The Third-Person Effect and Islamic Religiosity: Perceptions of Moral and Non-Moral Issues on Social Networking Sites among IIUM Students

Ala Bawazir [ID] [1] , *Somia Abdul Same'e* [ID] [2,3] & *Hasan M. Mansoor* [ID] [4]

[1]Department of Arabic for International Communication, Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[2]School of Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia
[3]College of Communication, Sana'a University, Sana'a, Yemen
[4]Communication and Digital Media at College of Humanities and Social Sciences, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
✉ somayahabsi@gmail.com

Abstract

Third-Person Effect theory (TPE) postulates that audiences deny the media's direct impact on themselves but perceive the same media as having a larger impact on others. This study examines TPE and its relationship with Islamic religiosity in shaping perceptions of moral and non-moral issues on social networking sites (SNS) among students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Another objective of this study is to determine how students perceive the effect of moral and non-moral issues in SNS on themselves compared to others. This study employed a quantitative design, with 357 students from the IIUM serving as respondents. The findings indicate that participants perceive moral issues as affecting others more than themselves, which is consistent with TPE. However, non-moral issues are perceived as influencing both the self and others. The results also indicate that Islamic religiosity positively affects the perceived impact of moral issues on others and non-moral issues on oneself in SNS. The data were analyzed using SPSS, with paired t-tests comparing self versus others' perceptions of moral and non-moral issues on SNS. The findings confirm that students perceive moral issues as having a greater impact on others than on themselves, aligning

with TPE. Conversely, non-moral issues are perceived as influencing both the self and others, demonstrating SPE. The study also reveals that Islamic religiosity positively influences the perceived effect of moral issues on others and non-moral issues on oneself in SNS.

Keywords: *Moral Issues; Non-Moral Issues; Religiosity Effect; Social Networking Sites; Third-Person Effect*

INTRODUCTION

Modern life is encompassed by media activities, advertisements, TV programs, newspapers, and the Internet, which contain several types of messages (e.g., political, social, or health messages) that have a great influence. However, when asked if we are influenced by these messages, the possibility is to answer "No," but when the same question was asked whether others are influenced, the reply quite likely would be "Yes, they are influenced." This perceived effect is called the "Third-Person Effect" (TPE), which was initially described by Davison (1983).

In addition, massive messages on different issues have been produced with the remarkable growth of social networking sites. Moral issues (e.g., crime and sexuality) and non-moral issues (e.g., health and environment) are controversial in different societies. These issues are discussed in different media types, which influence people's perceptions and behaviors towards such issues. Communication scholars study people's perceptions of media messages using several theories to interpret people's attitudes and behaviors. The Third Person Effect (TPE), postulated by Davison (1983), is one such theory. It hypothesizes that people perceive higher media effects on others than on themselves, specifically when the media content is considered a negative message, such as pornography and violence. In contrast, when content is considered positive, people might perceive themselves as being more affected than others. Various factors, such

as education, media use, and age, affect the magnitude of TPE to see the difference in self-others perception.

The TPE theory was discovered in the context of traditional mass media. Davison (1983) found that college students held different perceptions of the media's impact on themselves and others. People tend to overestimate the influence of mass communication on the attitudes and behavior of others. Meanwhile, they underestimated the influence of media messages on their attitudes and behaviors.

In relation to this, studies of Muslim students' perceptions of the effects of moral and non-moral issues on the self and others play a critical role in understanding their attitudes and psychological conditions. According to the TPE theory, when people perceive messages as negative or undesirable (e.g., moral issues), they overestimate the effect of such messages on others and underestimate the effect on the self. This study measures Islamic religiosity's influence on the magnitude of TPE on moral and non-moral issues on SNS. It will provide a better understanding of the attitude of Islamic society towards controversial issues in the media. This study is significant in the field of communication and religion.

This study aims to determine how International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) students perceive the effect of moral and non-moral issues in social networking sites (SNS) on self, compared to others. The study also aimed to determine whether the level of religiosity influences the difference in perceptions of moral issues between oneself and others. The researchers were able to achieve the following adjectives: (1) to determine the TPE perceptions of moral and non-moral issues on SNS; (2) to assess the relationship between Islamic religiosity and TPE perceptions of moral issues on SNS; and (3) to assess the relationship between Islamic religiosity and TPE perceptions of non-moral issues on SNS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The TPE theory holds that people have beliefs about media influence, whereby they think that other individuals are more influenced than they are. It is especially useful to recall in works that consider the role of misinformation and disinformation analysis because it reveals one of the important psychological biases when comparing the self-susceptibility and susceptibility of other people. Additionally, TPE research on traditional mass media has primarily concentrated on negative media content, such as pornography, violence, and video games. In the context of TPE in new media, scholars have found that people perceive the more negative influence of Internet pornography on others than on themselves (Lo et al., 2010; Lo & Wei, 2002).

A study conducted by Talwar et al. (2020) on fake news sharing behavior on social media examined underlying motivations using a mixed-method approach. The study identified six behaviors associated with sharing fake news based on qualitative data from 58 open-ended essays. A research model was proposed involving the honeycomb framework and third-person effect hypothesis, with age and gender as control variables. To validate the model's findings, cross-sectional surveys were conducted with 471 and 374 social media users. Key insights include the positive impact of sharing news immediately to raise awareness, driven by time constraints and religiosity. Surprisingly, verifying the news before sharing did not significantly reduce fake news sharing, which was also attributed to time constraints and religiosity. However, active corrective actions reduce the likelihood of sharing fake news owing to time constraints.

Similarly, Yang & Tian (2021) investigated social media users' susceptibility to fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic. They integrated third-person perception theory (TPP) with digital disinformation and surveyed 871 respondents. The study found that

social media engagement during COVID-19, directly and indirectly, increased third-person perception, suggesting that social media not only spreads false information but also fosters the belief that users are immune to fake news.

Similarly, Liu & Huang (2020) explored how exposure to COVID-19 digital fake news affects individuals' perceptions of susceptibility. Surveying 511 Chinese respondents, the study revealed that individuals often considered themselves less vulnerable to disinformation than others, particularly when disinformation was received through mobile social networking apps. Actively, fact-checking was associated with a lower perceived susceptibility to disinformation. Additionally, emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, and worry about COVID-19 were linked to both self-perception of disinformation effects and the perceived gap between the self and others' susceptibility. This study underscores the importance of promoting fact-checking behaviors in digital media to mitigate the emotional impact of disinformation during public health crises.

Another study investigated the third-person effect in relation to doxing, an Internet-related practice involving the public release of private or personal information about an individual without their consent (Chia et al., 2023). The researchers conducted a phone survey with 486 adult citizens in Taiwan, focusing on their exposure to doxing-related content on social media and news media. The findings revealed that respondents generally believed that others were more susceptible to media influence regarding doxing than were themselves. This perception gap influenced both support for doxing regulation and intention to engage in doxing. Moreover, the belief that others were more influenced by media motivated individuals to take steps to protect their privacy. The study provides valuable insights into public opinion about doxing and the behavioral consequences of perceived media influence (Chia et al., 2023).

Moreover, previous studies reported that individuals tend to reject the influence of undesirable messages. According to optimistic bias theory, this rejection is more evident when considering a third person. TPE research typically concentrates on controversial media messages that are mostly considered negative (Johansson, 2002, 2005). As moral issues are deemed negative, various studies have examined TPE regarding these issues in the media (Golan, 2002; Lo et al., 2010; Lo & Wei, 2002). Additionally, TPE theory has also been applied to non-moral issues on SNS (Chung, 2019; Golan, 2002; Stavrositu & Kim, 2014).

In this context, religious people are not as attracted to or affected by moral and non-moral issues, or they perceive themselves in this way (Golan, 2002) because they do not have a strong relationship with the media and often hold a negative perception of it. Golan (2002) conducted the first study measuring the effect of religiosity on TPE concerning moral and non-moral issues in TV programs but measured the religiosity of different religions as a single group. Therefore, this study specifically measured religiosity in Islam and its effect on TPE on moral issues as negative messages and non-moral issues as positive messages. It is likely that increasing Islamic religiosity will increase the perceived effect of moral issues on others and non-moral issues. The impact of Islamic religiosity on TPE concerning such issues may be more evident than that of other religions. Islamic religious individuals have a rigorous attitude towards moral issues and a more tolerant attitude towards non-moral issues in the media. Thus, it is highly likely that they will think that moral issues influence others more, whereas they are more influenced by non-moral issues.

According to Golan (2002), pornography is a moral issue regarding social and sexual behaviors, including crime, abortion, sexuality, pornography, and family values. Mintz (2013) believes that SNS causes a moral crisis among the younger generations. One of the

major disadvantages of SNS and its potential threat is the prevalence of obscenity, such as pornography and sexual acts, which can lead to violence, particularly against women (Donnerstein, 2013; Nicklin et al., 2020; Weinstein, 2023; Wright, 2013). Therefore, SNS content related to moral issues is perceived as having a negative impact on society's morality. Thus, it is highly likely that people underestimate the effect of moral issues on SNS on themselves while overestimating the effect on others. This prediction leads to the following first hypothesis:

> H1: Moral issues in SNS have a greater perceived effect on others than on the self.

While TPE theory is defined as people perceiving negative messages as having a greater influence on others than on themselves, the First-Person Effect (FPE), on the other hand, indicates how positive messages are perceived to have more influence on oneself compared to its influence to others. Positive media messages, such as those in public service announcements (PSAs) about environmental awareness or banning drunk driving, are considered socially desirable. Hence, people tend to perceive these positive contents as having the same or a higher impact on themselves than on others (Gunther & Thorson, 1992). Cho & Boster (2008) discovered that adolescents in rural Midwest schools perceived anti-drug advertisements to have a greater influence on themselves than on others. Thus, positive or desirable messages were perceived to have more influence on oneself than on others.

Moreover, non-moral issues are identified as political issues, including foreign affairs, healthcare, the environment, and race relations, according to Golan's (2002) classification. Several studies have examined TPE for non-moral issues on SNS (Chung, 2019; Stavrositu & Kim, 2014). Stavrositu & Kim (2014) found that a health message posted on social media was perceived to have a greater

influence on others than on oneself. Participants viewed the message as undesirable because it threatened their health. Despite the benefits of such messages, people are reluctant to acknowledge personal vulnerability regarding media impact (Gunther & Thorson, 1992).

By contrast, Chung (2019) found that respondents reported a larger influence on themselves than on others regarding environmental and health risks under the influence of high social media metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, reflecting FPE. The contradiction in these results suggests a need to reinvestigate non-moral issues on SNS through TPE theory. Thus, this study assumes that non-moral issues on SNS are perceived as positive messages and that people are likely to overestimate the effect of these non-moral issues on themselves and underestimate their effect on others, reflecting FPE or reverse TPE. This assumption leads to the second hypothesis.

> H2: Non-moral issues in SNS have a greater perceived effect on others than on the self among IIUM students.

One of the purposes of this study was to assess the impact of Islamic religiosity on perceptions of SNS effects on university students (themselves) and others. There is a relative lack of literature related to religion and media (Hoover & Lundby, 1997), specifically on the Third-Person Effect (TPE) and religiosity. Therefore, this study aims to understand the role of Islamic religiosity in people's perceptions of the impact of SNS on themselves and others.

McDaniel & Burnett (1990) defined religiosity as a belief in God's presence and obedience to the rules defined by God. Religiosity is also defined as a system of symbols that creates different motivations, resulting in various levels of commitment and obligation (Baazeem et al., 2018; Begum, 2021; Nuriman & Ibrahim, 2020). Regarding Islamic religiosity, Krauss et al. (2005) present a concept called the Muslim Religiosity-Personality Inventory (MRPI), which includes two main

constructs. The first construct is the 'Islamic Worldview,' reflecting "the Islamic doctrine of God's divine unity/oneness." In other words, the 'Islamic Worldview' expresses that *aqidah* encompasses beliefs and practices according to the Quran and Sunnah, such as believing in God. The second construct is 'Religious Personality,' which includes special *ibadat* (such as a direct relationship with Allah, such as prayer) and general *ibadah* (such as relationships with self and others, such as respecting parents). This study adopts Krauss et al.'s (2005) definition of Islamic religiosity because it provides a comprehensive, clear, and in-depth understanding of Islamic religiosity.

Furthermore, religion and religiosity influence the bounds of moral standards, judgments, attitudes, thoughts, and human behavior (Alam et al., 2022; Cohen & Hill, 2007). Religion shapes thoughts, norms, opinions, socialization, decision-making, beliefs, moral standards, and attitudes, both directly and indirectly (Aliza & Akbar, 2024; Choi, 2010; Fam et al., 2004; Radianti et al., 2023; Wilkes et al., 1986). Religiosity can reject negative attitudes and behavior (Abu Bakar et al., 2018; Juliansyahzen, 2023). In Islam, for example, engaging in or spreading adultery or evil, such as crime and violence, is forbidden (Anspach, 1992; Burton, 1993; Islamway. net, 2016; Mohd Noor, 2010; Nurozi et al., 2021; Triandis, 2013). Hence, the level of Islamic religiosity can be positively related to TPE on SNS. TPE hypothesizes that people are likely to perceive the greater influence of negative media messages on others than on themselves. Religious Muslims might reject the negative impact of SNS on themselves and perceive others as being more influenced. Golan (2002) found an association between religiosity and how people perceive the impact of moral issues on others on TV programs. Highly religious individuals may consider moral issues sensitive and undesirable for media discussion. Therefore, highly religious individuals perceive others as more influenced by moral issues in the media.

Golan ([2002](#)) examined the effect of religiosity on TPE as one group but did not specifically study the effect of Islamic religiosity on TPE. Additionally, he studied TPE in the context of TV programs, while this study tested the effect of Islamic religiosity on SNS. Based on the above, it is highly likely that highly religious Muslims will overestimate the effect on others if they consider such issues to be negative. This leads to the following third hypothesis:

> H3: There is a positive relationship between religiosity and the perceived effects of moral issues in SNS on others.

Golan ([2002](#)) also found that religiosity does not influence the perceived effect of non-moral issues on oneself and others. He suggested that this might be due to a stereotype error. Golan ([2002](#)) explains: "particularly in its Protestant form and among sectarian Christians, Christian faith is very much based on the concept of natural sin". Following the logic that "we are all sinners' and the need to be constantly watchful lest we fall out of grace, Christians of higher religiosity might assume that they are just as likely to be influenced by the media as those who are not religious". Muslims share a similar belief in the concept of "we are all sinners." However, if non-moral issues are considered positive messages by highly religious Muslims because the messages are beneficial, they are likely to overestimate the effect of such issues on themselves. This assumption leads to the fourth hypothesis.

> H4: There is a positive relationship between religiosity and the perceived effect of non-moral issues in SNS on self.

Previous research on the Third-Person Effect (TPE) has consistently shown that people often perceive others as being more affected by the media than themselves ([Perloff, 1996](#)). Researchers have proposed various mechanisms to explain or interpret the differences in perceptions of media effects on oneself and others. One such mechanism is self-esteem, which many researchers suggest plays

a role in TPE (Duck et al., 1995; Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Hoorens & Ruiter, 1996). Self-esteem refers to a positive evaluation of oneself (Gecas, 1982). Individuals with high self-esteem may exhibit biased comparisons.

Additionally, previous studies on religiosity and SNS have consistently indicated that religiosity is linked with levels of SNS consumption. Research has found that those who regularly read the Bible are less likely to use SNS (Miller et al., 2013). Another study found that highly religious people were less likely to participate in or browse SNS sites frequently (Smith & Snell, 2009). These findings reflect why people perceive media as distrustful and threatening social values and beliefs (Golan, 2002). Given the general distrust of the media and the need to enhance self-esteem, it is highly likely that as Muslims' religiosity increases, they overestimate SNS influences on others concerning moral issues. Conversely, regarding non-moral issues, increasing religiosity may lead Muslims to overestimate the influence of SNSs on themselves.

Based on the discussion above, no prior study has specifically examined the effects of moral and non-moral issues on SNS as two distinct categories to see how people differentiate between them according to TPE. Therefore, this study is the first to investigate TPE concerning moral issues within Muslim society. It aims to explore how Muslims regard moral issues—whether they find them acceptable or perceive them as threatening their values and interests.

This study focuses on the perceived influence of moral and non-moral issues on SNS on oneself and others. It also investigates the impact of Islamic religiosity on TPE concerning these issues on SNS. Examining the differences in perceptions and attitudes towards these issues and the effect of Islamic religiosity on TPE provides a deeper understanding of people's psychological and behavioral conditions regarding various issues on SNS.

Theoretical Framework

In the previous section, the literature review established the theoretical foundations of this study, which are presented in the conceptual frameworks depicted in Figure 1, 2, and 3.

Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework of the TPE on Moral Issues on SNS*
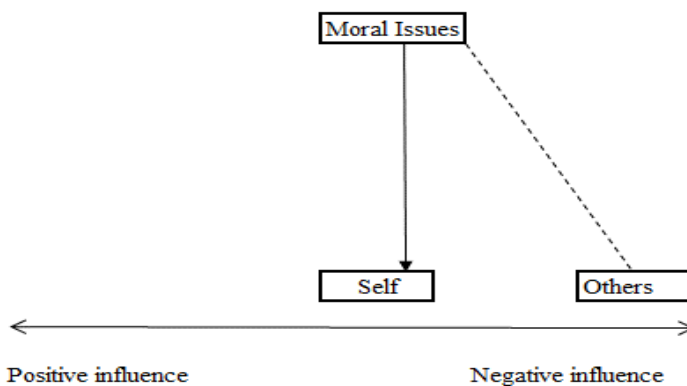
Source: Andsager & White (2007, p. 3)

Figure 1 presents a model depicting the impact of moral issue (negative) messages, specifically SNS, on individuals. Andsager & White (2007) elucidated the graph, wherein the solid line denotes an individual's self-assessment of the consequences of detrimental messages, spanning from positive to negative outcomes. The self is positioned at the middle of the continuum and experiences minimal influence of the message on itself. The third-person perspective of others is positioned at the extreme left of the continuum, signifying a recognition of the message's substantial influence on them. This suggests that negative words exert a negligible influence on the self but a more significant effect on others, corroborating the TPE theory premise.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of the FPE on Moral Issues on SNS
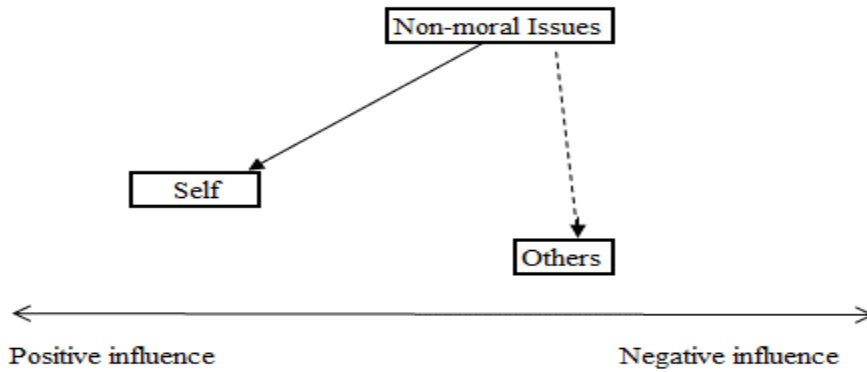
Source: Andsager & White (2007, p. 4)

Figure 2 presents a model of the first-person or reverse third-person effect, where individuals believe they are more influenced by a positive message (on non-moral issues) than they think others will be. The solid line from the "desirable" message to the self represents self-reported influence, while the dashed lines from the message to others represent perceived influence. The social distance between the self and others remains consistent with Figure 1, in which the self more readily acknowledges the influence of the message, typically in a positive way. Others may be seen as either slightly positively influenced, negatively influenced to a lesser extent than oneself, or not influenced at all.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework of the Correlation between Religiosity with Perceived Moral Issues on Others and Perceived Non-moral Issues on Self.
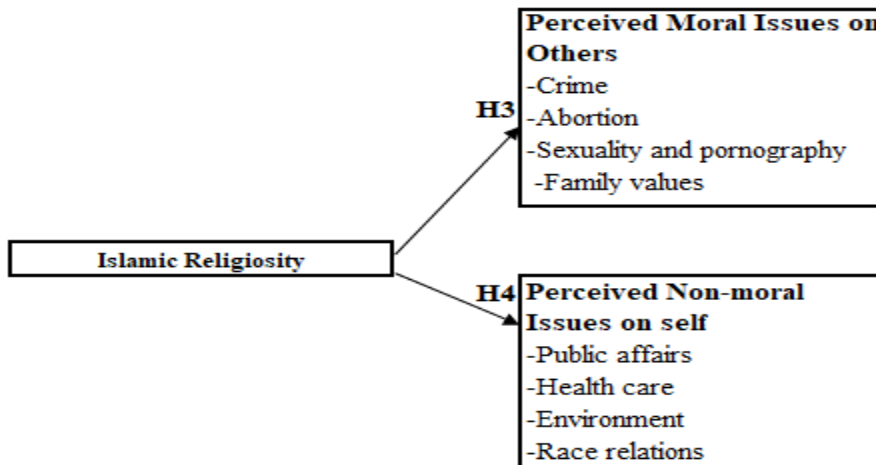

Figure 3 elucidates the theoretical structure and delineates the variables under examination. The study's independent variable is Islamic religiosity, which is linked to both perceived moral issues on SNS on others and non-moral issues on SNS on the self. The study's dependent variables were perceived moral issues on SNS on others and non-moral issues on SNS on the self.

METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative research design utilizing the survey method, which aligns with the objective of collecting measurable data to assess the relationships and patterns among variables. The rationale behind choosing a quantitative approach is its capacity to provide statistical evidence and generalizable findings, which are essential for understanding the extent and influence of Islamic religiosity on the Third-Person Effect among IIUM students on social networking sites (SNS).

A cross-sectional survey design was used, allowing for data collection at a single point in time to capture respondents' views and behaviors. This design is particularly effective for studies examining the prevalence and relationships between variables in large populations. This study sought to quantify the relationships between variables (e.g., SNS use, religiosity, and perceived effects), enabling statistical analysis and inferential conclusions.

This study is rooted in the positivist paradigm, which emphasizes objectivity, measurement, and hypothesis testing. By employing standardized instruments, such as structured questionnaires, the research ensured consistency and reliability in the data gathered. Surveys are ideal for collecting large-scale data from a specific population, making them suitable for this study's objective of examining student perceptions and behaviors.

The population included students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Gombak campus, with a total student population of 26,266. A total of 357 valid responses were obtained using simple random sampling. This sampling technique ensures that each student has an equal chance of being selected, reducing sampling bias and enhancing the representativeness of the findings. This technique minimized selection bias, ensuring that the sample represented a broader population of IIUM students.

The sample of this study was students from the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), where the majority of participants were Muslims from various countries worldwide. These students have been exposed to a unique blend of Islamic teachings and values through various avenues. In addition to their academic learning, they frequently engaged in religious activities and acquired Islamic principles at the campus mosque (*masjid*). They also take courses focused on the Islamization of knowledge, which integrates Islamic perspectives into various disciplines. This academic

environment reinforces their understanding of subjects through an Islamic lens, allowing them to approach both religious and secular studies with a comprehensive, faith-based worldview.

The primary tool for data collection was a self-administered survey questionnaire distributed between December 16, 2019, and December 20, 2019, using Google Forms. The researchers posted an online survey on WhatsApp and Facebook Groups of IIUM students. The researcher received 400 responses, of which 43 were invalid because they were not completed. The sample included 357 respondents, 197 males, with the remainder being females (160), indicating a balanced representation of gender demographics.

The questionnaire was chosen for its efficiency in quickly collecting large amounts of data, especially within the context of academic institutions where students are accustomed to responding to surveys. This allows respondents to complete the survey at their convenience, reducing interviewer bias and encouraging honest responses, particularly when addressing sensitive topics, such as religiosity and moral perceptions.

The survey consisted of four sections: (1) demographic information: the respondents' basic details, such as age, gender, and academic level; (2) social networking site use: assesses the extent and patterns of SNS usage; (3) Islamic Religiosity Index: this index contains 10 items adapted from Wan Ahmad (2008), focusing on measuring the religiosity of participants; (4) Third-Person Effect (TPE): evaluates participants' perception of the influence of moral and non-moral issues on SNS on both themselves and others, with items adapted from Golan (2002).

The use of adapted and validated scales enhances the reliability and validity of the study, allowing for robust data analysis and interpretation. The reliability of these elements was measured. Cronbach's alpha values for the variables ranged from .72–.90,

indicating good reliability. More details on the study's dimensions and reliability are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Measurement Items and reliability

Dimension	Items	Alpha	Scale
Islamic religiosity index	-I fast the whole of Ramadhan.	0.87	5-Likert scale where 1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5= always.
	-I make sure the food and drink I consumed are halal.		
	-I earn money from *halal*[1] sources.		
	-I pray five times a day.		
	- I make sure that my dress/cloth covers my nakedness.		
	- I pay *zakat fitrah*[2] every year.		
	- I read Quran and perform *zikir*[3].		
	-I give charity to the poor and needy.		
	-I visit my family/friends when they are bedridden.		
	-I am honest at all times.		

[1] Halal is an Arabic word that refers to what is lawful or permissible, encompassing all matters of daily life.

[2] Zakat Fitrah is an Arabic term referring to a mandatory donation that Muslims must give during Ramadan, up until the approach of Eid al-Fitr.

[3] Zikr is an Arabic word that encompasses all words of praise and glory to Allah, extolling His perfect attributes of power, majesty, beauty, and sublimeness. Whether uttered aloud or silently in one's heart, these acts of remembrance of Allah are known as Zikr.

Perceived effect of moral issues on self	Please tell me how much influence you think Social Networking Sites messages have over your (others') perceptions of the following topics: -Crime -Abortion -Sexuality and pornography -Family values	0.83	five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.
Perceived effect of moral issues on others		0.87	five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly disagree.
Perceived effect of non-moral issues on self	Please tell me how much influence you think Social Networking Sites messages have over your (others') perceptions of the following topics: -Public affairs -Health care -Environment	0.72	five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.
Perceived effect of non-moral issues on others.	-Race relations	0.90	five-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree, and 5

	= strongly disagree.

Source: Primary data.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis. A paired sample t-test was employed to assess differences in perceptions of self and others regarding moral and non-moral issues on social networking sites (SNS), as well as the computed variables. To evaluate the impact of Islamic religiosity on Third-Person Effects, a one-sample t-test with a test value of 3 was used to determine the level of Islamic religiosity, followed by correlation analyses. Further tests were conducted to explore the relationship between religiosity and computed variables related to moral and non-moral issues. Correlation analysis was used to determine the associations between variables.

RESULTS

Level of Islamic religiosity

A one-sample t-test with a test value of 3 was employed to assess the level of Islamic religiosity. The results indicate that Islamic religiosity is significant, with the majority of the respondents acknowledging its importance. Most of the students (85.1%) integrated Islamic values into their daily lives. Respondents strongly agreed with the adoption of Islamic religiosity, as reflected in the findings ($M = 4.257$, $SD = 0.656$, $t = (357) = 36.184$, $p = .000$).

Third Person Effect on Moral Issues Effect in Social Networking Sites

A paired sample *t-test* was conducted to explore the difference in the perceived impact of moral issues on SNS between oneself and others (Table 1). The findings reveal that respondents believe that both

others (*M* = 3.337, *SD* = 1.018) and themselves (*M* = 2.972, *SD* = 1.071) are influenced by moral issues. H1 predicted that the perceived effect of moral issues would be greater for others than for oneself. The results show that students perceived others (*M* = 3.337, *SD* = 1.018) to be significantly more affected by moral issues than themselves (*M* = 2.972, *SD* = 1.071), *t* = -7.531, *p* = .000, thus supporting H1. This suggests that students believe that moral issues on SNS have a greater influence on others than on themselves, which is consistent with the classical theory of TPE.

For the four items, the results indicated that crime was perceived to affect others (*M* = 3.196, *SD* = 1.195) significantly more than oneself (*M* = 2.711, *SD* = 1.387), *t* = -7.359, *p* = .000. Similarly, abortion and sexuality/pornography were perceived to have a greater impact on others (*M* = 3.084, *SD* = 1.210) and (*M* = 3.459, *SD* = 1.271) than on oneself (*M* = 2.566, *SD* = 1.336), *t* = -7.971, p = .000, and (*M* = 2.972, *SD* = 1.394), *t* = -7.483, *p* = .000, respectively, aligned with the TPE. However, family values were perceived to affect oneself slightly more (*M* = 3.639, *SD* = 1.157) than others (*M* = 3.608, *SD* = 1.133), although this difference was not significant (*t* =.595, *p* =.276). This result suggests that students may view family values as positive and desirable, which is why they do not perceive others as being more influenced by these values than themselves. On the other hand, crime, abortion, and sexuality/pornography are viewed as negative and undesirable messages. When the four items are combined into one element (Moral Issues), the results show that respondents believe others are more affected by moral issues than themselves, which aligns with TPE and supports H1.

Table 2

Paired Sample t-Test for the Perceived Effect of Moral Issues on SNS on the Self and Others

Variables		N	M*	SD	r	p	t	df
Crime	On self	357	2.711	1.387	.544	.000	-7.359	356
	On others	357	3.196	1.195				
Abortion	On self	357	2.566	1.336	.538	.000	-7.971	356
	On others	357	3.084	1.210				
Sexuality and pornography	On self	357	2.972	1.394	.577	.000	-7.483	356
	On others	357	3.459	1.271				
Family values	On self	357	3.639	1.157	.635	.276	.595	356
	On others	357	3.608	1.133				
Moral issues	On self	357	2.972	1.071	.617	.000	-7.531	356
	On others	357	3.337	1.018				

Note: *5-point scale whereby 1=no influence, 2 =a little influence, 3 =some influence, 4 =quite a bit of influence, and 5 =great deal of influence.

Source: Primary data.

FPE on Non-Moral Issues in Social Networking Sites

Table 2 presents the difference in perceived effects of non-moral issues on SNS between oneself and others. The results indicate that

non-moral issues are perceived to affect both others (*M* = 3.590, *SD* = .910) and oneself (*M* = 3.604, *SD* = .965). H2 proposed that non-moral issues would be perceived as having a greater effect on oneself than on others. Although the students perceived themselves to be slightly more affected by non-moral issues than others (*M* = 3.590, *SD* = .910), *t* = .317, *p* = .376, the difference was not significant, leading to the rejection of H2. Therefore, the respondents did not consider themselves to be more influenced by non-moral issues than others. The results did not support the First-Person Effect (FPE) for non-moral issues on SNS.

For the four items, the findings revealed that public affairs were perceived to affect oneself (*M* = 3.496, *SD* = 1.070) slightly less than others (*M* = 3.571, *SD* = 1.038), although this difference was not significant (t =-1.597, p = 0.056). Healthcare and race relations were perceived to affect oneself (*M* = 3.641, *SD* = 1.071) and (*M* = 3.630, *SD* = 1.866) slightly more than others (*M* = 3.594, *SD* = 1.017), *t* = .964, *p* = 0.168 and (*M* = 3.633, *SD* = 1.064), *t* = -.029, *p* = 0.489, but these differences were not significant. The results showed that the difference in perceptions of non-moral issues affecting oneself versus others was very small and non-significant. However, the environment was perceived to influence oneself (*M* = 3.647, *SD* = 1.057) significantly more than others (*M* = 3.563, *SD* = 1.052), with *t* = 1.897, *p* = 0.029, indicating FPE. When the four items were combined into one category (Non-moral Issues), the results revealed that the respondents did not perceive themselves to be more affected by non-moral issues than others. This finding does not support H2 and does not reflect FPE for nonmoral issues.

Table 3

Paired Sample t-Test for the Perceived Effect of Non-Moral Issues in SNS on the Self and Others

Variables		N	*M**	SD	R	p	t	df
Public affairs	On self	357	3.496	1.070	.640	.056	-1.597	356
	On others	357	3.571	1.038				
Health care	On self	357	3.641	1.071	.601	.168	.964	356
	On others	357	3.594	1.017				
Environment	On self	357	3.647	1.057	.685	.029	1.897	356
	On others	357	3.563	1.052				
Race relations	On self	357	3.630	1.866	.311	.489	-.029	356
	On others	357	3.633	1.064				
Non-moral issues	On self	357	3.604	.965	.644	.751	.317	356
	On others	357	3.590	.910				

Note: *5-point scale whereby 1=no influence, 2 =a little influence, 3 =some influence, 4 =quite a bit of influence, and 5 =great deal of influence.
Source: Primary data.

Islamic Religiosity and Perceived Effect of Moral Issues in SNS on Others

H3 posits a positive relationship between Islamic religiosity and the perceived impact of moral issues on others on SNS. The results presented in Table 3 show that this relationship is both positive and significant ($r = .190$, $p = .000$), supporting H3. Higher levels of Islamic religiosity are associated with stronger perceptions of moral issues

that affect others. Additionally, religiosity was positively and significantly related to perceptions of crime (r = .103, p = .026), abortion (r = .100, p = .029), sexuality and pornography (r = .204, p = .000), and family values (r = .237, p = .000). As Islamic religiosity increases, so does perception of the impact of crime, abortion, sexuality, pornography, and family values on others. When combining these four items into the category of (Moral Issues), the results showed that higher levels of Islamic religiosity were associated with a stronger belief that others are influenced by moral issues, thus supporting H3.

Table 4

Bivariate Correlation between Religiosity and Perceived Effect of Moral Issues in SNS on Others

Variable (N=357)		Religiosity Index*	
		r	P
Moral issues	On others	.190	.000*
Crime		.103	.026*
Abortion		.100	.209
Sexuality and pornography		.204	.000*
Family values		.237	.000*

Note: *Significant at the .05 level (one-tailed).
Source: Primary data.

Islamic Religiosity and Perceived Effect of Non-Moral Issues in SNS on Self

H4 posits a positive relationship between Islamic religiosity and the perceived impact of non-moral issues on oneself on SNS. The results presented in Table 4 show that this relationship is both positive

and significant (r = .233, p = .000), confirming H4. As Islamic religiosity increases, so does the perception of non-moral issues that affect oneself. Among these four items, three showed similar results. Specifically, the associations between Islamic religiosity and the perceived impact of public affairs (r = .228, p = .000), health care (r = .243, p = .000), and environmental issues (r = .228, p = .000) were positive and significant. However, the correlation between Islamic religiosity and the perceived impact of racial relations (r = .082, p = .061) was positive but not significant. Therefore, an increase in Islamic religiosity does not correspond to a greater perception of racial relations that affect oneself. When combining the four items in the category of (Non-moral Issues), the results indicate that higher Islamic religiosity is associated with a stronger perception of being affected by non-moral issues, thus supporting H4.

Table 5

Bivariate Correlation between Religiosity and Perceived Effect on Non-Moral Issues in SNS on the Self

Variable (N=357)		Religiosity Index*	
		r	P
Non-moral issues	On self	.233	.000*
Public affairs		.228	.000*
Health care		.243	.000*
Environment		.228	.000*
Race relations		.082	.061

Note: *Significant at the .05 level (one-tailed).
Source: Primary data.

Table 6, and Figures 4, 5, and 6 present the results of the hypothesis examination.

Table 6

Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis	Results	*r*	*P*
H1: Moral issues in SNS have a greater perceived effect on others than on the self.	Supported	.617	.000
H2: There is a perceived effect of non-moral issues in SNS on others more than on self.	Not Supported	.644	.751
H3: There is a positive relationship between religiosity and the perceived effects of moral issues in SNS on others.	Supported	.190	.000
H4: There is a positive relationship between religiosity and the perceived effect of non-moral issues in SNS on self.	Supported	.233	.000

Source: Primary data.

Figure 4

Results of Testing H1
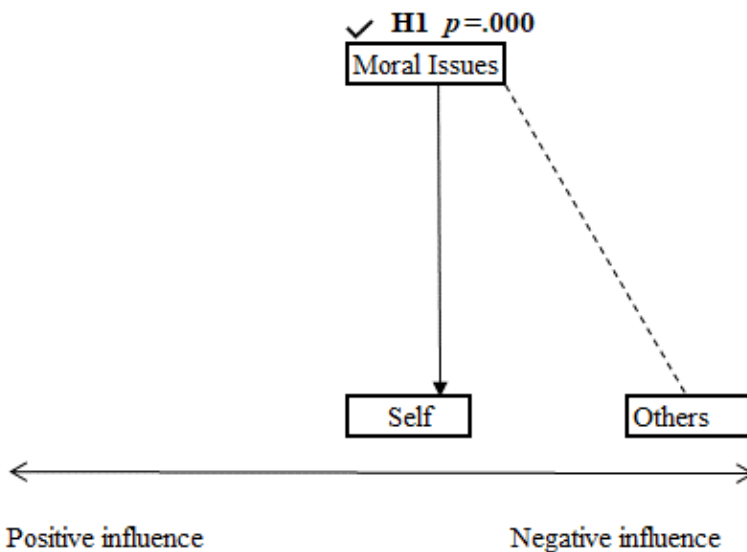
Source: Primary data.

Figure 5

Results of Testing H2
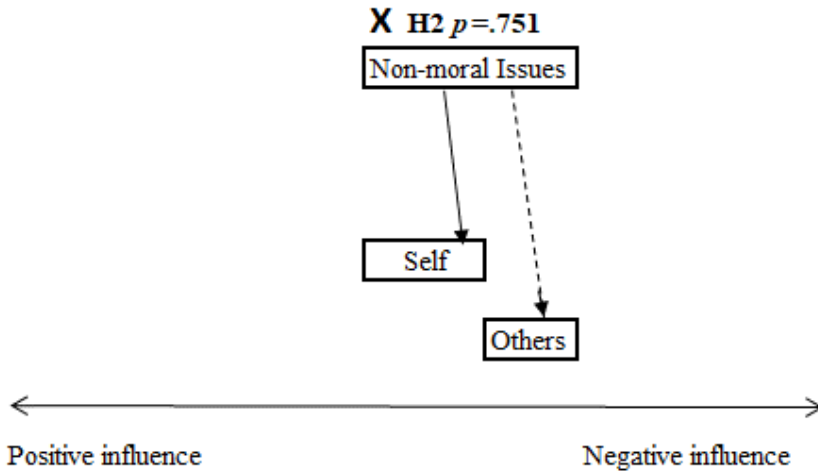
Source: Primary data.

Figure 6

Results of Testing H3 and H4
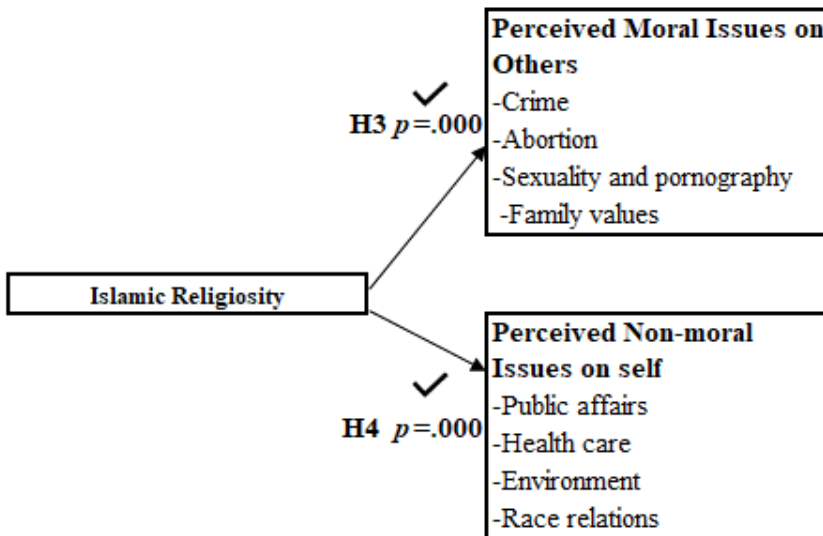
Source: Primary data.

DISCUSSION

This study explored moral and non-moral issues on Social Networking Sites (SNS) among university students from the perspective of the Third-Person Effect (TPE), which suggests that people believe others are more influenced by media content than themselves. The research also investigated how Islamic religiosity affects perceptions of the impact of moral and non-moral issues on oneself and others on SNS. The findings revealed that students perceived others as being more affected by moral issues than themselves, reflecting TPE. Moreover, higher levels of Islamic religiosity are associated with an increased perception of moral and non-moral issues that affect others.

After testing the general variable of moral issues (H1), students perceived others to be more affected by these issues than themselves, supporting H1 and showing classical TPE (Cheng & Chen, 2020; Idid & Souket, 2019; Tsay-Vogel, 2020; Tsay-Vogel, 2016) (see Table 6 and Figure 4). When people perceive that a message is undesirable and negative, they perceive others as having more influence than themselves because they want to show others' vulnerability and weakness. However, people indicate their superiority and knowledge using biased comparisons. Additionally, a biased comparison reflecting a self-serving bias involving self-enhancement in relation to moral issues on SNS was also observed.

Respondents believed that others were more affected by issues related to crime, abortion, sexuality, and pornography than were themselves. This finding regarding sexuality and pornography is consistent with the results of Lo & Wei (2002) and Lo et al. (2010), who found that respondents perceived others as being more influenced by pornography on the Internet compared to themselves. In the current study, students demonstrated a sense of superiority and

invulnerability toward moral issues by making biased comparisons with others.

The psychological basis for this biased comparison can be attributed to self-enhancement, whereby individuals tend to view themselves more positively and others more negatively (Alicke, 1985). Consequently, students downplayed the impact of undesirable messages, such as crime and sexuality, while exaggerating their effect on others, thus enhancing their own sense of protection from what they perceived as harmful content. This results in an increased self-enhancement. However, respondents perceived others to be more affected by family value issues (p = .276) on SNS than themselves, but this difference was not significant. Students may view these issues as positive and desirable, and therefore, do not feel the need to employ biased comparisons, as they could equally acknowledge the influence of these positive messages.

H2 hypothesized that students perceive themselves to have more impact on non-moral issues on SNS than others. The findings also found that the students did not perceive themselves as being more affected by non-moral issues on SNS than others, not supporting H2 (see Table 6 and Figure 5). It is interpreted that the respondents may consider non-moral issues as positive and desirable media content, which leads them to confirm their influence on the self and others.

However, students perceived themselves as being more influenced by environmental issues than others, demonstrating a First-Person Effect. This finding aligns with Chung's (2018) results, which showed that SNS users felt more impacted by environmental messages than by others. In the current study, students may have viewed environmental issues as positive and important, which could explain their heightened perception of personal impact. The respondents likely wish to highlight their awareness of and

involvement with these significant global issues, reflecting a form of self-enhancement.

This study examines the relationship between Islamic religiosity and the perceived impact of moral issues on others (H3). The results showed that as Islamic religiosity increases, so does the perceived impact of moral issues—such as crime, abortion, sexuality and pornography, and family values—on others, thereby supporting H3 (see Table 6 and Figure 6). This result aligns with Golan's (2002) findings, which identify a link between religiosity and the perceived impact of moral issues on others. Golan (2002) found that religiosity leads individuals to view others as more vulnerable and susceptible, thereby boosting self-esteem among religious people by perceiving others as being more affected by negative and undesirable moral issues.

Additionally, this study predicted a positive relationship between Islamic religiosity and the perceived effect of non-moral issues on the self (H4). The results showed that an increase in religiosity led to a higher perceived self-impact of non-moral issues, supporting H4 (see Table 6 and Figure 4) and contradicting Golan's (2002) findings. Golan (2002) revealed no relationship between religiosity and the perceived effect of non-moral issues on TV on self.

However, in the current study, Islamic religiosity led students to acknowledge that non-moral issues influence them because they view such issues as positive and desirable content. However, an increase in Islamic religiosity did not lead to a greater perception of the impact of racial relations on oneself (p = .029). This suggests that respondents view racial relations as negative issues that contribute to societal problems. Consequently, religious individuals may be reluctant to acknowledge that racial relations affect them, as Islam promotes peace and societal unity. Thus, students may highlight their ability to select valuable content, thereby enhancing their self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that people perceive others as being more affected by moral issues displayed on SNS, indicating TPE. By contrast, the same individuals acknowledge that both themselves and others are influenced by non-moral issues. The study also found that an increase in Islamic religiosity leads to a heightened perception of others being more influenced by moral issues, and a greater perception of oneself being more influenced by non-moral issues. This finding explains how religious individuals in Muslim societies view moral content in the media and assess its impact based on their religious values and self-esteem. As a result, they tend to support media censorship and regulations, believing that they would protect others from negative influences.

Implications of the Study

These findings suggest that individuals with higher Islamic religiosity are more inclined to support media censorship and regulations, particularly for content deemed morally sensitive. As these individuals perceive others as more susceptible to the negative effects of moral issues in the media, they may advocate stricter controls to protect society from potential harm. This study highlights the significant role that religious values play in shaping how Muslim individuals evaluate media content. Their religious beliefs and self-esteem guide them in perceiving moral content through the lens of social responsibility. This insight is crucial for policymakers, media producers, and educators to understand how religious communities engage with the media in ways that align with their values.

This study confirms the existence of the third-person effect (TPE) in moral issues, where individuals believe others are more influenced by negative moral content than themselves. This perception drives support for interventionist policies as it fosters a sense of

responsibility to protect others who are deemed more vulnerable to such content. These findings imply a need for integrated approaches to media literacy that consider religious perspectives. Educational programs could focus on promoting critical media consumption while respecting religious values, helping individuals discern between moral and non-moral issues, and understanding their own biases in assessing media influence.

The differential perceptions of moral and non-moral issues reveal a nuanced understanding of how social dynamics and religious identity influence media perceptions. In Muslim societies, where collective well-being and moral values are highly emphasized, these findings underscore the complex relationship between self-perception, religiosity, and the assumed impact of the media on society. For media creators and marketers, these insights highlight the importance of cultural and religious sensitivity when designing content for Muslim audiences. Understanding that these communities view content through a religious lens can inform strategies that respect their values and avoid backlash.

Policymakers in Muslim-majority countries or communities can use these findings to better tailor regulations that balance freedom of expression with the protection of moral and social values. The perceived need to protect the public from harmful moral content may drive more effective policy decisions supported by religiously motivated constituents. This study contributes to the broader discourse on media effects by showing how religiosity interacts with cultural factors to shape unique perceptions in non-Western contexts. It provides a foundation for comparative studies across different religious and cultural groups, offering insights into how diverse audiences process moral and nonmoral issues differently.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study focused on a specific group of students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. To enhance representativeness, it is recommended that future research should include a broader and more diverse population by involving students from multiple universities and regions. Expanding the sample to include different educational institutions and geographical locations can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how perceptions vary across different contexts.

One limitation of this research is that it addressed moral and non-moral issues on social networking sites in general without focusing on a specific platform. Different SNS platforms have unique features, audiences, and content dynamics that can influence user perceptions. Therefore, future research should focus on a specific platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) to obtain more precise findings. Alternatively, a comparative analysis between multiple platforms could provide insights into whether perceptions differ depending on the platform used and how the content is presented.

This study concentrates on the impact of religiosity on the third-person effect (TPE). However, other variables, such as education level, income, cultural background, and individual values, may also play a significant role in shaping perceptions of moral and non-moral issues. Future research should explore these additional factors to better understand their influence on the TPE and other related phenomena. Investigating these variables can provide a more nuanced picture of how different demographic and socioeconomic factors interact with perceptions in SNS contexts.

While this study primarily explored the perceptual aspects of TPE regarding moral and non-moral issues, it did not delve into the behavioral responses associated with these perceptions. Future

research could expand on this by examining the behavioral components of the TPE, such as whether individuals take actions (e.g., supporting censorship, advocating for policy changes) based on their perceptions of how others are affected by moral and non-moral content on SNS. Understanding these behavioral implications can offer valuable insights into how perceptions translate into real-world decisions and actions.

This study was guided by third-person effect theory (TPE), which primarily addresses how individuals perceive others' susceptibility to media influence. However, future research should consider applying other theoretical perspectives to investigate the effects of moral and non-moral issues on SNS. Theories such as social comparison theory, cultivation theory, and social identity theory can provide alternative explanations for how individuals perceive and respond to content on SNS. Broadening the theoretical framework can help to uncover new dimensions of media influence and deepen our understanding of how different factors shape user perceptions in digital environments. By addressing these limitations and exploring new directions, future research can offer a more comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of how moral and non-moral issues are perceived and acted upon in social networking contexts.

Author Contributions

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by Department of Arabic for International Communication, Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained before the respondents filling the questionnaire.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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