Fake news, information overload, and the third-person effect in China

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Abstract
Based on a national survey of 1111 Chinese citizens, this study analyzes how exposure to fake news and perceptions of information overload are associated with the third-person effect. The findings indicate that fake news exposure correlates with perceived information overload and third-person perceptions of fake news. Respondents with higher levels of perceived information overload also report stronger third-person perceptions. In addition, Chinese respondents who believe that fake news affects others more than themselves are less likely to support stricter controls of fake news.

Keywords
fake news, information overload, the third-person effect, survey, China

Fake news became a widely discussed phenomenon after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which was characterized by a flood of fabricated and inaccurate news stories circulating on the Internet and social media (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). In a survey of U.S. adults conducted shortly after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that 15% of the respondents...
reported having encountered fake news stories during the month before the election. Other studies show that many of these fabricated news stories became “viral” because people were more likely to forward fake stories to their friends on social media than real ones (Langin, 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Similarly, studies conducted in China indicate that the number of fake news stories on social media has increased exponentially during the past few years—a trend attributed to the growing reliance on digital news sources among Chinese citizens (Annual Fake News Research Group, 2021). However, despite this increase in fake news, only a few empirical studies have analyzed the rise of fake news in China (Chen, 2006; Fu, 2012). One goal of this study is to explore whether increased exposure to fake news might prompt concerns among Chinese audiences regarding the potentially harmful effects of fake news on self and others and whether these perceptions, in turn, will lead to calls for stricter controls of news sources. Although the third-person effect has been shown for various negative messages, such as pornography or violence in the media, studies investigating how fake news might be associated with the third-person effect remain limited (e.g., Jang & Kim, 2018; Koo, Su, Lee, Ahn, & Rojas, 2021).

Due to the ever-increasing amount of information available on digital media platforms, this study also investigates the potential effects of information overload and media use on perceptions of fake news. Studies of the American media consumers found that frequent users of Facebook, for example, were more likely to perceive higher levels of information overload (Holton & Chyi, 2012). It is reasonable to assume that the constant torrent of news and information on media, especially social media, forces some media consumers to only skim the content without having the time to verify its accuracy and authenticity (Aspach, 2017). This simplification of news processing, in turn, might decrease news consumers’ capability to identify fake news and simply trust the selective media sources that they perceive to be credible (Lee, Lindsey, & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, studies on social media users’ sharing behaviors found that those who perceived a higher level of information overload were also more likely to share fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic on social media (Bermes, 2021). But despite growing evidence that information overload has become a significant problem for news consumers (Bawden & Robinson, 2020; Gottfried & Barthel, 2018; Schmitt, Debbelt, & Schneider, 2018), only a few studies have analyzed this phenomenon, and none have linked them to perceptions of fake news.

To close these research gaps, this study uses data from a national online survey conducted among 1111 Chinese citizens in late 2018. The study first explores how often Chinese citizens encounter fake news in their daily lives and how they think about the effects of such news on themselves and others. Next, the study analyzes how media and fake news exposure impact perceptions of information overload. This is followed by an analysis of how information overload is associated with perceptions of the influence of fake news on self and others. In a final step, the study investigates whether the perceived effects of fake news might be associated with more support for censoring and punishing those who willfully spread fake news.

**Literature review**

**Fake news in China**

The spread of fake news in China is closely linked to the growing consumption of news via online media. As of 2020, about 81% of all Chinese Internet users consumed online news (CNNIC, 2020). Given that more than 904 million Chinese now have access to the Internet, the potential reach of fake news stories is impressive.
Although Chinese scholars argue that fake news has become a significant issue in China (Annual Fake News Research Group, 2017), discussions of fake news in China’s media are limited. Most reports either cover the spread of fake news in Western nations (Wu, 2018) or on foreign social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Huan, 2019). However, in recent years, the Chinese government has launched several campaigns to regulate fake news in the Chinese news media (Yan, Zhao, & Zen, 2021), including the launch of fact-checking services that help media consumers identify fake news and misinformation (Zheng, 2017). The Chinese news media also lack extreme partisan news outlets, such as Fox News or Newsmax, which are responsible for spreading fake political news in the United States (Sardarizadeh, 2020). As a result, fake news in China is mainly limited to content found on popular social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat.

Even though studies on fake news in China are limited, most media scholars argue that the Internet and social media have become significant sources of fake news (Annual Fake News Research Group, 2015; Jia & Chen, 2009). In a survey of 602 Chinese adults, for example, Chen (2006) found that more than half (58%) of the respondents had encountered news with false facts and nearly half (48.9%) reported to have seen fake news regularly. Similarly, Fu’s (2012) survey of 162 respondents in central China found that fake news was cited by almost 4 in 10 respondents (39%) as “the most important factor undermining the image of Chinese journalists” (p. 21). However, these studies were mainly conducted before the boom of social media in China. Considering that China has a long tradition of monitoring and regulating the traditional media but is less effective in controlling the online media (Zhao, 2008), Chinese media users might be more likely to encounter fake news via the less-controlled social media. This underscores the need to update analyses on fake news and social media use in China today.

Although studies found that social media facilitate the diffusion of fake news in Western societies (Chauhan, Connelly, Howe, Soderberg, & Crisostomo, 2021), such effects might be undermined in China because of online fact-checking platforms and the Chinese government’s efforts to curb fake news (Yan et al., 2021; Zheng, 2017). Consequently, it is important to investigate whether Chinese citizens are concerned about fake news in their daily media consumption or, more generally, as a threat to Chinese society.

The third-person effect

The third-person effect hypothesis, proposed by Davison (1983), describes individuals’ tendency to perceive persuasive communication via the mass media as having a more significant effect on others than on themselves. Following Davison’s groundbreaking study, media scholars have discovered this self-other discrepancy in perceived media effects of news (Price, Huang, & Tewksbury, 1997), advertising (Lim, 2017), political campaigns (Chang, Wei, & Lo, 2014; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011, Wei, Lo, & Zhu, 2019), TV violence (Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996), pornography (Gunther, 1995), messages on online or social media (Chen & Ng, 2016; Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014), misinformation (Jang & Kim, 2018; Koo et al., 2021), and health communication (Gunther & Storey, 2003; Liu & Lo, 2014; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2008).

Based on a meta-analysis of 135 third-person effect studies published between 1983 and 2005, Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) described two conditions that support third-person perceptions. First, the third-person effect is more substantial when people encounter media content with undesirable social influence. This is because people often feel smarter, more knowledgeable, or less vulnerable than others, and thus less susceptible to undesirable media influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Second, the third-person effect is stronger when people believe others are vulnerable to certain types of media content. For example, seeing others as being susceptible to media influences provides an
opportunity for individuals to act on their “paternalistic” tendency of protecting the weak (McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001). Thus, third-person perceptions are stronger when the “others” are social groups particularly vulnerable to media influence, such as children or people with lower levels of education (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). Scholars also suggest that the magnitude of the third-person effect is influenced by social distance (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988), which means that third-person perceptions are stronger when there is a larger social distance between the perceived “self” and the “other” (Eveland, Jr, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Lim, 2017).

Although the third-person effect has been discussed among Chinese academics for more than a decade, empirical studies of the third-person effect in China are rare. Most studies are either introductions of the theory (Wang, 2018; Yu & Yue, 2009) or meta-analysis of third-person effect studies in English-language journals (Wu, 2017; Yu & Zhang, 2008). In one of the first empirical studies of the third-person effect in China, Yu (2007) conducted two surveys and one experiment among college students and Shanghai residents. His findings support third-person perceptions of violent video and television content among respondents in all three studies.

Focusing on the perceived effects of online media, Lan (2010) asked 200 Chinese college students to predict how violent messages on the Internet might affect themselves, other college students, middle or high school students, and elementary school students. While the study found third-person perceptions for all “others,” the self-other gap increased for others who were thought of as younger than the respondents themselves. The findings also showed that respondents with stronger third-person effects were more likely to support tighter controls of online information.

Although these studies confirm that third-person perceptions exist in the Chinese media environment, they did not address whether exposure to fake news might lead to third-person perceptions among Chinese audiences. We hope to bridge this gap by exploring possible connections between exposure to fake news on media, especially social media, and third-person perceptions of the influence of fake news. Based on Sun et al.’s (2008) meta-analysis, which suggests that third-person perceptions are more pronounced when people encounter undesirable media messages (i.e., fake news) or see others as vulnerable to media influence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Respondents will perceive the general others as more vulnerable to fake news than they themselves are.

### News exposure and information overload

The proliferation of digital, social, and mobile media offers news consumers numerous information outlets, varying significantly in credibility and quality (van Aelst et al., 2017). However, such an abundance of information often surpasses a person’s attention limit, leading to news fatigue and news analysis paralysis, making it difficult for individuals to evaluate the trustworthiness of the information they encounter on the Internet and thus avoiding misinformation (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Flammini, & Menczer, 2017; Song, Jung, & Kim, 2017).

Information overload is defined as a situation in which individuals feel overwhelmed and have difficulties processing all information they receive, which leads to ineffective information processing (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1975). This concept assumes that individuals have a limited capacity for processing information (Thorson, Reeves, & Schleuder, 1985). Thus, information overload occurs when the amount of incoming information goes beyond a person’s information-processing capacity (Eppler & Mengis, 2004).

It is easy to see how today’s news environment might promote feelings of information overload due to an ever-faster news cycle and the omnipresence of news in our daily lives (Dhir, Chen, &
Chen, 2017). According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, for example, 7 in 10 Americans said they felt overwhelmed by the news they get. Interestingly, feeling overwhelmed was more common among those who followed the news less closely and had less favorable attitudes toward the news media overall (Gottfried & Barthel, 2018). Similar survey studies found that people who expressed less interest in the news (Holton & Chyi, 2012) or reported lower levels of news enjoyment (York, 2013) were more likely to report information overload. Although these studies suggest that information overload might reduce people’s interests in news and thus could prompt them to consume less news, we argue here that exposure to news in a 24/7 media environment—and especially through social media—will generally increase people’s perception that they are overwhelmed by a constant flow of news and information. Consequently, news exposure should be positively associated with information overload. Therefore, we propose that:

\[ H2. \text{Respondents with more exposure to news will exhibit higher levels of information overload than those with less exposure to such news.} \]

While the sheer amount of news and information might lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, the growing presence of fake news on social media (Martens, Aguiar, Gomez-Herrera, & Mueller-Langer, 2018) also might cause audiences to feel overwhelmed by constantly having to verify the news they encounter. Once the constant flood of news and information exceeds the users’ capacity to process new information, some users might begin to skim content without verifying its accuracy and authenticity on social media (Anspach, 2017). In addition, audiences exposed to large amounts of fake news might feel overwhelmed by the news they cannot verify and thus perceive increased levels of information overload. Consequently, greater exposure to fake news should lead to higher levels of information overload.

\[ H3. \text{Respondents with more exposure to fake news will exhibit higher levels of information overload than those with less exposure to such fake news.} \]

**Information overload and the third-person effect**

Studies of the third-person effect found that media credibility is associated with the third-person effect. This connection between perceived media credibility and the third-person effect is due to the fact that people often believe that “others” are more influenced by non-credible sources, such as tabloids or social media (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Gunther, 1991). Furthermore, studies have found that the perception of information overload is associated with more negative perceptions of the news media (Gottfried & Barthel, 2018). As discussed above, people exposed to more fake news might perceive higher levels of information overload because they feel exhausted by the constant need to identify and verify fake news. Therefore, people who feel overwhelmed by the news might be more aware of the impact of fake news and thus feel unable to handle such misinformation. Through third-person effects, these people might believe fake news to have even more negative influences on others than themselves. This suggests that the perceived level of information overload could mediate between the exposure to news media or fake news and the third-person effect of fake news. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis about the relationship between information overload and third-person perceptions of fake news:

\[ H4. \text{Respondents with higher levels of information overload will exhibit a stronger third-person effect related to fake news.} \]
Behavioral consequences of the third-person effect

Davison (1983) speculated that “exaggerated expectations about the effects of dissident communications” could lead to censorship of media (p. 14). Many later studies confirm that the third-person effect casts a perceptual influence on media consumers and triggers a behavioral intention for media monitoring, censorship, and regulation. Researchers have found evidence of growing support for media censorship activated by third-person perceptions of sensitive media content, such as pornography (Gunther, 1995; Lo & Wei, 2002), violence on television (Rojas et al., 1996), and rap lyrics (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997).

However, studies that have analyzed the influence of the third-person effect on support for news regulation in the United States suggest this might not be the case. For example, Salwen and Driscoll (1997) found that although Americans perceived news media coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial had a more significant impact on other people than on themselves, such third-person perceptions did not lead to stronger support for restrictions on press coverage of the trial. More recently, studies of the third-person effect of fake news even revealed that Americans with stronger third-person perceptions became less likely to support the regulation of media (Jang & Kim, 2018; Yang & Horning, 2018). According to Yang and Horning (2018), the negative relationship between the third-person effect and the support for censorship in the context of news might be because Americans are “deeply subscribed to the idea of [a] free press and thereby are very cautious of involving any government interventions” regarding fake news (p. 17).

Because of these conflicting findings regarding the relationship between the third-person effect and support for media regulation, it seems important to test the behavioral consequences of the third-person effect in different cultural contexts. This is especially important for a study of Chinese respondents, as the media environment in China is much more heavily regulated and censored compared to the one found in the United States (Reporters without Borders, 2021). We therefore propose the following research question:

**RQ:** What is the relationship between third-person perceptions and respondents’ support for the regulation of fake news?

Methods

The study is based on a national online survey conducted from August 2 to 6, 2018 with a national sample of 1111 Chinese adults from China’s 22 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four municipalities. Respondents were recruited by Impression Boguan Network Technology (Beijing), a professional survey organization that offers national, 100% research-only, online panels managed by Sina Data Solution. The respondents were rewarded with Alipay’s virtual voucher, Ji Fen Bao, for participation. The cooperation rate was 40.5%.

The sample includes 559 women (50.3%) and 552 men (49.7%), and the median age is between 40 to 49 years. Most respondents had either some college (23.8%) or a complete college education (39.2%) with a 6000 to 8000 Chinese Yuan median monthly income. While the sample compares favorably to representative surveys of Chinese Internet users conducted during the same period by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2019), respondents in this study tended to be more female, slightly younger, better educated, and had higher incomes.

The questionnaire focused mainly on the perceived effects of fake news on self and others, perceived information overload, and support for stricter controls of fake news. Respondents were also asked about their consumption of news on traditional and social media and their exposure to fake news.
**Dependent Variables**

*Third-person effect:* The third-person effect was measured by subtracting the perceived influence of fake news on self from the perceived effect on others. Respondents were first asked how much they thought fake news stories might influence their understanding of facts and events and then how much they thought fake news stories might affect other people’s understanding of facts and events (1 = not at all; 4 = a great deal). To compute the third-person effect, scores for perceptions of influence on others were deducted from scores for perceptions of influence on self.

*Support for regulation and punishment:* To get a better understanding of whether the third-person effect of fake news might influence behavioral intentions, respondents were asked how much they agreed with the following statements: (1) fake news should be controlled by media companies, (2) media organizations that publish fake news purposefully should be punished, and (3) netizens who spread fake news purposefully should be punished (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The three measures were then combined in a *regulation support* index ($M = 4.2$, $SD = .62$, $\alpha = .59$).

**Independent Variables**

*News media exposure:* Exposure to mainstream and social news media was assessed by asking respondents about how much time they spent on an average weekday reading a printed newspaper, watching TV news, reading online news either on their computer or the mobile phone, or reading news on social networking sites (1 = none; 6 = more than 90 minutes).

*Fake news exposure:* In this study, we define “fake news” as “news stories that are completely made up.” To measure encounters with and perceptions of fake news, respondents were asked how often they came across news stories that they thought were fake in the past 6 months and how often they had shared a news story on social media that later they found to be fake (1 = never; 4 = often). They were also asked how many of the news stories on social media or online media they believed to be entirely made up (1 = none of them; 5 = all of them). Finally, the perceived threat of fake news was measured by asking respondents how much of a threat they thought fake news might be to Chinese society (1 = not at all; 4 = a great deal).

*Information overload:* Based partly on measures developed by Lee et al. (2017), respondents were asked to state their agreement with five measures of information overload. These statements asked, for example, whether they could not keep up with all the news every day or lack time to check the accuracy of news stories. Respondents’ agreement scores for each of the statement were then combined in an index that represents perceived *information overload* ($M = 3.4$, $SD = .79$, $\alpha = .79$).

*Demographics:* The survey included a set of standard demographic control variables that assessed respondents’ gender, age, education, place of residence (rural vs. urban), and income.

**Findings**

The survey results suggest that fake news has become a significant concern among Chinese citizens. Nearly half (46.2%) of the respondents reported frequently coming across fake news stories in the past 6 months. More than one-third also said that they had “often” (5.7%) or “sometimes” (30.9%) shared news stories on social media that they later found to be fake.

When asked about how many of the news stories in online news media they thought were fake, more than one-third (37.2%) of the respondents said that at least “some” of the news stories they encountered in the past 6 months were completely made up and another 10% said “most” of them were fake. News on social media was perceived to be even more saturated by fake news: nearly half
(44%) of the respondents believed that at least “some” of the stories on social media were fake, and 12% thought that “most” of the news on social media was made up. Moreover, about 7 in 10 respondents believed that fake news posed “a great deal” (27.7%) or “a fair amount” (44.4%) of a threat to Chinese society. The widespread of fake news in China also drives strong public support for restrictions of fake news. In fact, most respondents agreed that fake news should be controlled by the media (81.3%) and that media organizations (88%) and individuals (90.9%) should be punished for distributing fake news purposefully.

The findings also suggest that most Chinese feel overwhelmed by the amount of news and information they receive every day. More than half of the respondents said that they sometimes could not keep up with the news every day (60.8%), have trouble choosing what news stories are important and which are not (54.6%), or do not have enough time to check the accuracy of the news stories they need to keep up with (57.6%). Many respondents also felt that they sometimes find it difficult to concentrate because of all the news they need to digest every day (47%).

To test the third-person effect of fake news, we asked respondents how they perceive the influence of fake news on themselves and others. Surprisingly, about 6 in 10 (62.8%) respondents thought that fake news has “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of influence on themselves, while only one-third (33.3%) believed that fake news affects others the same way. Paired-sample T-tests confirmed that respondents perceived a greater influence of fake news on themselves ($M = 2.73, SD = 0.78$) than on others ($M = 2.14, SD = 0.93, t(1022) = 15.57, p < .001$), which suggests a reversed third-person effect (also called “first-person effect”). Consequently, Hypothesis 1, which proposed that most respondents will believe that others are more vulnerable to fake news than they themselves are, is not supported.

Because our findings indicate a first-person effect of fake news for most respondents, we decided to examine more closely how exposure to real and fake news might affect perceptions of fake news on self and others. To do so, we developed two hierarchical regression models that separately predict perceptions of the fake news on self and others. Both regressions are based on four blocks of measures, including (1) demographics, (2) news media exposure (newspapers, TV news, Internet news, and social media news), (3) exposure to and perception of fake news, and (4) information overload.

As Table 1 indicates, exposure to news is not significantly associated with how respondents perceive the impact of fake news on themselves. However, those exposed to more fake news ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$) and those who perceive a higher level of information overload ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$) are less likely to believe that fake news is affecting them. At the same time, those who believe that fake news is a threat to society are more likely to think that fake news can negatively affect themselves ($\beta = .08, p < .01$).

In contrast to the perceived effects of fake news on self, exposure to news media and fake news is associated with stronger perceived effects of fake news on others. Respondents who consume more news from newspapers ($\beta = .26, p < .001$) or social media ($\beta = .13, p < .001$) and more frequently encounter or share fake news ($\beta = .13, p < .001$ and $\beta = .26, p < .001$, respectively) are more likely to believe that fake news has a greater impact on others rather than on themselves. However, those who believe that fake news is a threat to society are less likely to think that fake news can negatively affect others ($\beta = -.13, p < .001$).

Overall, these findings indicate that the third-person effect is mainly driven by how respondents feel about the impact of fake news on others rather than on themselves. Thus, although those who believe that fake news is a threat to society felt more affected by fake news, exposure to fake news primarily increased concerns about the negative effects of fake news on other people.
To explore how exposure to real and fake news, information overload, and third-person perceptions are associated with support for more fake news restrictions, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) calculated with Mplus 8.4. SEM analysis is an extension of regression analysis that entails a joint analysis of associations between key variables in effects models (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). The tested SEM model includes several observed (media exposure, fake news exposure, and the third-person effect) and latent variables (information overload and support for regulation of fake news). In addition, gender, age, education, urban residence, and income were used as covariates. To verify the two scales represented the intended constructs, the measurement model was fitted to the data using confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 2).

The goodness-of-fit indices for the structural model were good ($\chi^2$/df = 2.90, RMSEA = .041, CFI = .945, TLI = .924, SRMR = .037). As shown in Figure 1, both general news exposure ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) and fake news exposure ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$) are positively associated with respondents’ perceived level of information overload. Thus, Hypothesis 2 and 3, which predicted that respondents with more exposure to news in general and fake news specifically will perceive higher levels of information overload, are both supported.

The analysis also indicates that general news exposure ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) and fake news exposure ($\beta = .09$, $p < .01$) predict stronger perceptions of third-person effects. Thus, respondents with more exposure to regular and fake news tend to think that others are more affected by fake news than they

| Table 1. Predictors of perceived influence of fake news on self and others. |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                     | Influence on self  | Influence on others|
| Individual background |                    |                    |
| Female              | .02                | −.01               |
| Age                 | −.01               | −.05               |
| Education           | .04                | .07*               |
| Urban (vs. more rural) | .07               | −.07               |
| Income              | .22***             | .08*               |
| Incremental $R^2$ (%) | 7.8***             | 1.5**              |
| News media exposure |                    |                    |
| Newspapers          | .01                | .26***             |
| TV news             | .02                | .06                |
| Internet news       | .03                | −.04               |
| Social media news   | .01                | .13***             |
| Incremental $R^2$ (%) | .10                | 9.2***             |
| Fake news exposure and perception |        |                    |
| Frequency of encountering fake news | −.07* | .13***             |
| Frequency of sharing fake news      | .01    | .26***             |
| Threat of fake news to society      | .08**  | −.13***            |
| Incremental $R^2$ (%)       | 1.0**  | 11.4***            |
| Information overload |                    |                    |
| Information overload      | −.22*** | .24***             |
| Incremental $R^2$ (%)       | 4.5*** | 5.2***             |
| Total $R^2$ (%)           | 13.4*** | 26.5***            |
| Total $N$                | 1110              | 1110               |

Note. Cell entries represent standardized regression coefficients.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
themselves. As predicted, higher levels of information overload ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) are strongly associated with stronger perceptions of third-person effects, which indicates that feeling overwhelmed by a flood of real and fake information can contribute to the perceptions that fake news primarily affects other people. Thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

The final step in the analysis explores whether stronger perceptions of third-person effects of fake news are associated with more support for the regulation of fake news. As Figure 1 shows, respondents who believe that others are more affected by fake news than they themselves are less supportive of restrictions on fake news ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$). Moreover, while higher levels of exposure to fake news ($\beta = .09$, $p < .05$) are associated with more support for the regulation of fake news—as would be expected—higher levels of exposure to general news ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) are associated with significantly less support for such regulation.

Overall, these findings indicate that the third-person effect serves as a mediator between information overload and the support for regulation in our proposed model—albeit in a somewhat unexpected way. Respondents with higher levels of information overload exhibited stronger perceptions of third-person effects related to fake news, which, in turn, prompted them to be less supportive of fake news regulations. Thus, information overload might contribute to the perception that others are more affected by fake news in China. However, such perceptions do not necessarily translate into a desire for more control of fake news.

**Discussion**

This study analyzed how exposure to real and fake news and perceptions of information overload might influence people’s perceptions of third-person effects of fake news. We also tested whether these third-person perceptions influence people’s willingness to regulate and punish those who

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**Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).**

| Scales                          | Items                                                                 | Factor loading | p-value | Composite reliability$^a$ |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------------------------|
| Information overload           | I sometimes feel that I do not have enough time to check the accuracy of news stories that I need to keep up with every day | IO1  .604      | .023    | .81                       |
|                                | I sometimes cannot keep up with all the news every day                | IO2  .719      | .020    |                           |
|                                | It is sometimes hard for me to concentrate because of all the news I have to process | IO3  .644      | .022    |                           |
|                                | There is so much news available that I sometimes have trouble choosing what is important and what is not | IO4  .712      | .020    |                           |
|                                | I sometimes feel numb and incapable of action because of all the news every day | IO5  .689      | .024    |                           |
| Support for Regulation of Fake news | Fake news should be controlled by media companies                     | SR1  .666      | .036    | .70                       |
|                                | Media that publish fake news purposefully should be punished          | SR2  .620      | .034    |                           |
|                                | Netizens who spread fake news purposefully should be punished         | SR3  .650      | .034    |                           |

$^a$Composite reliability = (Σ std. Loadings$^2$/Σ std. Loading$^2$ + Σ measurement error. Model fit of the measurement model: $\chi^2$/df = 4.26, RMSEA = .054; CFI = .945, TLI = .918, SRMR = .035.
spread fake news in China. The findings confirm that exposure to real and fake news boosts perceptions of information overload, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that people think others are more affected by fake news than they are (i.e., the third-person effect). However, this study also showed that stronger third-person perceptions are associated with less willingness to regulate fake news—a finding that might be unique to China’s social and political culture.

As predicted, this study found that respondents who encountered and shared fake news more frequently exhibited higher levels of information overload. More than half of the respondents also said that they sometimes do not have time to check the accuracy of news stories. Because almost half of the respondents said they had encountered and shared fake news on social media or the Internet, such findings only confirm the significant reach of fake news in China. Thus, it is not surprising that more than 7 in 10 respondents regarded fake news as a serious threat to Chinese society.

Another important finding of this study is that perceptions of information overload are associated with stronger third-person perceptions of fake news. In other words, as information overload increases, people are more likely to believe that others are more affected by fake news than they are. As we have argued earlier, those who feel overwhelmed by the constant flood of real and fake news might have simply given up trying to distinguish fake from real news or even started avoiding news altogether. Consequently, they might be more likely to believe that fake news will negatively affect others in society—while they remain insulated from such harmful effects themselves because of their remaining vigilance or their increasingly limited exposure to fake news.

It is important to note that, unlike some third-person effects studies conducted in the United States (Jang & Kim, 2018; Yang & Horning, 2018), the majority (62.8%) of respondents in our study thought that they were more affected by fake news than other people. This so-called first-person effect of fake news suggests that—at least in China’s social and cultural context—most people are more concerned about the potential influence of fake news on themselves than on others. Such an unusual finding might be explained by the fact that the Chinese depend heavily on social media for their daily information, which, of course, is known to be the main source of fake news in China. Moreover, during times of crisis, Chinese citizens tend to turn to social media for news and information rather than the official news outlets (Guo, 2020; Hu, 2009; Ma, 2008). Consequently, Chinese citizens might perceive a personal rather than societal threat from fake news coming to them through their favorite social media platforms.

Finally, our findings suggest that third-person perceptions of fake news are associated with less support for stricter controls of fake news in China. This finding confirms the results of studies that have found weak or negative relationships between the third-person effect and support for

Figure 1. SEM Analysis of Proposed Effects Model. Note. The media exposure index consists of exposure to newspapers, TV news, online news, and social media news. The fake news exposure variable represents the frequency of exposure to fake news. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
censorship of fake news in Western contexts (Jang & Kim, 2018; Yang & Horning, 2018). Yang and Horning (2018) interpreted the negative relationship between the third-person effect and demands for more robust controls of fake news as a sign of people’s support of press freedom.

However, we should be cautious about how to interpret such a finding in China. As shown in Table 1, those who perceive greater threats of fake news to Chinese society are more likely to believe they themselves are negatively influenced by fake news and less likely to think of others as more vulnerable to the impact of fake news. In other words, Chinese who regard fake news as a threat to society are especially likely to believe in the harmful effects of fake news on themselves. Consequently, Chinese media audiences who perceive fake news to have a greater negative impact on others rather than on themselves (i.e., the third-person effect) might downplay the harm of fake news to society and reject stricter regulations of fake news as unnecessary—likely because such laws are often associated with censorship and the suppression of dissent in China (Creemers, 2017; Jiang, 2016).

Of course, this study is not without limitations. First, the data for this study come from an online survey that was conducted among respondents who were compensated for their participation. Although the key demographics of our sample compare favorably with those of a nationally representative sample of Chinese Internet users created by CNNIC in December 2018, they might deviate slightly from China’s overall population. Consequently, we need to be cautious when generalizing the findings of this study to the broader population.

Second, the survey questionnaire employed a relatively narrow definition of fake news as “news stories that are entirely made up.” Fake news is often considered a much broader concept that includes, for example, news satire and parody (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Future studies should explore how media audiences define and understand fake news and whether they see any differences in the perceived harmful effects of various types of fake news. The context and the perceived targets of fake news are also likely to influence how people evaluate the impact of fake news. News stories that have been fabricated to influence an election, for example, will be perceived differently than those invented to spoof a celebrity.

Third, the factors considered to affect third-person perceptions of fake news in this study focus on media use and information overload and are therefore primarily concerned with media technology and the information environment. Yet, any discussion of perceived media effects in China would benefit from including broader cultural and political factors. For example, some third-person effect studies conducted in China and South Korea have included measures of collectivism that might mitigate the impact of third-person perceptions (Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Yu, 2007). To better understand why Chinese who perceive fake news to have a greater influence on others than themselves are less likely to support tighter controls of fake news, future studies should measure Chinese citizens’ attitudes toward government regulations and censorship of news and their trust in official media outlets. More broadly, future studies of the perception of fake news should consider the way such news stories are understood and evaluated in different political and cultural contexts.

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