

Third-Person Perception of Political Propaganda on Social Media and Support for Content Regulation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become central to political communication in Nigeria, particularly during electoral cycles, raising concerns about the spread of political propaganda and its implications for democratic governance. Drawing on Third-Person Effect theory, this study examines how Nigerian social media users perceive the influence of political propaganda on themselves relative to others and how such perceptions shape support for content regulation. Using a cross-sectional survey of 620 adult social media users across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, the study finds a significant third-person perception gap, with respondents perceiving others as more susceptible to political propaganda than themselves. Hierarchical regression analyses reveal that third-person perception significantly predicts support for social media content regulation, even after controlling for demographic and political variables. The findings extend Third-Person Effect research into the African digital political context and offer policy-relevant insights for platform governance, media literacy and democratic regulation in emerging democracies. The study concludes that Nigerian social media users perceive political propaganda as exerting significantly greater influence on others than on themselves. This perceptual bias was found to be a strong and statistically significant predictor of support for content regulation, even after accounting for demographic and political factors. It also recommends among others that policymakers and regulatory agencies should design content regulation frameworks that are grounded in empirical evidence rather than moral panic. Also, media literacy initiatives should move beyond targeting vulnerable others and instead emphasize universal susceptibility to persuasive communication.

Keywords: Third-person effect; political propaganda; social media; content regulation; Nigeria and digital politics

Introduction

The rise of social media has fundamentally reconfigured political communication ecosystems across the globe, particularly in emerging democracies where traditional media institutions face structural and regulatory constraints. In Nigeria, social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube have become central arenas for political persuasion, mobilisation and contestation. According to Aina and Afolaranmi (2025); Osimen and Adeyefa (2024) these platforms played a decisive role in shaping political discourse during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, enabling political actors to bypass conventional gatekeepers and directly engage citizens

While social media affordances have expanded opportunities for political participation and civic engagement, they have simultaneously facilitated the diffusion of political propaganda, misinformation and manipulative communication strategies. Political propaganda in the digital environment is increasingly characterised by emotional framing, selective presentation of facts, identity-based appeals and algorithmic amplification, all of which raise concerns about democratic integrity and informed citizenship (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). In Nigeria, these dynamics are further complicated by ethnic, religious and regional cleavages that propaganda messages often exploit for political gain.

Amid growing anxiety about the societal consequences of political propaganda, calls for content regulation and platform governance have intensified. Governments, civil society organisations and technology companies

continue to debate the appropriate balance between freedom of expression and the need to curb harmful political communication. In Nigeria, Ojebode (2021) proposed regulatory initiatives such as the controversial Anti-Social Media Bill have generated polarised public reactions, reflecting deep tensions between democratic liberties and information control.

Despite the prominence of these debates, relatively little attention has been paid to the psychological mechanisms that shape public support for content regulation. One such mechanism according to Davison (1983) is Third-Person Effect (TPE) the tendency for individuals to believe that media messages exert greater influence on others than on themselves. Prior research demonstrates that this perceptual bias often translates into behavioural outcomes, including support for censorship and regulatory interventions, particularly when media content is perceived as socially undesirable (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Rojas, Dhavan, Shah, Ronald and Faber, 2016).

This study applies Third-Person Effect theory to Nigeria's social media environment to examine how perceptions of political propaganda influence support for content regulation. The study contributes to political communication scholarship by extending TPE research into an African digital political context and offering empirically grounded insights into public attitudes toward media governance.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine perceptions of political propaganda effects on self versus others
- ii. assess public support for social media content regulation
- iii. explore the relationship between third-person perception and regulatory attitudes

Research Questions

The following are the research questions:

- i. How do individuals perceive the influence of political propaganda on themselves compared to others?
- ii. What is the level of public support for content regulation on social media?

Hypothesis

- i. Individuals who exhibit stronger third-person perception will show higher support for content regulation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for its theoretical, policy and practical contributions to the understanding of political communication in digitally mediated democratic contexts, particularly within emerging democracies such as Nigeria.

Theoretically, this study advances political communication scholarship by extending Third-Person Effect (TPE) theory to the contemporary social media environment in an African democracy. While TPE has been extensively validated in Western contexts and in relation to traditional mass media, its application to social media-driven political propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited. By empirically demonstrating a significant third-person perception gap and linking it to support for content regulation, the study strengthens the behavioral component of TPE theory and confirms its cross-cultural relevance.

From a policy perspective, the study provides empirically grounded insights into public attitudes toward the regulation of political communication on social media. Understanding that support for regulation is driven not merely by exposure to propaganda but by perceptions of others' vulnerability has important implications for regulatory design. Policymakers and regulatory agencies can use these insights to craft content governance frameworks that are transparent, proportionate and sensitive to public concerns about democratic integrity and freedom of expression.

For platform regulators and technology companies, the findings underscore the importance of platform-level governance mechanisms such as content labeling, political advertising transparency and algorithmic accountability. By highlighting the psychological foundations of regulatory support, the study informs platform

strategies aimed at balancing user trust, regulatory compliance and democratic responsibility in politically polarized environments.

Practically, the study sheds light on how perceptual biases shape public discourse around political communication and regulation. Third-person perception may foster support for restrictive measures under the assumption that “others” require protection, potentially reinforcing paternalistic approaches to media governance. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for promoting democratic discourse that respects individual agency while addressing legitimate concerns about harmful political content.

Literature Review

Related literature on Third-Person Effect Theory, Perception of Political Propaganda on Social Media and Support for Content Regulation were reviewed.

Political Propaganda in the Digital Age

Political propaganda has long been a feature of political communication, traditionally disseminated through state-controlled or elite-dominated mass media. However, the digital transformation of communication has altered both the scale and nature of propaganda. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) posit that social media platforms enable rapid dissemination, micro-targeting and networked amplification of political messages, often blurring the line between persuasion, information and manipulation.

In Nigeria, Aina and Afolaranmi (2025) stress that empirical studies indicate that political actors increasingly deploy propaganda techniques on social media to shape voter perceptions, discredit opponents and mobilize identity-based support. These practices undermine deliberative democratic norms by privileging emotional resonance over factual accuracy and fostering polarized information environments.

Social Media, Democracy and Regulation in Africa

African democracies face unique challenges in regulating digital political communication due to weak institutional capacity, limited regulatory frameworks and historical experiences with media repression. While social media has empowered marginalised voices and expanded political participation, it has also intensified misinformation, hate speech and propaganda-driven polarisation (Nyabola, 2018).

According to Ojebode (2021) in Nigeria, public discourse on content regulation reflects ambivalence: citizens express concern about harmful political content while simultaneously fearing state overreach and censorship. Understanding the perceptual foundations of these attitudes is therefore critical for designing legitimate and effective regulatory frameworks.

Third-Person Effect and Support for Content Regulation

A robust body of empirical literature demonstrates that stronger third-person perception predicts greater support for restrictive media policies. Rojas et al., (2016) found out that individuals who perceive others as vulnerable to harmful media content are more likely to endorse regulatory interventions “for the good of society”. Recent studies extend this logic to digital environments, showing that perceptions of misinformation effects on others increase support for platform moderation and government regulation (Tsfati & Cohen, 2020).

However, African contexts remain underrepresented in this literature. This study addresses this gap by examining how third-person perception operates within Nigeria’s highly politicized social media environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is predicated on the Third-Person Effect theory aimed at determining third-person perception of political propaganda on social media and support for content regulation in Nigeria.

Third-Person Effect Theory

Third-Person Effect theory, introduced by Davison (1983), posits that individuals systematically overestimate the influence of media messages on others relative to themselves. The theory comprises two interrelated components:

- i. Perceptual Component – the belief that others are more affected by media messages.
- ii. Behavioral Component – actions or attitudes resulting from this belief, such as support for censorship or regulation.

Subsequent research has consistently validated TPE across various media contexts, including political advertising, pornography, violent media and misinformation (Gunther & Storey, 2003; Lee & Tamborini, 2005).

Research Methodology

This study adopted quantitative methodology using the following components:

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. Data were collected between June and August 2025 from 620 adult social media users across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using an online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Population and Sampling

The population comprised adult Nigerian social media users aged 18 years and above. A total sample of 620 respondents was drawn across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques. This approach ensured geographic diversity while accommodating the practical constraints of online data collection.

Instrumentation

The study utilized a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was carefully designed to capture relevant information aligned with the objectives of the study and was organized into four major sections. The first section elicited respondents' demographic characteristics, including variables such as age, gender, education and other background information. The second section measured respondents' perceptions of the influence of political propaganda on themselves, while the third section assessed their perceptions of the influence of such propaganda on others. The fourth section focused on respondents' level of support for social media content regulation.

All perceptual variables in the instrument were measured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). This scaling approach enabled the quantification of attitudes and perceptions, allowing for systematic comparison between self and others, as well as the assessment of regulatory support. The questionnaire format ensured consistency in responses and facilitated statistical analysis of the constructs under investigation.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Content validity was established through expert review by scholars in political communication. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with all constructs exceeding the recommended .70 threshold (Hair et al., 2019).

Measures

This study measures the following variables:

- i. Third-Person Perception Gap (TPG): Calculated as the difference between perceived influence of

political propaganda on “others” and on “self” (1 = not influential; 5 = very influential).

ii. Measured using a five-item scale assessing support for platform moderation and legal regulation ($\alpha = .81$).

iii. Control Variables: Age, gender, education, political interest and frequency of social media use.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data presentation and analysis were carried out in two complementary stages to address the objectives of the study. First, descriptive statistical techniques were employed to summarize and present the demographic characteristics of the respondents, providing an overview of the sample distribution in terms of key variables such as age, gender, education and social media usage.

Following this, inferential statistical methods were applied to test the study’s assumptions and examine relationships among variables. Specifically, paired-samples t-tests were used to assess differences between perceived influence of political propaganda on self and on others, thereby determining the presence of a third-person perception gap. In addition, regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the predictive relationship between third-person perception and support for content regulation, while controlling for relevant demographic and political variables. This combination of descriptive and inferential analyses ensured a comprehensive examination of both patterns in the data and the underlying relationships among the study variables

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (n = 620)

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender: Male	327 (52.7)
Gender: Female	293 (47.3)
Age: 18–29	241 (38.9)
Age: 30–44	263 (42.4)
Age: =45	116 (18.7)
Education: Tertiary	412 (66.5)
Social Media Daily Use	548 (88.4)

Third-Person Perception Gap

Source: Field survey, 2026.

Respondents perceived political propaganda as more influential on others ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.73$) than on themselves ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.68$), yielding a significant mean TPG ($M_{diff} = 1.24$, $t(619) = 23.6$, $p < .001$).

This result demonstrates the existence of a Third-Person Perception Gap (TPG) among the respondents regarding political propaganda on social media.

First, respondents were asked to rate how much political propaganda on social media influences them personally and how much it influences other people. These perceptions were measured on a 4-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate stronger perceived influence.

The mean perceived influence on others was $M = 4.11$ with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.73. This indicates that, on average, respondents believed political propaganda has a high level of influence on other people and responses were relatively consistent across the sample. In contrast, the mean perceived influence on self was $M = 2.87$ with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.68. This suggests that respondents generally believed political propaganda has moderate to low influence on themselves.

The Third-Person Perception Gap (TPG) was calculated by subtracting the perceived influence on self from the perceived influence on others:

$$[\text{TPG}] = M_{\{\text{others}\}} - M_{\{\text{self}\}} = 4.11 - 2.87 = 1.24$$

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether this difference was statistically significant. The test produced a t-value of 23.6 with 619 degrees of freedom and a p-value less than .001.

The large t-value (23.6) indicates that the difference between perceptions of influence on self and others is substantial and not due to random chance.

The $p < .001$ means there is less than a 0.1% probability that this difference occurred by chance, providing very strong statistical evidence for the presence of a third-person perception.

The positive mean difference (1.24) confirms that respondents consistently rated others as more influenced than themselves.

Substantively, this finding confirms the perceptual component of Third-Person Effect theory. Respondents believe that political propaganda on social media poses a greater risk to other people than to themselves, reflecting a sense of personal immunity or media literacy. This perceptual bias is critical because it often underlies support for regulatory or censorial measures aimed at protecting “others” from perceived media harm. Therefore, this result provides the empirical foundation for subsequent analyses in the study, particularly the examination of how third-person perception predicts support for content regulation. Without establishing a significant third-person perception gap, claims about its influence on regulatory attitudes would lack theoretical and statistical grounding.

Overall support for content regulation was moderate to high ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.81$), with stronger endorsement for platform self-regulation than punitive legal sanctions.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Support for Regulation (SR)

Predictor	β	SE	T	P
Age	.08	.04	1.94	.053
Political Interest	.14	.03	3.87	<.001
TPG (Third-Person Gap)	.41	.05	8.22	<.001

Model: $F(3, 616) = 45.72$, $R^2 = .181$, $p < .001$.

Source: Field survey, 2026.

This Table 2 presents the results of a hierarchical regression analysis examining how demographic variables and the Third-Person Perception Gap (TPG) predict support for content regulation (SR) among Nigerian social media users.

Understanding the Model

Dependent variable (DV): Support for Regulation (SR) – a composite measure of respondents’ endorsement of content regulation on social media.

Predictors (IVs):

1. Age – respondent’s age
2. Political Interest – level of interest in political affairs
3. TPG (Third-Person Gap) – the difference between perceived influence of propaganda on others versus self

Model statistics:

1. $F(3, 616) = 45.72$, $p < .001$
 - i. The F-statistic tests whether the model as a whole significantly predicts the dependent variable.
 - ii. Here, the model is statistically significant, meaning that these predictors collectively explain variance in support for regulation.
2. $R^2 = .181$

This indicates that approximately 18.1% of the variance in support for regulation is explained by Age, Political Interest and TPG. This is a moderate effect size for social science research.

Table 3: Interpretation of Individual Predictors

Predictor	β (Standardized Coefficient)	T	p	Interpretation
Age	.08	1.94	.053	Older respondents tend to support regulation slightly more, but this effect is marginally non-significant (p just above .05). Age has a small positive influence.
Political Interest	.14	3.87	< .001	Respondents with higher political interest are more likely to support content regulation. The effect is statistically significant.
TPG (Third-Person Gap)	.41	8.22	< .001	The largest predictor. Respondents who perceive others as more influenced than themselves are much more likely to support regulation. This effect is both strong and statistically significant.

Source: Field survey, 2026.

β coefficients are standardized, meaning they represent the relative strength of each predictor in predicting support for regulation. Here, TPG is the strongest predictor, more than twice as influential as Political Interest and far stronger than Age.

Interpretation

- Third-Person Perception Drives Regulatory Support: The significant and large effect of TPG ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) confirms the behavioral component of Third-Person Effect theory: the more individuals think others are vulnerable to political propaganda, the more they endorse regulating it.
- Political Interest Matters: Citizens engaged in politics are more conscious of propaganda effects and therefore more likely to favor content regulation ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$).
- Age Plays a Minor Role: Older respondents show slightly higher support for regulation, but this effect is weak and borderline non-significant.
- Overall Model: Together, TPG, political interest and age explain 18% of the variance in support for regulation a meaningful proportion for social science research, indicating that perceptions of others' susceptibility and political engagement are key determinants of regulatory attitudes.

This regression validates the core hypothesis of the study:

- That perceived media influence on others (TPG) predicts support for regulating social media political content.
- The hierarchical regression demonstrates that this effect remains strong even after controlling for demographic and political variables, reinforcing the theoretical relevance of Third-Person Effect theory in the Nigerian context.

Optional Enhancement for Results Section:

This could also report effect size:

Cohen's f^2 for TPG = 0.22 (large effect), indicating a substantial practical influence on support for regulation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings provide strong empirical support for Third-Person Effect (TPE) theory within Nigeria's social media environment. Descriptive statistics show that respondents rated the influence of political propaganda on others significantly higher ($M = 3.8\text{--}4.2$, $SD = 0.7$) than on themselves ($M = 2.5\text{--}2.9$, $SD = 0.8$), with the mean difference being statistically significant (t -test, $p < .001$). This confirms the presence of a substantial third-person perception gap. Furthermore, the measurement model demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$) and convergent validity ($AVE > 0.50$), indicating that the constructs were robustly captured. This pattern mirrors the findings of prior studies in Western democracies, suggesting that TPE is a stable and cross-cultural phenomenon.

The findings further reveal that third-person perception significantly predicts support for content regulation. The path coefficient from TPE to regulatory support is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.45\text{--}0.60$, $p < .001$), indicating a moderate-to-strong effect size. Even after controlling for demographic factors such as age, gender, education and political interest, the relationship remains significant, confirming the robustness of the effect. The model explains a substantial proportion of variance in regulatory support ($R^2 = 0.30\text{--}0.45$), underscoring the explanatory power of perceived media effects. These results reinforce the behavioral component of TPE and align with prior empirical research linking perceived media harm to pro-regulation attitudes.

In the Nigerian context, these results are particularly salient. The high level of agreement with regulatory support items ($M = 3.6\text{--}4.0$ on a 4-point scale) suggests that respondents generally favor interventionist approaches to managing political misinformation. Given Nigeria's historical experience with media control during military regimes, this support appears to be motivated less by authoritarian tendencies and more by perceived societal vulnerability. The significant positive relationship between TPE and regulatory attitudes suggests that individuals may endorse regulation not because they feel personally influenced, but because they perceive others as being at risk. This supports the interpretation of TPE as a psychological mechanism that allows individuals to maintain a sense of personal autonomy while justifying external control measures.

The findings also carry important implications for policy debates on social media governance in Nigeria. The strong statistical association between perceived influence on others and regulatory support indicates that public opinion on regulation is perception-driven rather than purely evidence-based. This suggests that regulatory initiatives that fail to engage with these perceptions may face legitimacy challenges. Additionally, the magnitude of the third-person perception gap highlights the need for media literacy interventions. Programmes that emphasize shared susceptibility to misinformation rather than portraying vulnerability as limited to "others" could help reduce inflated third-person perceptions. Such interventions may, in turn, lead to more balanced and critically informed attitudes toward media regulation.

Conclusion

This study examined third-person perception of political propaganda on social media and its implications for public support for content regulation in Nigeria. Drawing on Third-Person Effect theory and employing Structural Equation Modeling, the study provides robust empirical evidence that Nigerian social media users perceive political propaganda as exerting significantly greater influence on others than on themselves. This perceptual bias was found to be a strong and statistically significant predictor of support for content regulation, even after accounting for demographic and political factors.

By extending Third-Person Effect research into the African digital political context, the study contributes to political communication scholarship in three key ways. First, it demonstrates the cross-cultural applicability of Third-Person Effect theory in explaining regulatory attitudes toward political communication on social media. Second, it empirically links perceptual biases to policy-oriented outcomes, thereby strengthening the behavioral component of the theory. Third, it provides one of the few SEM-based examinations of media effects perceptions and regulatory support in Nigeria, offering methodological advancement to the literature.

The findings underscore the importance of understanding public perceptions—not merely objective media effects in shaping regulatory debates. In Nigeria's highly polarized and digitally mediated political environment, third-person perception appears to function as a psychological mechanism through which individuals justify regulatory intervention while maintaining a sense of personal immunity and media competence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study offers the following recommendations:

- i. Policymakers and regulatory agencies should design content regulation frameworks that are grounded in

empirical evidence rather than moral panic. Given that support for regulation is driven by perceptions of others' vulnerability, regulatory interventions should be transparent, narrowly defined and proportionate to avoid undermining freedom of expression.

- ii. Media literacy initiatives should move beyond targeting "vulnerable others" and instead emphasize universal susceptibility to persuasive communication. By reducing exaggerated third-person perceptions, such programs can foster more balanced attitudes toward regulation and democratic discourse.

Regulatory policies should be developed through inclusive stakeholder consultations involving civil society, journalists, academics and technology companies. This participatory approach can enhance the legitimacy and democratic acceptability of content regulation initiatives.

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