism Theory asserts that foreign media products can inflict deleterious effects on indigenous culture, and the

negative elements from the foreign products challenge or undermine traditional values and beliefs of individuals. Proponents of this theory (see e.g., Hamelink, 1983; Schiller, 1991) contend that the one-way flow of Western cultural products and the supposedly undesirable, foreign values embodied in those products often challenge or undermine traditional cultural and ideological beliefs in non-Western communities.

The growing influx of western media programs in non-western countries has raised the issue of trans-cultural impact of media system (Shigeru, 1998; Park, 2005). In Malaysia, the government has set a broadcasting policy of targeting a certain minimum percentage of local contents in media programs. While the government has established guidelines for media organizations to follow, in practice much improvement need to be made. American programs still dominate Malaysian television programming. The concern on the negative effect of western programs to the society, perceive or real, is continuously debated. The contention is most of the western movies promote lifestyle, values, morals and belief system that are truly foreign; the news programs are based on the western conception of truth, freedom and democracy which may not resonate with the Malaysian cultural values, and the music videos are based on changing western taste devoid of spiritual values (Mohd Yusof Hussain, 2006). Those who are concern of the negative influence of western programs, logically, would refrain themselves and their families from exposure to such programs. Some, on the contrary, would view that exposure to western programs is source of learning about foreign cultures and help broaden audience outlook and world view.

In trans-cultural media systems, Park (2005), for instance, found that perception of foreign culture was more strongly affected by media use. Media effect studies conducted in the west found support for the third-perception hypothesis which postulated that perception of the negative effect media has been attributed more to others than self (Duck, Hogg & Terry, 2000; Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000). Studies that specifically examined the impact of foreign media programs particularly U.S. entertainment and news programs on non-western audience, however, are not many and the findings were mixed (see e.g., Elasmr & Hunter, 1997; Lee, 1998; Willnat, Takeshita & Lopez-Escobar, 2002).

Malaysia offers an ideal place to test perceptions of U.S. media effects because of its cultural diversity (60% Malay, 30% Chinese, and 10% Indians) and its close economic ties to the United States—both of which left it relatively open to the importation of U.S. media products such as television series, movies and music. More importantly, Malaysia is different from the United States in terms of culture. Malaysia is generally described as collectivistic country, while the United States is individualistic country (Abdullah, 2001; Bochner, 1994; Tamam, Hassan, & Yadi, 1997). As a moderate and predominantly Muslim country, Malaysia is also considered a close political ally of the United States a fact that has increased in importance because of the growing rift between Muslim and Western nations. While Malaysia is a multi-religious society, Islam is the country's official religion and is practiced by more than 60 percent of the populations. Other dominant religions are Buddhism (19%), Christianity (9%) and Hinduism (6%). Thus, the unique mix of ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, which juxtaposes more traditional values and beliefs with modern influences that come through close economic and political ties with the United States and other Western nations, make Malaysia a unique testing ground for perceptions of U.S. media effects. Accordingly, this study investigates how young audiences in Malaysia evaluate the effects of the U.S. media on themselves and others.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

This study is based on the argument that the widespread perceptions of negative effects that might result from exposure to the U.S. media and the argument that people attribute greater negative effect of media on others than on themselves as explained by Davison's (1983) third-person hypothesis (Cohen & Davis., 1991; Gunther, 1991; Perloff, 1999). While the third-person effect has been documented in a large number of studies with a variety of messages and in different cultural settings (see: Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000, Perloff, 1999; Peiser & Peter, 2000), it has not been studied locally.

Based on the assumption that the (perceived) dominant message of "sex & violence" in the U.S. media is believed to have a powerful negative impact on audiences in Malaysia, most should be psychologically predisposed to believe that U.S. media content affects others more than themselves. This might be particularly true when the U.S. media are perceived to carry persuasive messages with deleterious effects on culture or society, or if those messages are believed to be biased toward a U.S. point of view. Based on the preceding discussion, we predict that:

H1: Respondents will perceive the effect of the U.S. media to be stronger on others than on themselves.

H2: There will be a significant different in the degree of third-person perception effect by level of U.S. media exposure.

H3: There will be a significant different in the degree of third-person perception effect by religion.

## METHODOLOGY

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in communication and business classes at various large universities in Kuala Lumpur. The questionnaire was originally written in English and then translated into Bahasa Malaysia.

A total of 425 students completed the survey on a voluntary basis. The final sample contained slightly more females (51%) than males and a fairly representative distribution of ethnicity (49% Malays, 32% Chinese, and 13% Indians) and religion in Malaysia (51% Islam, 13% Christian, 11% Hindu, and 22% Buddhist). The average age of respondents in this survey was 21.4 years (SD = 2.6).

Measure of exposure to U.S. media was done by asking respondents (1) to indicate on a four-point scale how regularly (1 = "never" to 4 = "regularly") they watched any of nine popular television shows (e.g., CSI, Medical Investigation, Apprentice, Desperate Housewives, Fear Factor), (2) whether they saw any of 12 movies that were shown in Malaysian cinemas at the time of this study (e.g., The Da Vinci Code, X-Men: The Last Stand, Pirates of the Caribbean 2), (3) the number of videos or movies watched "per week," and (4) how much time they spent each day listening to American music (1 = most of the music listen are U.S. music, 2 = some of the music are U.S. music, 3 = do not listen to American music). A composite score was computed based on the responses to the questions. A higher score indicates higher level of exposure to U.S. media programs.

Respondents were asked how much influence (1 = “no influence” to 4 = “a lot of influence”) they thought the U.S. media have on (a) their own cultural values, and (b) the cultural values of other people in their country. A similar set of questions asked how much influence they thought that U.S. media containing a lot of violence have on (a) themselves, and (b) other people in their country. Each question about the perceived strength of U.S. media effects on self and others was followed by a question asking respondents to evaluate whether these effects were positive (score = 1), negative (score = -1) or neutral (score = 0). Each respondent’s score for the perceived strength of U.S. media influence on self and others was then multiplied by the perceived direction of U.S. media influence (-1 = “negative influence”; 1 = “positive influence” or “no influence”). The resulting score measures the perceived strength and direction of U.S. media content (culture and violence) on self and others on an eight-point scale ranging from -4 (= “strong negative influence”) to +4 (= “strong positive influence”).

To test the third-person effect, each respondent’s score for perceptions of U.S. media effects on self was subtracted from his or her score for perceptions of U.S. media effects on others. The resulting score measures the degree of the third-person effect for the topic of culture and violence on a 15-point scale ranging from -7 (more influence on others than self) to +7 (more influence on self than on others). In other words, negative scores on either of the two third-person effect measures indicate that respondents believe that U.S. media influence others more than themselves.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the general question how the respondents think about the United States, the survey revealed 58.4 percent of all respondents had a “negative” or “very negative” overall opinion about the United States, suggesting that the samples are quite divided in terms of opinion about the United States with substantial percentage of them are quite conservative. On their perception on the amount of American media available in Malaysia, a majority of the respondents (48.0%) felt that it was “just the right amount,” while only 15.8 percent thought that there was “too little” U.S. media available. However, more than a third of the respondents (36.2%) said that there was “too much” American media available—indicating a sizable resistance to the U.S. media presence in Malaysia. As expected most subjects perceived the effects of the U.S. media to be negative on self and others in both measured dimensions (culture and violence). While 40.7 percent of the respondents thought that the U.S. media affect the cultural values of others more than their own (29.7% no effect, 19.6% others less affected than self), 53.9% thought that mediated U.S. violence is affecting others more than themselves (34.3% no effect, 11.8% others less affected than self).

The first hypothesis of the study (H1) predicted that respondents will perceive the effect of the US media to be stronger on others than on self. A strong support was found for the first hypothesis, which proposed that respondents will perceive the negative effects of the U.S. media to be stronger on others than on self. As shown in the Table 1, the means perceived effect of US media on others are significantly higher than the means perceived effect on self on both measures cultural values and violence. The means of perceived impact of the U.S. media on self and other’s cultural values are -.78 and -1.66, respectively, [ $t(422) = 8.138, p = .000$ ]. The means of perceived impact of mediated U.S. violence are -1.31 and -2.29 on self and others, respectively, [ $t(422) = 12.119, p = .000$ ]. Drawing from the psychology literature, this finding is expected because people have the tendency for optimistic bias. As pointed by Chapin (2008), people believe that they are less likely than others to suffer the negative consequences of their behavior.

**Table 1: Mean Scores of Perceived U.S. Media Effect on Self and Others**

	<b>Self</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Perceived U.S. media effect on cultural values	-.78 (2.33)	-1.66 (2.35)	-0.88*
Perceived effect of mediated U.S. violence	-1.31 (1.64)	-2.29 (1.78)	-.98*

Note:

The perception of U.S. media's effects on self and others is measured on a four-point scale ranging from 1= "no influence" to 4 = "a lot of influence." This scale is then multiplied by the perceived direction of U.S. media's effects (-1 = "negative influence"; +1 = "positive influence"). Standard deviations are listed in parentheses. \*  $p < .000$  based on paired-sample t-tests.

The second and the third hypothesis investigated whether degree of third-person perception effect varies by level of exposure to U.S. media and religion. The Table 2 summarizes the results of independent t-test of mean scores on third-person perception for the low and high exposure to U.S. media group, and by Islam and non-Islam. The H2 predicted that the level of exposure to U.S. media has influenced on the strength of the third-person perception effect. As shown in the Table 2, no significant different was observed on the third-person perception effect on both dimensions of culture, mediated U.S. culture (mean different = -.05,  $t = .198$ ,  $q = .847$ ) and mediated U.S. violence (mean different = -.14,  $t = .616$ ,  $q = .568$ ), indicating that the tendency to perceive the effect of the U.S. media on others to be stronger than on oneself (third-person effect) is not more pronounce among subjects with higher level of US media exposure. Thus, the H2 was not supported. Irrespective of the level of exposure to U.S. media, the respondents generally see that the effect of the U.S. media to be stronger on others than on themselves.

**Table 2. Mean Scores of Third-Person Perception Effect of US Media by Media Exposure and Religion**

	<b>Perceived effect of mediated U.S. culture</b>	<b>Perceived effect of mediated U.S. violence</b>
U.S. media exposure		
Low	-1.02	-1.23
High	(2.57)	(2.15)
Mean Different	-1.07	-1.09
	(2.50)	(1.53)
	-.05	-.14

Religion		
Islam	-1.48	-1.25
Non Islam	(2.63)	(2.01)
Mean Different	-.58	-1.16
	(2.46)	(2.15)
	-.90 *	-.09

Note:

Third-person effect is measured on a seven-point scale ranging from -7 = “more influence on others than self” to 7 = “more influence on self than others.” Standard deviations are listed in parentheses. \*  $p < .000$  based on t-tests.

H3 predicted that there will be a significant different in the degree of third-person perception effect by religion. As shown in Table 2, the third-person perception effect of mediated U.S. culture is significantly more pronounce among the Muslim respondents ( $M = -1.48$ ) than that of the non-Muslims ( $M = -.58$ ),  $t(421) = 3.623$ ,  $q = .000$ . Similarly, the third-person perception effect of mediated U.S. violence is also more pronounce among the Muslim respondents ( $M = -.125$ ) than that of the non-Muslims ( $M = -1.16$ ); however, the mean score different was not significant. The findings suggest that the Muslim respondents, as compared to the non-Muslims, are more likely to perceived that other are more affected by U.S. mediated culture. This could be attributed to the fact that the Muslims see their cultural and religion values are in sharp contradiction to the values of the west. The non-significant different in the third-person effect perception for mediated violence between Muslim and non-Muslims means that Muslim and the non-Muslims see themselves and others are relatively equally affected by the U.S. media.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of present study support the conclusion that the third-person effect hypothesis can be applied to perceptions of U.S. media influence abroad. In the context of the present study, while Malaysian youth in general are concerned of the negative impact of the U.S. media program, they tended to perceive others to be more affected compared to themselves. If they perceived that they are not likely to be much influenced as others, they might become less critical and become a more passive consumer of U.S. media programs. This could lead to a problem because many of the U.S. media programs particularly entertainment programs contain negative elements that challenge or undermine traditional values and beliefs of individuals. Hence, to confront this third-person effect bias more media literacy programs need to be implemented so that they are made aware of the how media influence audience and in particular the influence of imported media programs.

The survey also shows that perception of third-person media effect is not related to level of exposure of U.S. media. However, the study seems to show that the third-person perception effect is more pronounce for mediated U.S. culture rather than mediated U.S. violence among the Muslims youth.

The findings of this study are, of course, limited by the fact that data were collected from a non-representative student sample. While we acknowledge that such a sample cannot be representative of the general population, we do believe that university students are good subjects to test the effects of the U.S. media because they are arguably the most affected by the collision of foreign culture that arrives through the mass media and traditional culture which is represented by their parents and families. Nevertheless,

future studies should investigate the third-person perceptions of foreign media effects with demographically more diverse audiences to confirm the positive evaluation of cultural effects with people who might be less open to social and cultural change than university students.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of our data, which does not allow us to make any conclusive statements about causality. While this is a problem in most media effects studies, it would have been extremely useful to be able to determine whether exposure to the U.S. media actually creates beliefs about the cultural impact of U.S. media products, or whether pre-existing beliefs about the U.S. media actually determine media exposure. Finally, more studies need to be carried out to further understand what contribute to the third-person perception.

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