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When Partisans Do Not Share Partisan News: Third-Person Effect in an Era of Polarized Politics

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In the context of partisan news, the present study examines (1) how partisan news slant and comparison target interact in inducing the third-person perception (TPP) and (2) how TPP is related to online behavioral reactions to the news. An online experiment reveals a significant interaction between content slant (proattitudinal vs. counterattitudinal news) and comparison target (in-group vs. out-group others) on TPP. That is, TPP as a function of exposure to proattitudinal news, as compared to exposure to counterattitudinal news, is larger when the comparison target is out-group members. Further, the interaction pattern is more evident among strong partisans. Next, TPP indirectly reduces news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through devaluing perceived news quality. Yet, the indirect effect is significant only when partisans are compared with political out-group members, not to in-group members. This implies that partisans are motivated to correct public opinion by suppressing the opposite side in the online public sphere.

Keywords: third-person effect, presumed media influence, partisan news, perceived news quality, news sharing, corrective action

Mass communication research shows that "media effects perceptions" are as powerful as actual media effects (McLeod, Wise, & Perryman, 2017); for example, the third-person effect (TPE; Davison, 1983), which consists of perceptual and behavioral components. First, a tendency that audiences perceive others to be more susceptible to (undesirable) media influence than themselves, or the third-person perception (TPP), is affected by various causes such as message content (Duck, Hogg, & Terry, 1995; Gunther, 1995) and comparison target (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Meirick, 2004). TPP, in turn, results in behavioral consequences, including support for censorship (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Sun,

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Shen, & Pan, 2008) and regulations (Kim, 2015; Lim, 2017). In short, TPE has been studied across various topics (Perloff, 2009).

Reflecting the increasingly partisan media environment and polarized politics, recent studies have investigated fake news (Chung & Kim, 2021) and partisan news (Hyun & Seo, 2021) through the lens of TPE. Building on this research, the present study looks at the phenomenon of partisan audiences consuming and reacting to partisan news from the TPP perspective. That is, we examine how partisan news content (pro- vs. counterattitudinal) and polarized political sentiment (in-group vs. out-group comparison) shape TPP and how TPP leads the audience to engage with news. Given the heightened intergroup contrast (e.g., favorability to like-minded people and hostility to political opponents) in contemporary political culture (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019), we posit that TPP research needs to account for the role that group identity and intergroup dynamics would play in the perceptions of media influence, especially when studying partisan news. Indeed, TPP and TPE have long been discussed with an emphasis on "self" as compared to "others" at various social distances. Drawing on social identity theories, the present study distinguishes between "in-group" others and "out-group" others as the comparison target and investigates how group (partisan) identity plays a role in the way partisans perceive news influences when exposed to slanted partisan news. Furthermore, as an outcome of TPP, we also examine whether and how TPP leads partisan users to share, post, and comment on partisan news, which have increasingly become habitual behavioral reactions to news consumption.

Using the issue of immigration in American politics as a topical context, an online experiment was conducted. Results reveal that the news slant (proattitudinal vs. counterattitudinal) and the comparison target (in-group vs. out-group) interact on TPP, and the interactive pattern is evident when it comes to strong partisan users. Furthermore, TPP indirectly reduces partisans' news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through devaluing perceived news quality. Yet, the indirect effect is significant only when partisan audiences are compared with political opponents, not like-minded people.

Study Context: Immigration in the United States

Through the transition from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, major national policies have been changed and immigration was not an exception. The former President Trump pursued restrictive policies against illegal immigration during his presidency and reduced opportunities to immigrate into the United States. For example, he called for the mobilization of military forces to prevent caravans from entering the United States. Most Republicans and conservatives tended to support Trump's immigration policy. In contrast, President Biden has attempted to reverse his predecessor's policies, taking a more generous approach. For instance, he has considered paying several hundred-thousand dollars to illegal immigrant families and expanded immigration opportunities. Most Democrats and liberals tended to support Biden's approach to immigration. Yet, this rapid turn of immigration policy has caused a fierce political controversy along partisan lines. Further, the "crisis at the southern border" (Shaw, 2021, para. 1) made immigration emerging as a top nationwide issue in Biden's very early months of presidency (spring 2021), which is around the period when the present study was conducted. We used the issue of immigration, one of the most politically divided and salient national issues of that time, as a topical context for our study, assuming that political and partisan identities were salient in the minds of study participants.

Literature Review

Self-Enhancement Biases Shape TPP

A body of scholarship suggests that TPP is driven by self-enhancement or self-serving bias, a tendency to enhance one's self-concept (e.g., perceiving oneself to be superior to others; Brown, 1986; Weinstein, 1980). As people believe their abilities to handle harmful communication effects, they tend to underestimate media's influence on themselves. Conversely, they tend to overestimate undesirable media influence on others, who are perceived to be susceptible to it. It leads to differential perceptions between the self and others in terms of media influence, that is, TPP (Davison, 1983; Gunther, 1995). In short, a tendency of evaluating oneself to be superior to others is nominated as a fundamental trigger for TPP (Perloff, 2009).

When social identity is salient, self-enhancement motivation becomes relevant to social groups with which one is affiliated (i.e., in-group). The self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) posits that people perceive social actors through the lens of group membership when their social identities are primed. An in-group member is thought to share the same identity and prototypes, whereas an out-group member is supposed to have the opposite identity and prototypes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). When gender identity is salient, for instance, men perceive other men as in-group members and women as out-group members, and vice versa (Lo & Wei, 2002; Reid, Byrne, Brundidge, Shoham, & Marlow, 2007). In the context of intergroup contrast (i.e., perceived in-group homogeneity and out-group heterogeneity), in-group members are perceived as an extended self, and thus people perceive themselves to share a common fate with in-group members (Campbell, 1958; Reid, 2012). Accordingly, people are motivated to enhance their in-group (Reid & Hogg, 2005). Thus, we expect that the roles of content slant and comparison target in TPP, which have long been discussed with an emphasis on individual self-enhancement motivation, can be discussed in relation to an individual's group identity and perception of intergroup contrast.

Content Slant and TPP: Social Desirability Corollary

Social desirability corollary posits that audiences tend to judge socially undesirable communication messages to be more influential on others than themselves (e.g., pornography; Gunther, 1995, and fake news; Jang & Kim, 2018). Because of self-enhancement biases, TPP is expected to occur because being influenced by socially harmful content is not good for self-enhancement. Conversely, people admit themselves to be more influenced by communication messages if socially desirable (e.g., public health advertisement; Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995). The first-person perception (FPP; a tendency of perceiving oneself to be more influenced by media than others) is likely to occur because being influenced by socially beneficial content helps to enhance self-concept. In short, the effects of message content on TPP are explained by perceived social desirability.

Yet, the judgment of social desirability would likely be influenced by the context of intergroup contrast. As in-group is considered an extended self, people are motivated to follow in-group norms and conform to in-group members (Campbell, 1958; Hogg & Reid, 2006). Furthermore, they likely judge in-group to be superior to out-group because of in-group favoritism (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002) and biased processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990). For instance, partisan audiences tend to assess content favorable to in-group (e.g., proattitudinal news) to be superior to unfavorable content (e.g., counterattitudinal news). In addition, partisans are motivated to devalue the argument quality of counterattitudinal content and/or seek counterevidence against it to defend their preexisting views (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Given this, partisans would reinterpret social desirability in terms of in-group favorability through those mechanisms. For example, male participants admit themselves to be more influenced by pornography than female participants when gender identity is salient (Reid et al., 2007). Although pornography is generally considered socially undesirable (Gunther, 1995), in-group identification (i.e., male identity) can motivate them to reinterpret it such that being impacted by pornography fits into maleness. In a similar vein, partisans can judge proattitudinal news to be desirable and counterattitudinal news to be undesirable. It is because they are likely to perceive proattitudinal arguments to be reliable and rational while counterattitudinal arguments are poor and ridiculous. In short, counterattitudinal news will produce larger TPP than proattitudinal news.

Comparison Target and TPP: Social Distance Corollary

Social distance corollary posits that audiences judge distant or dissimilar targets to be more influenced by media communication than close or similar targets (Cohen et al., 1988; Jang & Kim, 2018; White, 1997). Because admitting a large media influence on the target close to oneself (e.g., friends and students in the same college) can threaten one's own self-concept, the individual is likely to deny it. As a result, TPP will increase as social distance between the self and the target increases (Cohen et al., 1988). In other words, the effects of the comparison target (i.e., whom the self is compared with) on TPP are determined by perceived social distance.

In the intergroup context, judging social distance is likely influenced by group membership. Through the self-categorization process, in-group members are perceived as a close or like-minded target, while out-group members are considered as a distant or dissimilar target (Jang & Kim, 2018; Reid & Hogg, 2005). Thus, partisans are likely to underestimate media influence on in-group targets while overestimating media influence on out-group targets. For example, when gender identity is salient, female participants judge other females (i.e., in-group targets) to be less influenced by pornography than male participants (Lo & Wei, 2002). In short, out-group target comparison will induce larger TPP than in-group target comparison.

Interactive Roles of Content Slant and Target in TPP

Social desirability and social distance corollaries explain the roles of content slant (proattitudinal vs. counterattitudinal news) and target (in-group vs. out-group targets) in producing TPP, respectively. Yet, it is plausible to expect that the two factors interplay in real communication. To wit, when exposed to slanted partisan news, the degree of TPP induced by a news slant (pro- vs. counterattitudinal slant) may vary depending on the comparison target (in-group vs. out-group others). This is because, when it comes to slanted partisan news, partisan audiences would process the news and assess the potential impact of the news on self and others through their partisan minds. Counterattitudinal news would be viewed as undesirable and threatening to their partisan identities, thus triggering strong TPP (social desirability corollary). The TPP would then be more pronounced when the comparison target is out-group members as they are perceived to be more gullible and simple-minded and thus more likely to be influenced by the undesirable news than self and in-group members (social distance corollary).

For example, Cohen and Davis (1991) found that political advertising that attacks an in-group candidate (i.e., counterattitudinal messages) causes TPP, while advertising that criticizes an out-group candidate (i.e., proattitudinal messages) induces FPP. Drawing on the self-categorization theory, we expect that this pattern of TPP and FPP, which is primarily explained by social desirability corollary, would vary depending on which partisan groups the self is compared with. When it comes to out-group others, the pattern observed in Cohen and Davis would be amplified because of self-categorization and intergroup contrast. In contrast, the pattern would be weaker when the self is compared to in-group others because perceived differences (or contrast) between the self and the in-group target are relatively small (i.e., in-group homogeneity; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

To summarize, we posit that the nature and magnitude of TPP are determined by the interaction of two factors (i.e., content slant and comparison target) especially when political identity is salient. Although not in the context of slanted partisan news and partisan identity, past work has examined the interaction between content characteristics and comparison targets. For instance, Reid and Hogg (2005) found that college students judge themselves to be more affected by MTV (FPP) while less affected by a tabloid TV talk show (TPP), relative to "trailer trash" (i.e., out-group target). In contrast, weak TPP occurs in both programs when compared with other college students (i.e., in-group target). That is, the difference in TPP is larger when one is compared with out-group targets than in-group targets. In a similar vein, Meirick (2004) found that political advertising that advocates in-group candidates induces FPP when it comes to the out-group target, whereas advertising that favors out-group candidates results in TPP when it comes to the in-group target. The findings of this research speak to the possibility that content would interact with comparison targets. It is also noteworthy that work by Reid and his colleagues (Reid & Hogg, 2005; Reid et al., 2007) considered message slant and its interaction with comparison target, but the slant in message was determined only by source cues, not by message itself.

TPP Influences News Sharing/Posting/Commenting Online

TPP leads audiences to engage in certain activities such as supporting censorship (Guo & Johnson, 2020; McLeod et al., 1997), political discussion, and participation (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Lo, Wei, Lu, & Hou, 2015), which is called "behavioral component of the TPE" (Sun et al., 2008, p. 296), or the "influence of presumed influence" (IPI: Gunther & Storey, 2003, p. 199). Ample evidence has shown that TPP translates into behavioral outcomes either directly or indirectly through intervening variables (e.g., attitudes, emotions; McLeod et al., 2017; Sun, 2013). On the one hand, TPP directly leads to behavior as audiences are motivated to counterbalance the perceived influence of counterattitudinal news (corrective action hypothesis; Rojas, 2010) and/or prevent others from falling under undesirable media effects (prevention; Gunther, 1995). For example, TPP toward socially undesirable communication directly results in support for censorship (McLeod et al., 1997; Sun et al., 2008) and regulations (Jang & Kim, 2018; Lim, 2017). On the other hand, a line of research shows the indirect effects of TPP on behavior. For instance, Gunther and Storey (2003) propose an indirect effect model in which presumed media influence indirectly affects behavioral intention through switching a specific attitude and belief. In other words, TPP first changes a preexisting attitude, which in turn results in behavioral outcomes (Sun, 2013). Yet, past work suggests that the mediating process goes beyond attitudes, including emotional responses. TPP decreases the likelihood of precautionary behavior for the Y2K problem through reducing anxiety (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004), while TPP increases support for opinion poll restriction through increasing anxiety (Kim, 2015). In summary, TPP motivates audiences to take an action either directly or indirectly. Note that previous research found inconsistent findings concerning the relationship between TPP and behavioral outcomes (Lo & Wei, 2002; Salwen & Driscoll, 1997), which indicates that TPP would not be a reliable predictor of behavior if it did not distinguish between those who had high levels of TPP and those who had low levels of TPP.

These days, consuming news online has become part of an everyday routine for many Americans (Geiger, 2019). As online news engagement (e.g., sharing news with friends, posting news on social media, and leaving comments on news) is regarded as critical discursive participation (Bobkowski, 2015; Park & Kaye, 2018; Trilling, Tolochko, & Burscher, 2017), scholarly attention is given to users' news-sharing/posting/commenting in the TPE literature (Chung & Kim, 2021; Lee, Johnson, & Wilkerson, 2023; Lim, 2017). Given that TPP is found to influence user assessment of news (Yang & Horning, 2020), we hypothesize an indirect path from TPP to news-sharing/posting/commenting intention in the context of partisan news and polarized politics, employing judgment of news quality (or perceived news quality) as a mediator. First, partisans are likely to be motivated to underestimate the quality of news that induces large TPP. Because of self-enhancement biases, being influenced by poor- or low-quality news is not good for self-concept, whereas being influenced by excellent or high-quality news can help for self-enhancement. In other words, when viewed from a self-enhancement perspective, the news influencing others should be of lower quality than the news influencing oneself. For example, partisans are likely to devalue the quality of the news that is perceived to be highly influential for their political opponents but overvalue the quality of news that they think they are impacted by. Thus, TPP is expected to be negatively related to perceived news quality.

Next, previous research shows that users are more likely to share and leave comments on high-quality news rather than low-quality news. For example, when news has higher informational utility (Bobkowski, 2015), greater newsworthiness (Trilling et al., 2017; Valenzuela, Pina, & Ramirez, 2017; Weber, 2014), and argument quality (Thompson, Wang, & Daya, 2020), they are likely to share and comment on it online. Those characteristics are regarded as criteria to judge the quality of news. In a similar vein, Yang and Horning (2020) found that greater TPP toward fake news decreased perceived social desirability, which could be considered an indicator of news quality, and it in turn influenced news-sharing intention. In sum, high-quality news is more likely to be shared, posted, and commented on than low-quality news.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Based on the TPP literature and self-categorization theory, we expect both news slant and comparison target influence TPP jointly as well as respectively. Furthermore, the self-categorization process should be evident when social identity is strong. For example, within-group homogeneity and intergroup contrast are largely manifest when it comes to strong partisans (Levendusky, 2018; Reid, 2012). Thus, the content-target interaction on TPP can be amplified as the strength of partisan identity increases. Next, we expect that TPP indirectly influences users' intention to news-sharing/posting/commenting through judgment of news quality. TPP leads individuals to undervalue news quality, which in turn discourages them to share, post, and comment on the news. To summarize, we propose the following set of hypotheses and a research question.

H1: *Counterattitudinal news will induce larger TPP than proattitudinal news.*

H2: *Out-group target comparison will induce larger TPP than in-group target comparison.*

H3: *There will be an interaction between news slant and comparison target, such that the positive relationship between counterattitudinal news (as opposed to proattitudinal news) and TPP will be more pronounced when the comparison target is out-group members.*

RQ1: *Does the interaction between news slant and target on TPP vary by the strength of partisanship?*

H4: *TPP will be negatively related to perceived news quality.*

H5: *Perceived news quality will be positively related to news-sharing/posting/commenting intention.*

H6: *TPP will indirectly reduce news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through decreasing perceived news quality.*

Method

Online Experiment

Participants

A total of 201 participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing marketplace through which researchers can outsource jobs to a distributed workforce who can perform virtual tasks. Participants were self-selected into the MTurk database and financially compensated for participating in this online experiment. Once they accepted this task, they automatically moved to the online experiment run by Qualtrics, an online survey platform. They electronically consented for their participation. After completing the experiment, they were debriefed and compensated (duration in minutes: *M* = 14.55).

As this study focuses on intergroup partisan conflict, participants' partisanship should be determined first. Participants were asked to indicate their political predispositions using three items: party affiliation (*1* = a strong Democrat; *4* = Independent; *7* = a strong Republican), political ideology (*1* = extremely liberal; *4* = moderate; *7* = extremely conservative), and job approval of President Biden (*1* = strongly approve; *3* = neither approve nor disapprove; *5* = strongly disapprove). Using the three items, partisanship was determined through a multistep procedure. First, party affiliation was the baseline.

Participants were categorized as a Democrat/Republican when they identified themselves as a Democrat/Republican. When it came to Independents, partisanship was decided based on political ideology. Specifically, they were regarded as a Democrat/Republican when they identified themselves as liberal/conservative. That is, liberal independents were considered Democrats, while conservative independents were considered Republicans. When it came to moderate independents, partisanship was then determined by their job approval of Biden. In particular, they were considered a Democrat/Republican if they approved/disapproved of Biden. Finally, five pure independents (i.e., moderate independents who were neutral toward Biden) were identified and excluded from the analysis as the in-group versus out-group categorization was infeasible.

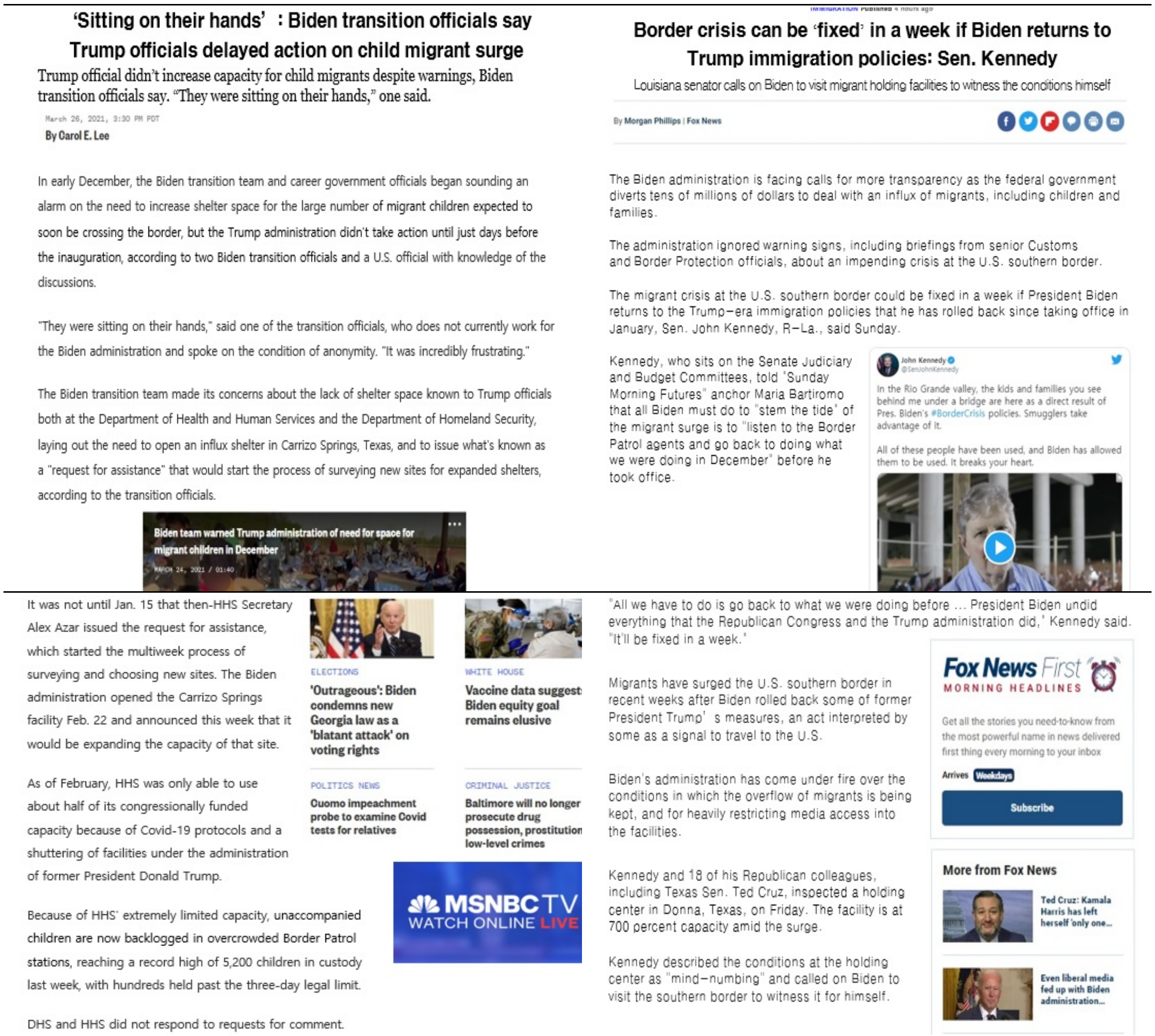
Next, the strength of partisanship was computed (weak: *n* = 52, moderate: *n* = 82, strong: *n* = 62). The three variables of political predispositions were classified into three categories, respectively (i.e., Democrat, Republican, or Independent for party affiliation; Liberal, Conservative, or Moderate for political ideology; Approval, Disapproval, Neither approval nor disapproval for Biden). Then, these three variables were cross-tabulated (3 x 3 x 3), and the resulting 27 cases were sorted to construct a variable that captures the direction and degree of partisan identity (see Appendix for summary). In sorting, we used the party affiliation measure as the baseline. Among Democratic participants, those who have liberal ideology *and* approve of Biden were considered "strong" Democrats. Democratic participants who either have liberal ideology or approve of Biden were defined as "moderate" Democrats. All other Democratic participants were defined as "weak" Democrats. The same procedure was applied to Republican participants. Yet, independent participants were never coded as "strong" partisans. They were defined as "moderate" partisans at best only when their ideological leaning and Biden approval converge. That is, independent participants who have liberal ideology and approve of Biden were categorized as "moderate" Democrats and those who have a conservative ideology and disapprove of Biden as "moderate" Republicans. All other independent participants were categorized as "weak" partisans (either Democrats or Republicans) depending on their ideological leaning and Biden approval.

Finally, responses from 196 participants were analyzed: sex (male = 72%), age (*M* = 34.52 in year), ethnicity (White = 43%, Asian = 42%, others = 15%), education (*1* = high school diploma or lower to *5* = master's degree or higher: *M* = 3.66, *SD* = 1.21), yearly household income (*1* = less than $10,000 USD to *12* = more than $150,000 USD, *M* = 4.87, *SD* = 2.73), and partisanship (Democrats = 66%). A post-hoc randomization check was satisfactory: sex ($x^2(1) = 3.75$, *ns*), age ($t(194) = 0.21$, *ns*), ethnicity ($x^2(4) = 1.37$, *ns*), education ($t(194) = 0.20$, *ns*), household income ($t(194) = 0.54$, *ns*), and partisanship ($x^2(1) < 0.001$, *ns*).

Experimental Design and Stimuli

A 2 (content manipulation: favoring vs. opposing Biden's immigration policy) x 2 (partisanship: Democrat vs. Republican) x 2 (comparison target: Democratic supporters vs. Republican supporters) experimental design was employed. Partisanship was not manipulated but measured, and the comparison target was a within-subject factor. A participant was randomly assigned to one of the two content manipulation conditions.

When it came to content manipulation, we made two versions of hypothetical news stories favorable/unfavorable to Biden's immigration policy. Each version provided several arguments and one quotation to solely support/oppose the policy. For example, a Republican senator blamed Biden for the crisis at the U.S. southern border (i.e., anti-Biden news), whereas an official in the Biden administration attributed blame to the former Republican administration to defend President Biden (i.e., pro-Biden news). These arguments and quotations were adopted from actual news stories published by *Fox News* and *MSNBC*. The two versions were designed to seem like actual online news stories, including bylines and advertisements (see Figure 1). The length of the two news stories is approximately identical (333/336 words).



'Sitting on their hands' : Biden transition officials say Trump officials delayed action on child migrant surge

Trump official didn't increase capacity for child migrants despite warnings, Biden transition officials say. "They were sitting on their hands," one said.

March 26, 2021, 3:30 PM PDT

By Carol E. Lee

In early December, the Biden transition team and career government officials began sounding an alarm on the need to increase shelter space for the large number of migrant children expected to soon be crossing the border, but the Trump administration didn't take action until just days before the inauguration, according to two Biden transition officials and a U.S. official with knowledge of the discussions.

"They were sitting on their hands," said one of the transition officials, who does not currently work for the Biden administration and spoke on the condition of anonymity. "It was incredibly frustrating."

The Biden transition team made its concerns about the lack of shelter space known to Trump officials both at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Homeland Security, laying out the need to open an influx shelter in Carrizo Springs, Texas, and to issue what's known as a "request for assistance" that would start the process of surveying new sites for expanded shelters, according to the transition officials.

Biden team warned Trump administration of need for space for migrant children in December

March 24, 2021 / 01:40

It was not until Jan. 15 that then-HHS Secretary Alex Azar issued the request for assistance, which started the multiweek process of surveying and choosing new sites. The Biden administration opened the Carrizo Springs facility Feb. 22 and announced this week that it would be expanding the capacity of that site.

As of February, HHS was only able to use about half of its congressionally funded capacity because of Covid-19 protocols and a shuttering of facilities under the administration of former President Donald Trump.

Because of HHS' extremely limited capacity, unaccompanied children are now backlogged in overcrowded Border Patrol stations, reaching a record high of 5,200 children in custody last week, with hundreds held past the three-day legal limit.

DHS and HHS did not respond to requests for comment.

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Border crisis can be 'fixed' in a week if Biden returns to Trump immigration policies: Sen. Kennedy

Louisiana senator calls on Biden to visit migrant holding facilities to witness the conditions himself

By Morgan Phillips | Fox News

The Biden administration is facing calls for more transparency as the federal government diverts tens of millions of dollars to deal with an influx of migrants, including children and families.

The administration ignored warning signs, including briefings from senior Customs and Border Protection officials, about an impending crisis at the U.S. southern border.

The migrant crisis at the U.S. southern border could be fixed in a week if President Biden returns to the Trump-era immigration policies that he has rolled back since taking office in January, Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., said Sunday.

Kennedy, who sits on the Senate Judiciary and Budget Committees, told 'Sunday Morning Futures' anchor Maria Bartiromo that all Biden must do to "stem the tide" of the migrant surge is to "listen to the Border Patrol agents and go back to doing what we were doing in December" before he took office.

John Kennedy @SenJohnKennedy

In the Rio Grande valley, the kids and families you see behind me under a bridge are here as a direct result of Pres. Biden's #BorderCrisis policies. Smugglers take advantage of it.

All of these people have been used, and Biden has allowed them to be used. It breaks your heart.

"All we have to do is go back to what we were doing before ... President Biden undid everything that the Republican Congress and the Trump administration did,' Kennedy said. "It'll be fixed in a week.'

Migrants have surged the U.S. southern border in recent weeks after Biden rolled back some of former President Trump' s measures, an act interpreted by some as a signal to travel to the U.S.

Biden's administration has come under fire over the conditions in which the overflow of migrants is being kept, and for heavily restricting media access into the facilities.

Kennedy and 18 of his Republican colleagues, including Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, inspected a holding center in Donna, Texas, on Friday. The facility is at 700 percent capacity amid the surge.

Kennedy described the conditions at the holding center as "mind-numbing" and called on Biden to visit the southern border to witness it for himself.

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Pro-Biden news (left) ***Anti-Biden news (right)***

Figure 1. Manipulated news stories.

In the analysis, the experimental design was reorganized to a 2 (content slant: proattitudinal vs. counterattitudinal news) x 2 (comparison target: in-group vs. out-group target) design to test the hypotheses. First, two news stories were recoded into pro- versus counterattitudinal news based on participants' partisanship. For Democrats (Republicans), news favorable to Biden's immigration policy was coded as proattitudinal (counterattitudinal) and news unfavorable to it as counterattitudinal (proattitudinal). Second, two comparison targets were recoded into in-group versus out-group targets based on partisanship. For Democrats (Republicans), Democratic supporters were coded as in-group (out-group) targets and Republican supporters as out-group (in-group) targets.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to assess biases of a news story to which they were exposed on an 11-point scale (*1* = strongly biased against Biden to *11* = strongly biased in favor of Biden; Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, & Wise, 2017). As intended, the results show that pro-Biden news (M = 7.19, SD = 1.91) was perceived to be more favorable to Biden than anti-Biden news (M = 6.28, SD = 2.56; $t(175.67) = 2.81$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the author of pro-Biden news (M = 7.26, SD = 1.67) was thought to be more favorable to Biden than the author of anti-Biden news (M = 6.60, SD = 2.57; $t(161.80) = 2.11$, $p < .05$).

Measures

Third-Person Perception (TPP)

To assess perceived news influence, participants were asked to answer the following statement with reference to three targets (i.e., the self, Democratic supporters, Republican supporters) on a 7-point scale (Reid & Hogg, 2005; Sun et al., 2008; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2010): "indicate to what extent the news article that you just read would influence the following targets in terms of attitudes toward Biden's immigration policy" (*1* = not influenced at all to *7* = extremely influenced). To create a measure of TPP, a multistep procedure was employed. First, a measure of TPP that compares the self to Democratic/Republican supporters was created by subtracting the perceived influence on the self from that on Democratic/Republican supporters (Democratic supporters—Self: M = 0.37, SD = 1.46; Republican supporters—Self: M = 0.33, SD = 1.68). Positive scores indicated a greater influence on Democratic/Republican supporters than the self (i.e., TPP), whereas negative scores indicated a greater influence on the self (i.e., FPP). Next, a measure of TPP that compares the self to in-group/out-group targets was made based on participants' partisanship. For example, for Democrats, a measure of TPP comparing with Democratic supporters was coded as a TPP indicator of in-group targets while that with Republican supporters was coded as a TPP indicator of out-group targets, and vice versa. Higher scores indicate greater TPP (in-group target: M = 0.39, SD = 1.33; out-group target: M = 0.31, SD = 1.78). That is, positive scores indicated stronger TPP, whereas negative scores indicated stronger FPP.

Perceived News Quality

To measure perceived news quality, participants were asked to indicate how well the following words described the news story on a 5-point scale (*1* = strongly disagree to *5* = strongly agree): trustful, unbiased, fully informed, and fair (TUFF formula; Merrill, 1997). As a principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation confirmed one component (eigenvalue = 2.79, explained variance = 69%, factor loadings = .79 ~ .85), an index of perceived news quality was created by averaging scores of the four items (α = .85, M = 3.57, SD = 0.93). Higher scores indicate greater perceived news quality.

News-Sharing/Posting/Commenting Intention

To measure news-sharing/posting/commenting intention, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they were willing to do the following behaviors on a 5-point scale (*1* = definitely no to *5* = definitely yes): sharing the news with friends, posting the news on social media, and leaving comments on the news. As PCA with Varimax rotation confirmed one component (eigenvalue = 2.41, explained variance = 80%, factor loadings = .89 ~ .91), an index of news-sharing/posting/commenting intention was created by averaging scores of the three items (α = .88, M = 3.12, SD = 1.13). Higher scores indicate greater intention to share, post, and comment on the news online (see Table 1 for zero-order correlations).

Control Variables

Three variables of political engagement were additionally controlled. Issue involvement was measured by two items (interest: *1* = not interested at all to *5* = extremely, M = 3.69, SD = 1.00; personal relevance: *1* = not important at all to *5* = extremely important, M = 3.62, SD = 1.01). An index of issue involvement was made by averaging the two scores (Spearman-Brown coefficient = .77; M = 3.66, SD = 0.90). To measure political knowledge, a series of multiple-choice questions were employed (see Appendix). For each question, participants received one point when they answered correctly (otherwise = 0). An index of political knowledge was computed by summing the four scores up (M = 2.21, SD = 0.91). Last, participants were asked to indicate how frequently they used the following news media in the past week (*0* = none to *7* = everyday): newspaper (M = 4.28, SD = 2.47), radio (M = 3.93, SD = 2.32), television news (M = 4.96, SD = 1.89), Internet news (M = 5.54, SD = 1.49), and social media (M = 5.36, SD = 1.81). An index of news media use was created by summing the five scores up (M = 24.07, SD = 6.88).

Table 1. Binary Correlations Among Focal Variables.

	1. TPP (in-group target)	2. TPP (out-group target)	3. Perceived news quality	4. News-sharing intention
2.	.21***			
3.	-.05	-.29***		
4.	-.08	-.20***	.48***	

Note. N = 196 (*** p < .001).

Results

A 2 (between-subject factor: proattitudinal vs. counterattitudinal news) x 2 (within-subject factor: in-group vs. out-group target) mixed ANCOVA was run to test *H1–H3*. The mixed ANCOVA revealed a significant two-way interaction between news slant and comparison target on TPP (Wilks's λ = .95, F(1, 189) = 9.89, p = .002: see Figure 2). As expected, the difference in TPP between proattitudinal and counterattitudinal news was larger when it came to out-group targets (ΔTPP = 0.53, Cohen's d = 0.30) than in-group targets (ΔTPP = 0.33, d = 0.25). Further, counterattitudinal news resulted in larger TPP than proattitudinal news only in terms of out-group targets ($t(194) = 2.09$, $p = .04$; cf. in-group targets: $t(194) = 1.74$, $p = .08$). Yet, neither news slant (between-subjects effect: $F(1, 189) = 0.24$, $p = .62$) nor comparison target (within-subject effect: Wilks's $\lambda = .99$, $F(1, 189) = 0.03$, $p = .87$) induced significant differences in TPP. Taken together, content slants and targets jointly influenced TPP, rather than separately. Thus, *H3* was supported, but *H1* and *H2* were not supported.

A 2 (content slant) x 2 (comparison target) x 3 (partisanship strength) mixed ANCOVA was run to explore whether the content-target interaction would vary as a function of partisanship strength (*RQ1*). A significant three-way interaction was found (Wilks's $\lambda = .96$, $F(1, 186) = 3.27$, $p = .04$). As shown in Figure 3, the result suggests that the content-target interaction found in *H3* was amplified among strong partisans. That is, those who have strong partisan identity were more likely to differentiate between in-group and out-group targets in judging news influence than weak or moderate partisans as they tend to be faithful and prototypical to their in-group and their perception of intergroup contrast would be sharper (Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Table 2. Mediation Effects on News-Sharing/Posting/Commenting Intention.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	DV = Perceived News Quality	DV = News-Sharing/Posting/Commenting Intention	
Intercept	3.67 (0.33)***	1.63 (0.39)***	-0.29 (0.45)
TPP (in-group target)	0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)
TPP (out-group target)	-0.15 (0.04)***	-0.11 (0.04)*	-0.03 (0.04)
Mediator			
Perceived News Quality			0.52 (0.08)***
Partisanship	-0.03 (0.14)	-0.12 (0.17)	-0.11 (0.15)
Partisanship strength	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.10)
Issue Involvement	0.05 (0.08)	0.36 (0.09)***	0.33 (0.08)***
Political Knowledge	-0.20 (0.07)**	-0.15 (0.09)†	-0.05 (0.08)
News Media Use	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)†
Model Fit			
R^2	.14	.18	.34
ΔR^2	-	-	.16***

Note. $N = 196$. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in the parentheses († $p < .08$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).

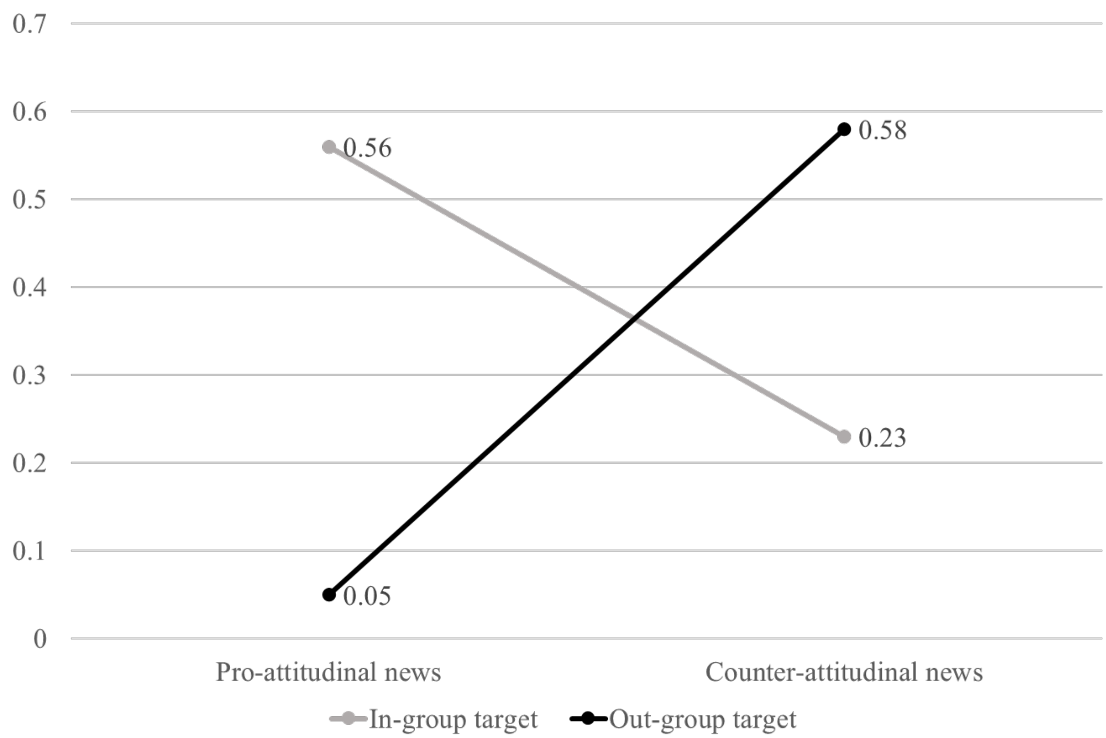

Figure 2. An interaction between news slant and comparison target on TPP.

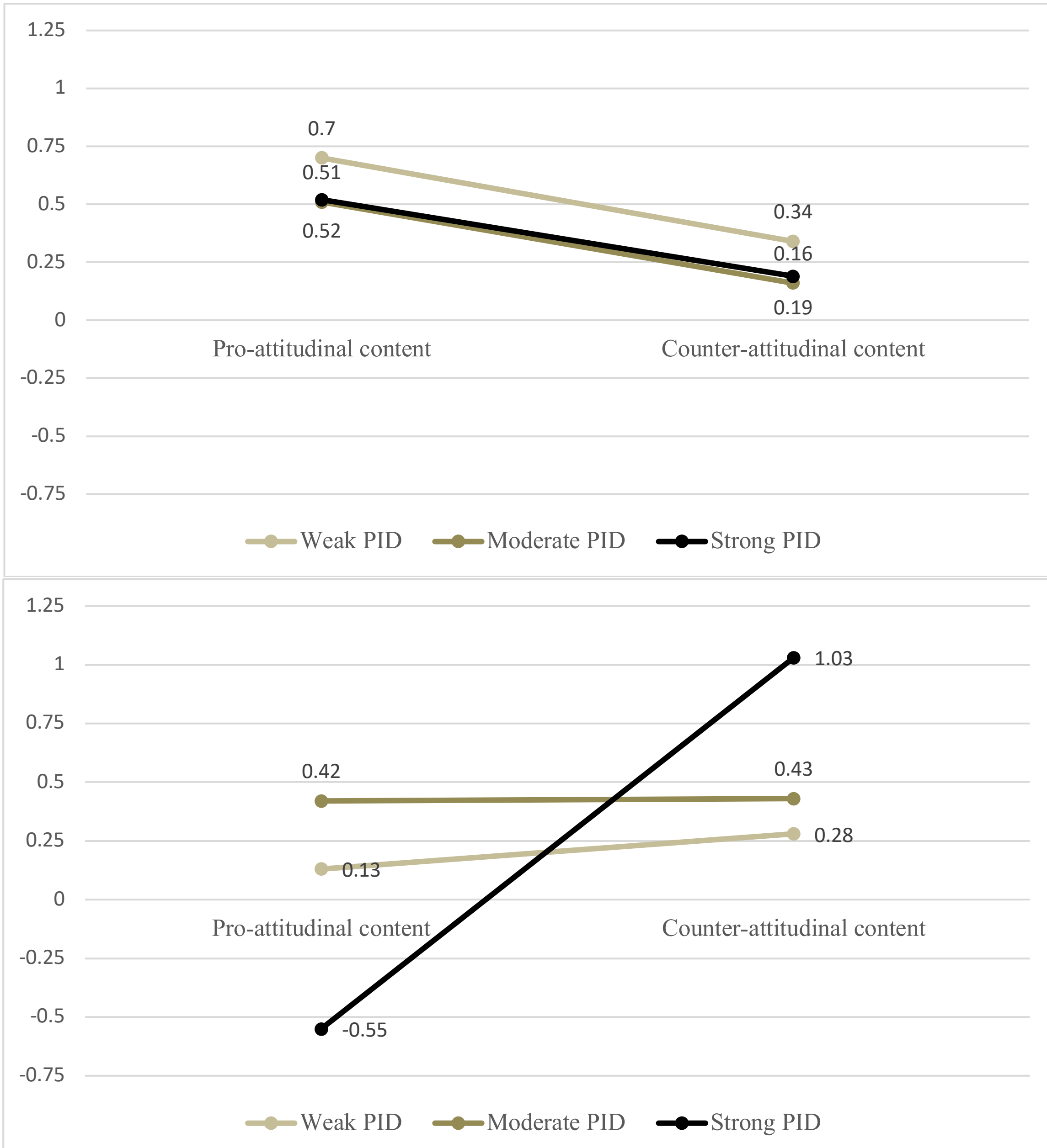

Figure 3. Moderation of news slant and partisanship strength on TPP (in-group target at the top vs. out-group target at the bottom).

We ran OLS regressions to test a mediating relationship between TPP and news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through perceived news quality (see Table 2). First, TPP compared with in-group targets was not significantly related to perceived news quality (b = 0.03, SE = 0.05, p = .56), but TPP compared with out-group targets significantly reduced perceived news quality (b = -0.15, SE = 0.04, p < .001). In other words, participants would devalue perceived news quality when they were compared with political opponents, but not like-minded targets. Thus, *H4* was supported when it came to the out-group target. Second, perceived news quality significantly increased news-sharing/posting/commenting intention (b = 0.52, SE = 0.08, p < .001). That is, participants were likely to share, post, and leave comments on news when they perceived it as high-quality. Therefore, *H5* was supported.

Next, TPP compared with out-group targets directly reduced news-sharing/posting/commenting intention (b = -0.11, SE = 0.04, p = .01) without perceived news quality. When it was added, however, TPP compared with out-group targets was no longer a significant predictor of news-sharing/posting/commenting intention (b = -0.03, SE = 0.04, p = .40). Therefore, TPP indirectly reduced news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through decreasing perceived news quality, when it came to the out-group target. A significant bootstrapped indirect effect was also found (b = -0.08, SE = 0.02, 95% CI = [-0.13, -0.04]) (Model #4 in Hayes, 2018). Yet, TPP compared with in-group targets did not have such indirect effects. In short, TPP would discourage partisans to share, post, and leave comments on news online by devaluing perceived news quality only when they are compared with political opponents. Thus, *H6* was partially supported. Note that multicollinearity was little concerned in all regressions (0.7 < *Tolerance* < 1 and *VIF* < 1.3).

Last, a serial-parallel mediation model (Model #80 in Hayes, 2018: see Figure 4 and Appendix) was run to examine the relationship between antecedents (i.e., content slant and comparison target) and consequences of TPP (i.e., perceived news quality and news-sharing/posting/commenting intention) as a whole. About *H3*, the effect of news slants on TPP (i.e., the difference in TPP between proattitudinal and counterattitudinal news) varied between in-group (b = -0.36, SE = 0.19, p = .06) and out-group targets (b = 0.53, SE = 0.26, p = .04). Further, TPP compared with out-group targets significantly reduced perceived news quality (*H4*: b = -0.14, SE = 0.04, p < .001), which in turn increased news-sharing/posting/commenting intention (*H5*: b = 0.53, SE = 0.08, p < .001). Consequently, the effect of news slants indirectly decreased news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through TPP and perceived news quality (b = -0.04, SE = 0.02, 95% CI = [-0.099, -0.003]) when it came to the out-group target. However, such indirect effects were not found about the in-group target (b = -0.004, SE = 0.010, 95% CI = [-0.026, 0.016]).

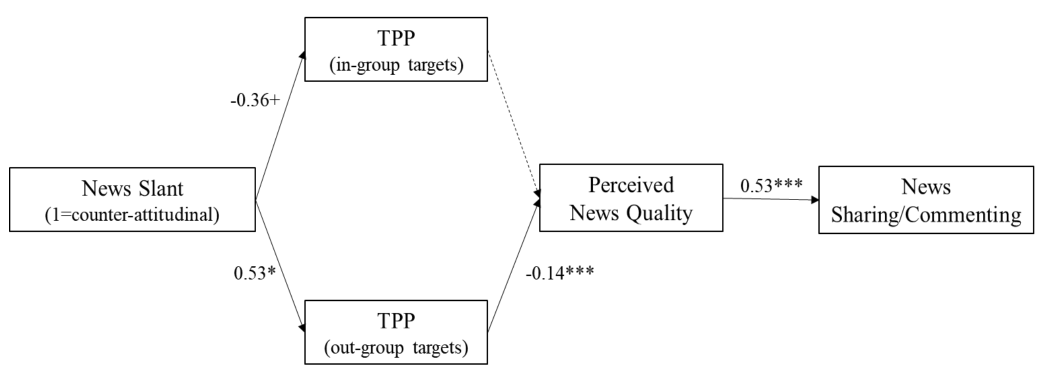

Figure 4. Indirect effects of news slant on news-sharing/posting/commenting intention.

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients were reported with statistical significance. A dotted line indicates a nonsignificant path (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$).

Robust Check: Revised Causal Chains

Alternatively, it is feasible that perceived news quality would lead to TPP such that low-quality news produces TPP whereas high-quality news FPP (e.g., Duck, Terry, & Hogg, 1995). Further, TPP can directly influence online news engagement (Chung & Kim, 2021), and thus perceived news quality would indirectly influence news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through TPP. Yet, regardless of the targets, nonsignificant indirect effects were found (in-group target: $b = 0.0002$, $SE = 0.005$, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.01] and out-group target: $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.05, 0.08]). Although not formally confirming the causal links among the three variables measured concurrently, the results provide more confidence in the mediating relationship as hypothesized in the present study.

Discussion

The present study attempts to theorize the interactive roles of content slant and target in shaping TPP in the context of slanted partisan news and polarized partisan groups. Specifically, the effect of content slant varies between in-group and out-group targets when group identification is salient. This interactive pattern may not be fully explained by either social desirability or social distance corollaries. Given the increasingly polarized politics and partisan journalism, both slanted news and different targets (i.e., like-minded people vs. political opponents) nearly always work together across various topics including politics, health, science, and religion. At least in the context of intergroup contrast, TPP is understood as a function of content slant and target, which is well-explained by social identity or self-categorization (Reid et al., 2007). Furthermore, the moderating role of partisan identity strength in facilitating the self-categorization processes is observed as social identity theories posit.

Our results suggest that researchers need to distinguish between in-group and out-group targets when studying TPE. Previous research has typically compared the perceived media influence between self and "generalized" others (Gunther & Storey, 2003; Lo et al., 2015). In other words, IPI on others is often assumed to be general and universal. Although TPP is different across various target groups (Cohen et al., 1988; Reid & Hogg, 2005), the distinction between in-group and out-group others is rarely considered when it comes to behavioral outcomes of TPP. Yet, the present study shows that the indirect effect of TPP on news-sharing/posting/commenting intention is significant only when it comes to comparison targets of out-group members. It is perhaps because in-group members may not be a strong comparison target that motivates partisans to take actions because of in-group favoritism and perceived similarity. When out-group members are compared, in contrast, partisans are more likely to be motivated to engage in actions against them. That is, partisans are likely to take actions against their opponents, but not against like-minded others. Thus, IPI on others should not be considered general or uniform at least in the intergroup context. Similarly, the distinction between in-group and out-group targets is also useful to capture TPP in relation to gender (e.g., men vs. women: Lo & Wei, 2002; Reid et al., 2007) and religious identities (e.g., Jews vs. Arabs; Perloff, 1989).

Next, TPP toward partisan news indirectly reduces news-sharing/posting/commenting intention through devaluing perceived news quality. Given partisans' biased processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006), the tendency to underestimate the quality of news can exacerbate already-polarized communication environments. For example, partisans would underestimate the quality of counterattitudinal news regardless of its objective quality, which in turn motivates them not to share and comment on or even read it. In contrast, they continue to share, post, and comment on proattitudinal news as it is perceived as high-quality news. Consequently, TPP would likely leave partisan users locked in echo chambers or homogeneous news consumption, which in turn leads to even more selective and polarized partisan communication.

In addition, this study sheds light on an indirect pathway to online news engagement as a behavioral outcome of TPP. Although TPP is often considered to directly influencing news-sharing behavior (Chung & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2023; cf. Yang & Horning, 2020), we found that TPP indirectly affects it via perceived news quality. In the realm of corrective actions (Rojas, 2010), the pattern of discouraging news-sharing/posting/commenting intention would be named as a "suppressive" action such that partisans are less likely to share and comment on counterattitudinal news to suppress the spread of politically disagreeable news. A corrective action is generally understood as desirable for democracy because it encourages civic participation to advocate one's opinion in the public sphere (e.g., political participation). Conversely, a suppressive action may be undesirable for democracy because partisans correct or influence public opinion by preventing the dissimilar opinion from being available in the public sphere. In other words, partisans suppress the opposite side by neglecting it. Finding a way of mitigating suppressive actions will be the next step.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, a one-shot experiment employing one issue in a certain country (immigration in the United States) may limit external validity. Additional experiments will be needed to confirm the findings in the present study. Second, our participant sample was skewed in terms of demographics (e.g., gender and ethnicity). Although randomization checks were satisfactory and the findings did not change regardless of demographic variables, the results of this study need to be interpreted with caution. Additionally, the size of the participant sample was relatively small for multivariate data analysis, which requires a large sample. Although a post-hoc analysis shows sufficient power for the two-way interaction in a mixed ANCOVA (a = .05, post-hoc power = .88), future research will need to employ a more representative and larger sample to improve validity. Third, the use of different scales (e.g., a 7-point scale for TPP and a 5-point scale for perceived news quality and news-sharing/posting/commenting intention) could impact the calculation of p-value. Although alternative statistical testing methods (e.g., bootstrapping) revealed the same results, future research should be more cautious in using measurement scales. Fourth, "pro-Biden" news could be viewed as "anti-Trump" or "anti-Republican" news by the participants as the emphasis of the news was more on blaming and correcting the Trump government's immigration policies by the Biden government. Although our manipulation check confirmed that pro-Biden news was judged to be in favor of Biden, participants' perception of the target group might have been influenced by what they thought was the main target. This should be considered when interpreting the results. Last, caution should be taken when interpreting the causal flow of the mediating relationship among TPP, perceived news quality, and news-sharing/posting/commenting intention. Although the hypothesized mediating path was empirically preferred to the alternative path, it should be further tested with multistep or longitudinal data.

Despite the limitations, the present study highlights the interplay between content slant and target on TPP and the distinction between like-minded and dissimilar others in the context of intergroup contrast. Furthermore, a pathway from partisan news exposure to news sharing/posting/commenting is examined by employing TPP and judgment of news quality as intervening processes, which adds to the understanding of TPE and online news engagement.

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Appendix

Table A1. Partisanship Determination.

Party Affiliation	Political Ideology	Approval of Biden	Partisanship	Partisanship Strength
Democrat	Liberal	Approve	Democrats (n = 129)	Strong Democrats
		Neutral		Moderate Democrats
		Disapprove		Moderate Democrats
	Moderate	Approve		Moderate Democrats
		Neutral		Weak Democrats
		Disapprove		Weak Democrats
	Conservative	Approve		Moderate Democrats
		Neutral		Weak Democrats
		Disapprove		Weak Democrats
Independent	Liberal	Approve		Moderate Democrats
		Neutral		Weak Democrats
		Disapprove		Weak Democrats
	Moderate	Approve		Weak Democrats
		Neutral	Pure Independent (n = 5)	
		Disapprove	Republicans (n = 67)	Weak Republicans
	Conservative	Approve		Weak Republicans
		Neutral		Weak Republicans
		Disapprove		Moderate Republicans
Republican	Liberal	Approve		Weak Republicans
		Neutral		Weak Republicans
		Disapprove		Moderate Republicans
	Moderate	Approve		Weak Republicans
		Neutral		Weak Republicans
		Disapprove		Moderate Republicans
	Conservative	Approve		Moderate Republicans
		Neutral		Moderate Republicans
		Disapprove		Strong Republicans

	Partisanship Strength		
	Weak	Moderate	Strong
Democrat	25	54	50
Republican	27	28	12

Table A2. Political Knowledge Question Wording.

Q1. In what year did the Supreme Court of the United States decide Geer v. Connecticut?	**A. 1896**; B. 1919 C. 1954; D. 1973
Q2. For how many years is a United States Senator elected, that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator?	A. 2; B. 4 **C. 6**; D. 8
Q3. On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the least?	**A. Foreign aid** B. Medicare C. National defense D. Social security
Q4. Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington?	**A. Democrats** B. Republicans C. Tie

Table A3. OLS Regressions on News-Sharing/Posting/Commenting Intention.

	Criterion Variable			
	TPP (in-group target)	TPP (out-group target)	Perceived News Quality	News Sharing/ Posting/Commenting Intention
Intercept	1.24(0.50)*	0.68(0.67)	3.75(0.34)***	-0.53(0.46)
News Slant	-0.36(0.19)†	0.53(0.26)*	-0.13(0.13)	0.33(0.14)*
TPP(in-group target)			0.02(0.05)	0.01(0.05)
TPP(out-group target)			-0.14(0.04)***	-0.05(0.04)
Perceived News Quality				0.53(0.08)***
Covariate				
Partisanship	-0.09(0.21)	-0.09(0.29)	-0.02(0.14)	-0.12(0.15)
Partisanship strength	-0.14(0.13)	-0.03(0.18)	-0.13(0.09)	0.002(0.09)
Issue Involvement	-0.01(0.12)	0.05(0.16)	0.04(0.08)	0.35(0.08)***
Political Knowledge	0.16(0.11)	0.02(0.15)	-0.19(0.07)**	-0.06(0.08)
News Media Use	-0.03(0.02)*	-0.03(0.02)	0.01(0.01)	0.02(0.01)†
R^2	.05	.04	.15	.36

Note. N = 196. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in the parentheses (PROCESS Model #80) († p < .07, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001).