From immediate community to imagined community: Social identity and the co-viewing of media event

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**Abstract**
This study examines how different types of co-viewing are associated with viewers’ emotional response to the live broadcast of media events and their social identity. A survey (N = 206) was conducted to examine the effect of the live broadcast of a grand national ceremony in China. Results show that viewers experienced emotional arousal when they watched the media event in physical, mediated, and perceived co-viewing conditions. Among these conditions, mediated co-viewing, operationalized as social media engagement during the event, is the strongest predictor of emotional arousal. Moreover, emotional arousal fully mediates the relationship between co-viewing conditions and viewers’ national identity conveyed in the broadcast ceremony. With empirical evidence, we demonstrate the continued relevance of the genre of media events and the importance of co-viewing experiences in the contemporary media ecology. We argue that this broadcast genre is still effective with regard to social integration, and dual-screening media events could be a new mechanism of this effect.

**Keywords**
Co-viewing, dual-screening, media event, social identity, social media engagement

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Introduction

Watching live broadcast events such as the Olympic opening ceremonies, President John F. Kennedy’s funeral, and Neil Armstrong’s moon landing by millions of people is culturally ritualistic and socially integrative. When millions of geographically dispersed viewers are synchronized in time, media are offering them a social experience oriented toward a shared identity. It is through the uses of symbols in the events and the beliefs implicated in them the collective emotional effervescence among a large audience is evoked and their social identity reinforced.

The above is the classic argument Dayan and Katz (1992) make about the unique broadcast genre that they call media events. However, grounded in Durkheimian sociology and ethnographic evidence, the effectiveness of media events has never been empirically tested on the individual level. As a consequence, some current literature contradicts on the integrative power of media events in contemporary societies. While some research contends that the effectiveness of media events in social integration has been compromised by the proliferation of media channels (Katz & Liebes, 2007), other research suggests that media events are still likely to promote social integration, especially when broadcast in conjunction with social media engagement (Cui, 2013; Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Loughlin, 2015; Widholm, 2015). Therefore, the first goal of this research is to look for empirical evidence of the extent to which media events arouse collective emotions and facilitate social integration.

In addition, because of the proliferation of media channels and the social nature of media events, televised media events rarely monopolize viewers’ attention. Instead, viewers engage in co-viewing while consuming those media events. Traditionally, co-viewing refers exclusively to viewing media programs with other individuals physically, engaging in conversations with them (Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam, & Colimore, 1985; Nathanson, 2001). New technology such as social media disrupts the geographic and temporal restrictions, thereby allowing for mediated co-viewing with other social media users (Cameron & Geidner, 2014; Marchetti & Ceccobelli, 2016). Furthermore, individuals can engage in perceived co-viewing because when viewers watch a media event, they may feel viewing it with hundreds of thousands or even millions of other viewers nationwide or worldwide. Dayan and Katz (1992) argue that the perceived co-viewing with a large audience synchronized in time through the live broadcast of a media event provides a sense of community and is the prerequisite of the collective emotional effervescence and the strengthening of social identity. As co-viewing may directly affect media effects (Denham, 2004), our second goal is to conduct comprehensive investigations into the impact of these three types of co-viewing on the outcome of watching media events.

Specifically, utilizing survey data from Chinese viewers on their consumption of the live broadcast of the Commemoration Ceremony of the 70th Anniversary of the Victories in the Anti-Japanese War and the World Anti-Fascist War (the Commemoration, hereafter), we investigate the relationship between co-viewing conditions, viewers’ emotional arousal, and their national identity.

In the literature review, we will first explain the Commemoration as a classic media event. Then the relationship between viewers’ emotional arousal and social identity will be reviewed in the context of media events. The specific mechanism of the relationship will be explicated with self-categorization theory. Finally, previous research on the three co-viewing conditions will be reviewed as various forms of collective participation in rituals. A comprehensive model of the effects of co-viewing the Commemoration will be proposed based on specific hypotheses.
The Commemoration as a media event

Dayan and Katz (1992) define media event as “the high holiday of mass communication” (p. 1), a broadcast genre that unites the society through shared intense experience of the social center. The society-wide mediated rite is presented as the supposed-to-be reality embodying the social ideals. Therefore, consuming the live broadcast of media events exerts the same ritual power on viewers as an aboriginal totemic worship does to tribal members. In this ritual process, people make symbolic contact with the social center, experience intensive collective emotions, and pledge their allegiance to the sacred beliefs through ritual participation (Durkheim, 1995).

Dayan and Katz (1992) explicate the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects distinctive of this genre. Syntactically, a media event should be preplanned outside the media, should be broadcast live, and should interrupt routine programming. The institution outside the media represents the social center that has the power to speak for the entire society. The interruption signals the event’s extraordinariness above mundane life. Meanwhile, the live broadcast provides viewers a sense of being together with the entire society. Semantically, a media event needs to be announced historic and be presented with reverence and ceremony. The ceremonial atmosphere suggests the importance of the message conveyed in the event or the sacred beliefs of the society. Pragmatically, a media event has to excite a large audience, and through the intense collective emotional effervescence, audience members’ social solidarity is renewed around a shared belief system as their social identity.

To commemorate the Chinese victories in the Second World War and the Anti-Japanese Aggression on 3 September 1945, 70 years later on the same day, the central government of China coordinated a large-scale commemorating ceremony and its live broadcast (Buckley, 2015). The Commemoration started with raising the national flag and singing the national anthem. Then, President Xi Jinping gave a speech and inspected the troops in the Tian’anmen Square, a location that has long been used as a symbol of the central authority of the government. Following the speech and the troop inspection was a grandiose parade of World War II veterans, soldiers, and cutting-edge weaponries.

The live broadcast of the Commemoration strictly conformed to the tripartite formula of a classic media event. First, syntactically, this event was broadcast live to the entire country. It interrupted the routine programming of all major media outlets. In fact, the government made 3 September a new public holiday: the Victory Day. This one day off made viewing the event convenient, which further marked it off from the mundane life. Second, semantically, viewers were constantly reminded of the historic status of the event in President Xi Jinping’s speech, in the narration during the broadcast and in countless news coverage before and after the event. The symbolic elements such as the national flag, the World War II veterans, squads of soldiers, and weaponry were shown solemnly “with reverence and ceremony” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 7). Finally, the live broadcast and the news coverage of the event were saturated with images of excited crowds and viewers. The extraordinary television rating and explosive social media engagements attest to the enthrallment of the population (CCTV, 2015; TVTV, 2015). If the Commemoration exemplified the genre of media event, according to Dayan and Katz (1992), it should have had an impact on the national viewers’ emotion and their identification with the country.

Media events and viewers’ emotional arousal and social identity

The theorization of media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992) posits that this broadcast genre enthralls viewers, invites awe, and stimulates intense positive emotion toward a shared identity, a state
Durkheim (1995) termed as “collective effervescence.” Through these aroused emotions, collective identity is reinforced and the social unity is cemented (Dayan & Katz, 1992). However, working in the sociological tradition, neither Durkheim nor Dayan and Katz explicated this effect on the individual level.

The social identity approach in psychology studies provides a clearer explanation of the underlying mechanism of the process on the individual level (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1972, 1978). A person’s social identity consists of his or her “knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups)” and “the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Multiple social identities, such as being a Chinese, a college professor, and a transgender person, could all be part of a person’s self-concept at the same time. Among the many social identities a person identifies with, chronically constructed and frequently invoked ones are more mentally accessible—in other words, have better “perceiver readiness” (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). When the characteristic behaviors or attitudes of that social identity are primed to a perceiver and match the perceiver’s expectations based on the chronically constructed expectation, a “normative fit” is achieved. If that normative fit is regarding positive characteristics of that identity, positive emotions will be elicited. At this point, that specific social identity becomes salient in the perceiver’s self-concept in that specific context (Burke & Stets, 1999; Stets, 2006).

In the context of the Commemoration, the identity as a Chinese is highly accessible due to chronic cultivation in the Chinese public discourse and the intensive media coverage leading up to the event. When characteristic portrayals of the Chinese identity (prototype) are provided to the viewers in the live broadcast, a normative fit with the viewers’ expectation is achieved.

However, according to Haslem (2001), what is expected to be prototypical of a certain social identity is contingent on the context. If a social identity consists of both the awareness of membership and the emotional significance attached to it (Tajfel, 1978), in the Commemoration, the national identity prototype expected by the majority of Chinese viewers must be predicated on the latter which is ideological (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) since the Commemoration is an ideological construction of the Chinese identity for political purpose. Therefore, the social identity construct in this research should address the ideological nature of the national identity.

Specific to this commemoration event, the ideology unequivocally boasted in the live broadcast is nationalism. A person’s national attachment—the ideological aspect of national identity—comprises two components: nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism refers to one’s beliefs that his or her country is superior to and has dominance over others, whereas patriotism is based purely on the love of one’s country and the willingness to sacrifice for the country (Druckman, 1994; Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999). Gries (2006) argue that since its reign, the Communist Party has been diligently building and capitalizing on the discourse of eliminating “the humiliation of a century” between the Opium War of 1840 and the victory of Anti-Japanese War in 1945 to legitimize its ruling. In the Commemoration, highlighting victories of wars and the military strength with goose-stepping soldiers and cutting-edge weaponries carried an unequivocal nationalistic tone that concentrates on the superiority of the country and its dominance over others. Viewers cultivated in this nationalistic discourse for decades certainly are proficient in the symbolic prototype, and the representations in the Commemoration should provide the normative fit necessary to arouse viewers’ emotions. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

\[ H1. \text{ Viewers’ emotional arousal during watching the Commemoration is positively associated with their nationalism level.} \]
Co-viewing contexts of media event

Prior scholarship has identified the importance of the social and personal conditions of media consumption in media effects. For example, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) have identified multiple “intervening variables” (p. 21) which influence media effects. More recently, Denham (2004) argue that media effect research needs to synthesize social norms, viewing condition such as co-viewing, and program content. One variable that both arguments highlight is the viewing context. The distinct social nature of media events as mediated rituals suggests that examining audience’s co-viewing conditions may provide a potential approach to understanding the mechanism underlying the effectiveness of this live broadcast genre.

Traditional co-viewing literature focuses on physical co-viewing, where audiences consume media programs with the physical presence of others such as family members, especially parents (e.g. Desmond et al., 1985; Lull, 1980; Nathanson, 2001; Schmitt, Woolf, & Anderson, 2003). More recently, social interactions during television viewing has gone beyond physical discussion with co-viewers to mediated co-viewing such as social media engagement with a much larger community unbound by locality (Cameron & Geidner, 2014; Marchetti & Ceccobelli, 2015; Nielson, 2013). Some studies have addressed social media engagement as a new type of co-viewing which embodies and enhances the social aspect of traditional television viewing (Ha & Chan-Olmsted, 2002; Sasseen, Olmstead, & Mitchell, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2015). Meanwhile, not only can co-viewing be tangible face-to-face or mediated interactions, it can also be conceptualized as perception (Burgoon et al., 1999). The sense of being connected to a community, being understood by its members, and being together during events culturally important for the group, or perceived co-viewing, is a conceptual pillar of Dayan and Katz’ (1992) theorization of media event.

Collins’ (2004) interaction ritual chain model, which focuses on collective reaction to co-participation of rituals, can shed light on the influence of co-viewing contexts on the effect of media events. Collins argues that in a successful physical ritual, participants focus on the same symbolic object out of which synchronized conversation, bodily movements, and emotional entrainment are developed. These emotionally aroused participants see the symbolic object as sacred and totemic of their social group. Therefore, shared meanings and identities rise or strengthen in successful rituals around the symbols. However, once again, the sociological focus in this line of research doesn’t account for the specific psychological mechanism on the individual level.

Following the social identity approach explicated earlier, when a normative fit is achieved between individuals’ expected images of a certain social identity and what they are primed with in that context, that specific social identity will become salient. At this time, group members participating in an activity together will see themselves and others in the context as prototype-bearing group members rather than individuated personalities, a state called depersonalization (Turner, 1985). The participants are then emotionally aroused and entrained as a collective. Psychological research has found numerous empirical evidence where collective emotions and identity can be evoked through co-participation in behaviors and shared attentions toward even arbitrary objects that develop into symbolic prototypes defining the group (Legare & Souza, 2012; Legare & Wen, 2014).

Since media events are mediated social rituals, millions of viewers watching the live broadcast can be conceptualized as depersonalized co-participants in social rituals with shared focus and entrained emotions. In the following, scholarly findings of the three co-viewing conditions will be reviewed, respectively, in relation to viewers’ emotions and social identity.
Physical discussion during co-viewing

Prior media psychology research has found that physical co-viewing was associated with viewers’ cognition and affect. For instance, viewers with at least one co-viewer were more cognitively involved and emotionally gratified (Yang, Zhao, Erdem, & Zhao, 2010) and enjoyed media programs more (Lee, Heeter, & LaRose, 2010). Besides, an experiment showed that individuals were more likely to conform to opinions expressed by their co-viewers (Cameron & Geidner, 2014). These findings highlight the importance of social factors to media effect. Co-viewers’ observable responses to the television content provide cues of their evaluations that affect viewers’ experience (Hocking, 1982). Meanwhile, people are likely to watch television with others they like, identify, or agree with. Therefore, when co-viewers voice their opinion, individuals are more likely to agree and gain positive viewing experience (Thorson, Hawthorne, Swasy, & McKinney, 2015). All these findings point to viewers’ psychological depersonalization where shared prototypicality takes precedence of individual personalities. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2. The frequency of physical discussion during the co-viewing of the Commemoration is positively associated with the intensity of viewers’ emotional arousal.

Social media engagement as mediated co-viewing

The contemporary media landscape provides more opportunities for mediated co-viewing on new platforms. De Zúñiga, Garcia-Perdomo, and McGregor (2015) call this phenomenon second screening where “individuals watching television use an additional electronic device or ‘screen’ to access the Internet or social networking sites to obtain more information about the program or event they are watching or to discuss it in real time” (p. 795). This conceptualization is similar to “Two Screen Viewing” (Shim, Oh, Song, & Lee, 2015) and “Social TV” (Shin, 2016). They all suggest a primary role of television and deem the socially and technologically connected devices as secondary or supporting. Meanwhile, they don’t distinguish the genres of the television content viewers’ consume. This study follows Vaccari et al.’s (2015) concept of “dual-screening” to understand viewers’ cross-media consumption of the live broadcast of media events with mediated co-viewers. Dual-screening is defined as “the complex bundle of practices that involve integrating, and switching across and between, live broadcast media and social media” (p. 1041). Therefore, we conceptualize mediated co-viewing as viewers’ social media engagement during the Commemoration.

Mediated co-viewing through dual-screening a media event can create and maintain virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000). The cyberspace has long been theorized as a space for the consumers of mass media texts to interact, oftentimes infused with shared identity (Jenkins, 2006). Social media platforms and mobile devices further facilitate mediated but temporally synchronized co-viewing, or dual-screening, media events ranging from reading posts, sharing them, to social conversing (Costello & Moore, 2007).

Social media engagement tends to intensify during a media event as a normative group behavior in a depersonalized context, which further strengthens the solidarity of the virtual community. During the 2012 US presidential election, there was a significant hike of replying and re-tweeting particular users, while interpersonal communication suffered significant decline (Lin, Keegan, Margolin, & Lazer, 2014). In a study on the dual-screening of the 2014 European Parliament election debate in the United Kingdom, Vaccari et al. (2015) found that seeing debate-related tweets,
getting mentions or direct messages from other Twitter users, and seeing debate-related hashtags on television translated into viewers’ partisan political actions rather than their general political engagement. These intensive mediated interactions through social media can be understood as a form of synchronized co-participation in a ritual that depersonalizes participants and makes them emotionally aroused and entrained. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

\[ H3. \] Social media engagement as mediated co-viewing during the Commemoration is positively associated with the viewers’ emotional arousal.

**Perceived co-viewing with the imagined community**

Characteristic to a media event as a mediated ritual, its power of social integration is also predicated on *perceived co-viewing*, that is, imagined co-participation with a large but invisible community (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Since the age of mass media, the idea of community has gradually shifted toward a symbolic-based imagination (Anderson, 2006). This imagined community is only intensified during media events that synchronize attentions and highlight identity meanings. As reviewed earlier, one of the syntactic features of media events is the liveness of the broadcast. It creates a perceived co-viewing audience nationwide, even worldwide, for individual viewers. The liveness of media event broadcast synchronizes millions of viewers around important identity performances and provides them with perceptual access to the sacred center of the society (Couldry, 2003; Dayan & Katz, 1992; Jiménez-Martínez, 2014; Widholm, 2015). Meanwhile, the pragmatic aspect of media event is to excite and enthrall large audience. In other words, it is not only the event and the symbolic representations in it but also the depersonalized mutual entrainment enabled by the live broadcast that makes a program an emotionally arousing and awe-inviting moment. Therefore, it is hypothesized as follows:

\[ H4. \] Viewers’ perceived co-viewing with a large imagined audience during the Commemoration is positively associated with their emotional arousal.

Based on Collins’ (2004) model of interactional ritual chain and the depersonalization effect in group contexts (Turner, 1985), when various forms of co-viewing are conceptualized as co-participation, H2, H3, and H4 suggest that these co-viewing conditions should cause emotional arousal. The self-categorization and self-verification process will then convert this emotional arousal to identification with the collective as represented in the media event. Therefore, to combine H1, H2, H3, and H4, we hypothesize the following:

\[ H5. \] Emotional arousal mediates the relationship between viewers’ (a) physical, (b) mediated, and (c) perceived co-viewing and nationalism level (Figure 1).

**Method**

**Sample**

An online survey was used to collect data in a timely matter in two large Chinese universities in northern and southern China. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and an anonymous link was sent to large general education classes by the instructors through a popular Chinese instant messaging
Global Media and China 1(4)

(IM) app immediately after the live broadcast of the Commemoration on 3 September 2015. The majority of the participants responded within 5 days. A total of 337 students completed the survey. Of them, 206 watched the Commemoration live; therefore, only these responses were used in the analysis. Within the sample, 118 are male and 88 are female. The average age is 19.7 years (standard deviation (SD) = 3.6), and the majority are undergraduate students except seven graduate students.

The use of student sample was dictated by following practical reasons. The survey is time-sensitive in nature. Participants’ memories of emotional response and social experience could obscure quickly after the live broadcast. Students are easier to mobilize for a timely data collection. Meanwhile, the survey gauges participants’ social media engagement during the live broadcast of the event. College students are, in general, more technologically engaged and may provide the variances needed to understand how social media engagements influence their emotional arousal and identities. However, a non-random student sample also leads to significant drawbacks for the research findings, which will be discussed in the “Limitations and future research” section.

Measurement

Demographic features including the participants’ age, gender, and educational level were measured. None of them was significantly correlated with any interested variable in this research. Therefore, they were not included for further statistical analyses.

Physical discussion during co-viewing was measured with a single item on a 5-point scale asking how frequently the respondent interacted with physical co-viewer(s) (1 = watched it alone, 2 = watched it with other(s) with no discussion, 3 = watched it with other(s) with sporadic discussions, 4 = watched it with other(s) with frequent discussions, and 5 = watched it with other(s) with constant discussions” (M = 3.76, SD = 1.02).

Social media engagement as mediated co-viewing was gauged by following steps. First, we asked the participants to list their most used social media services to provide better insights into their perceived co-viewing. WeChat, a popular chatting app, was used by 183 respondents, followed by microblog services (149) and QQ (119), another popular chatting app. Each of other

Figure 1. Proposed model of the relationships among viewers’ co-viewing interactions, emotional arousal, and nationalism.

All coefficients are standardized. The path analysis was conducted with composite variables based on the latent variables confirmed in a measurement model.

**p < .01; ***p < .001.
services was used by less than 10 respondents in the sample. Next, we asked participants their frequencies of “like,” sharing posts, and posting original content. These three items on 5-point scale ranged from “none,” to “less frequent than a normal day,” “about the same as a normal day,” “somewhat more frequent than a normal day,” and “a lot more frequent than a normal day.” An exploratory factor analysis with principal component extraction on the three items yielded one factor explaining 78.6% of the variances, and all items had loadings above .85. The measurement on social media engagement is highly reliable ($\alpha = .864$). This measurement is converted into a composite variable for further path analysis ($M=3.19, SD=1.09$).

Following Dayan and Katz’s (1992) conceptualization of media event, perceived co-viewing with the imagined community was measured with viewers’ perception that they co-viewed the media event live with a certain percentage of the national audience. The one-item instrument measured the perceived percentage of the national population that was watching the Commemoration with the participant during the live broadcast. The 5-point scale ranged from “below 20%” to “above 80%,” with an incremental interval of 20%. In general, respondents perceived a high level of collective co-viewing nationwide ($M=4.04, SD=0.89$).

The three items measuring Emotional arousal were created based on three of the positive aroused emotional states (Mackay, Cox, Burrows, & Lazzerini, 1978) describing the participants’ reactions during and immediately after watching the event (see Table 1). The three items were subject to an exploratory factor analysis with principal component extraction and loaded onto one factor with all the loadings above 0.9. The scale reached high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .926$) and was transformed into a composite variable ($M=3.84, SD=0.89$).

The measurement of Nationalism was adapted from Kosterman and Feshbach’s (1989) national attachment study. The six items were then transformed into one composite variable ($M=3.01, SD=0.64$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .778$) (Tables 1 and 2).

**Results**

Structural equation modeling was employed to test the measurement model and the path model derived from the hypotheses. First, the measurement model was tested with all latent variables and single-item measurements allowed to co-vary with each other. Hu and Bentler (1998) argue that for data to be considered good fit, not only $\chi^2$ statistic needs to be nonsignificant, but $\chi^2$/df ratios should be less than 5. Meanwhile, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be lower than .06, standardized root mean square lower than .06, and comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .95. The fit indices in this analysis demonstrated the data’s good fit to the measurement model: $\chi^2(60)=63.867, p<.35, \chi^2$/df$=1.06; RMSEA=.018; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)$=.04; CFI=.997$.

Path analysis was then conducted. H1 predicts that viewer’s emotional arousal by the media event is related to stronger nationalistic identity. H2, H3, and H4 predict that social interactions in various co-viewing situations are all positively associated with viewers’ emotional arousal. The data demonstrated a good fit to the path model ($\chi^2(3)=.892, p<.83, \text{SRMR}=.014, \text{RMSEA}=.000, \text{CFI}=1.000$). Specifically, the standardized coefficients of physical discussion ($\beta = .20, p < .01$), social media engagement ($\beta = .31, p < .01$), and perceived co-viewing ($\beta = .18, p < .001$) were all significant. The connection between emotional arousal and nationalism was also significant ($\beta = .41, p < .001$). Therefore, H1, H2, H3, and H4 were all supported.
Global Media and China 1(4)

H5a, H5b, and H5c predicted the mediation of emotional arousal between three co-viewing conditions and viewers’ nationalism. The mediation was tested within the path model in Amos using bootstrapping procedures. The indirect relations between the three co-viewing conditions and viewers’ nationalism level mediated by their emotional arousal were all significant (physical co-viewing: $\beta = .081$, standard error (SE) = .029, $p < .05$, 95% confidence interval (CI) = (.025, .14); mediated co-viewing: $\beta = .125$, SE = .039, $p < .05$, 95% CI = (.055, .207); perceived co-viewing: $\beta = .073$, SE = .026, $p < .05$, 95% CI = (.026, .128)). None of the direct relationship between the co-viewing conditions and nationalism through emotional arousal was significant with coefficients’ $p$ values larger than .05, and CIs all include zero. This suggests full mediation of emotional arousal between each of the three co-viewing conditions and viewers’ nationalism level. H5a, H5b, and H5c were supported.
Discussion

This study responds to the scholarly discussion on media events’ social integration effect in the contemporary media landscape. We offer empirical evidence about how the live broadcast of a commemoration ceremony in China, a typical example of media events, is related to viewers’ emotional arousal and the strength of their social identity. Specifically, the study highlights the role of co-viewing in this process and investigates how three types of co-viewing situations contribute to viewers’ emotional arousal and social identity.

Our data showed a good fit to the model based on the proposed hypotheses. We found that viewers who experienced higher emotional arousal during watching the live broadcast of the Commemoration reported stronger social identity related to the event, in this case nationalism (H1). This means that the much debated relevance of media event, which is theorized to be socially integrative, renews the belief system, unites its members, and does not diminish in the contemporary media ecology and social zeitgeist.

Katz and Liebes (2007) argued that the proliferation of media channels and people’s cynicism toward established social institutions would lead to the demise of media events of social integration. This genre would be upstaged by breaking news of disaster and terror. However, our findings clearly demonstrate that large audience can still be genuinely excited by integrative media events and experience high level of identification with a certain socially constructed belief system. One possible reason for this discrepancy might be that Katz and Liebes (2007) suggested different media channels are used to consume and discuss different media programming, which could distract audience’s attention to the important media event and thus weaken its effect on social integration. In contrast, in our study, probably due to the authoritarian political system in China and the government’s absolute control over media, the Commemoration was the only media programming that our participants could access on the day. Therefore, social media and even interpersonal discussions in our study are centered around the Commemoration and thereby function to augment its effect.

However, because of the cross-sectional design, causal interpretation should be avoided. Without an experimental design, we cannot rule out alternative explanation where people with stronger social identity flocked to the television for identity gratification (Harwood, 1999) and got emotionally aroused. In fact, oftentimes media selectivity and media effects exist in a “reinforcing spiral,” which means they influence and are influenced by each other (Slater, 2007).

In addition, this research integrates co-viewing scholarship on routine television shows and the theorization of media event. The original theorization of media events focuses on the liveness of the broadcasting and the perceived co-participation afforded by the liveness. Physical co-participation is left unelaborated because it is considered a feature of physical rituals and not unique of media events. This might not be essential for media events from a sociological perspective. Nonetheless, physical co-participation is an important part of individual viewers’ experience of media events. Meanwhile, few scholarly work on social media engagement or dual-screening has concentrated on live participation in important events. In this research, the inclusion of physical, mediated, and perceived co-viewing can provide a comprehensive understanding of the detailed mechanism of media events’ effects on the individual level.

Findings in this research demonstrate that co-viewing conditions are important for ceremonial broadcast genre like media events. The three co-viewing situations are all positively related to the viewers’ emotional arousal. Essentially, the nature of the three co-viewing conditions is the co-participation in a mediated ritual with an in-group collectivity that is prototypical and depersonalized.
Therefore, we provide a psychological explanation and empirical support to Dayan and Katz’s (1992) and Collins’ (2004) arguments in the context of mediated rituals.

Interestingly, among the three co-viewing situations, social media engagement is the strongest predictor of emotional arousal. The influence of perceived co-viewing with the imagined community as theorized for classic media events is the weakest, whereas the influence of physical co-viewing sits in between. This might be because different communication channels afford different levels of sociality. Conceptualizing communication as ritualistic (Carey, 1989), interactions among co-viewers in different conditions provide a sense of collectivity regardless of the specific content of their interactions. In physical co-viewing, the felt collectivity is concrete but limited. A viewer’s physical co-viewers might not manifest all prototypical traits of the social identity. On the contrary, the imagined national community experienced in perceived co-viewing could be representative and vast in scope. But in the meantime, it is also abstract and vague. Engagement in social media provides viewers with the sense of both the concreteness and the vast scope of the community they belong to. In fact, the qualitative answers to the social media platforms show a mixture of applications with different technological features. In these applications, there are identifiable individual users that viewers can engage with online, but there are also re-tweet/share chains, “likes,” and hashtag communities that suggest to social media users the overall collectivity that empowers them (Bruns & Sauter, 2015). Because the collectivity embodied in social media is both concrete and comprehensive, we speculate that it might explain the stronger relationship between mediated co-viewing and viewers’ emotional arousal. Future studies on co-viewing of media events should focus on specific media features or affordances to validate our speculation.

The overall model and the tested indirect effects suggest mediation of emotional arousal on the relationship between co-viewing conditions and viewers’ social identity. This finding suggests the importance of emotions in viewers’ experience with this specific broadcast genre. The finding reveals a mechanism of cultivating media consumers with social meanings that is different from the classic cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The classic cultivation theory focuses on the cultivation impact of media on individuals’ cognitions about social reality, and this impact takes a long time and must be achieved through heavy exposure to media content (Hawkins & Pingree, 1982). However, when it comes to media events and viewers’ identities, emotion plays an important role in building and reinforcing certain cultural meanings. Moreover, emotions can be amplified by viewers’ active participation in the convergent media environment.

Finally, contrary to previous studies of multitasking in media consumption (Van Cauwenberge, Schaap, & Van Roy, 2014), we found that dual-screening is not a distraction of media events viewing but rather an enhancer of it. As we argued earlier, this could be because all communication channels in our study are centered around the Commemoration and function to maximize its effect, due to Chinese government’s control over media. Hence, this suggests a moderator that might influence the impact of dual-screening: the specific media programming that viewers consume. If cross-media programming is monopolized, dual-screening could amplify media effect.

For practitioners, this may open new possibility of television genres, such as closed caption-based interaction and Twitter+TV, at least during important live and ceremonial media genres. In these genres that are more ritualistic than informational, encouraging viewers to interact with a larger community beyond their immediate physical environment could greatly enhance viewers’ identification with the community as well as the value system of this community. With stronger identification, more loyal consumption of convergent media content and more active participation in online and offline activities could be expected in politics, education, and marketing, among other contexts.
Limitations and future research

This study has a number of conceptual and methodological limitations. First, the current sample constrains the generalizability of the findings. As explained, in the sampling strategy section, the choice of a non-random student sample is mainly dictated by some practical reasons. We tried to mitigate this limitation with a decent sample size within limited time of data collection after the live broadcast and with a combination of two universities in Northern and Southern China, which provide a reasonable mixture of cultural and ideological orientations.

Nevertheless, future research should employ a larger random sample of the general population. This is especially important considering that the subject matter of this research deals with national identity and a society-wide ritual.

Second, the current research is a cross-sectional design. Survey data were collected after the viewing of the Commemoration. It could be argued that the nationalism level measured in the survey is not solely the result of watching the media event but also the outcome of long-term cultivation in China. However, nationalism as a dimension of national attachment only becomes salient in a person’s self-concept after being primed with familiar in-group prototypes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The survey was distributed and administered immediately after the live broadcast of the event when there was still intensive coverage in mainstream media about this event. Nonetheless, future research should employ experiment or longitudinal design to provide a better picture of the relationship, especially the causality between the nationalism level and viewers’ emotional reactions to a media event.

Moreover, exposure to media events is only one approach to this long-term cultivation. Other mundane interactions like social media use and face-to-face conversations may also contribute to their social identity and facilitate social solidarity. Thus, cautions are required to interpret our findings, as we may exaggerate the influence of media events without controlling the influence of other forms of mundane communication. We call for a communication multiplexity approach to investigating the process by which consuming media events affects social identity. By controlling the impact of other channels, future research may generate more accurate understanding of the unique contribution of media events on social identity.

Finally, measurements of physical co-viewing and perceived co-viewing are based on single-item instruments. Although single-item measurements could potentially suffer in reliability, when used to gauge attributes of concrete objects such as physical interactions, they have similar reliability and predictive power as multi-item instruments (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Wanous & Hudy, 2001).

In conclusion, this study finds significant relationships between media event viewers’ co-viewing conditions and their emotional arousal and between emotional arousal and social identity. The findings provide empirical support to media events’ social integration power in the contemporary media environment and demonstrate the importance of various co-viewing conditions for this broadcast genre.

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