

ARTICLE

Feeling the nation together: Offline esports spectatorship and the sensorial imagined community in China

Zhengxuezi Ji^{1,2*}  and Ming Ma² ¹Faculty of Humanities, Xiamen Huaxia University, Xiamen, Fujian, China²Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, City University of Macau, Taipa, Macau SAR, China

Abstract

Offline esports spectatorship has become an important setting in which nationalist feeling generated online is acted out through the body. This article draws on participant observation at four cinema screenings held in Zhuhai during the 2025 League of Legends World Championship, together with semi-structured interviews with eleven participants, to propose the analytical concept of the “sensorial imagined community.” The concept describes how a physical venue converts loose online sentiment into a felt experience of collective identity, and it does so along four interlocking dimensions: spatial anchoring, sensory synchronization, bodily co-presence, and narrative negotiation. Where the body re-enters the communicative process, we argue, the mechanism by which a community is imagined widens from the asynchronous reading Anderson described to synchronous sensory contact and shared physical practice. The framework thus extends imagined community theory into sensory and bodily territory.

***Corresponding author:**Zhengxuezi Ji
(H25092105110@cityu.edu.mo)

Citation: Ji Z, Ma M. Feeling the nation together: Offline esports spectatorship and the sensorial imagined community in China. *Arts & Communication*. doi: 10.36922/AC026180028

Received: April 30, 2026**Revised:** August 14, 2026**Accepted:** August 17, 2026**Published online:** September 7, 2026

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Publisher's Note: AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Keywords: Digital nationalism; Imagined community; Sensorial practices; Participatory culture; Esports culture

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, esports has moved from the margins of youth subculture into the global cultural and economic mainstream, forming an ecosystem that links competitive play, media entertainment, fan culture, and digital consumption.^{1,2} In China, this shift has been especially rapid: the esports user base has reached 490 million³, and competitive gaming now sits close to the center of youth cultural life. Among esports events, the League of Legends (LOL) World Championship is the largest annual media event in the field. It draws hundreds of millions of simultaneous online viewers worldwide and generates a dense layer of offline collective viewing—public screenings in cinemas, bars, and campus halls that turn a virtual contest into a physical group ritual.^{4,5}

Nationalist sentiment is a conspicuous feature of this field, and it is worth investigating for two reasons. First, although LOL is a commercial product of transnational capital, its regional league system borrows the structure of nation-state competition and attaches it to a club-based model, which gives spectators a ready-made landscape of identification.^{6,7} Second, nationalism is now widely understood to operate

inside everyday consumer and entertainment cultures rather than only in formal political arenas^{8,9}, and esports is among the settings where this is most visible.^{10,11} What remains unclear is the mechanism of transfer: how does sentiment that circulates online as discourse become an intense bodily experience of collective belonging offline? Benedict Anderson's account of the nation as an imagined community¹² is the natural starting point, but it was built for a world of print. In offline viewing, a single screen fixes every gaze, synchronized shouting fuses individual voices into one acoustic mass, and high-fives and embraces pass emotion directly between bodies.¹³ We call the community formed on this basis a sensorial imagined community: a process in which fluid online sentiment is converted into embodied collective identity through four intertwined dimensions—spatial anchoring, sensory synchronization, bodily co-presence, and narrative negotiation.

Based on the above, this study proposes two core research questions:

- (i) How does offline esports spectatorship turn loose online nationalist sentiment into a bodily experience of collective identity, and how do the spatial, sensory, bodily, and narrative dimensions work together to bring that about?
- (ii) What do sensory experience and bodily practice change about the way a community is imagined? And what does that change imply for Anderson's account, which rests on reading rather than on the senses?

We pursue these questions in a single setting: the “Jinyi LOL Fan Spectatorship” community in Zhuhai, which operates both online and offline. A close description of one case allows us to trace how the sensorial imagined community comes into being and what keeps it running, and it offers a small but sharply focused view of nationalism in the digital age.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

Work on how digital nationalism is enacted in offline viewing venues sits across communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. This section reviews that work along four threads and then sets out the analytical framework we build from it.

2.1. Literature review

To grasp the embodied generation process of digital nationalist sentiment in offline esports spectatorship, the review is organized along four interrelated threads.

2.1.1. Digital nationalism: From online mobilization to the offline turn

Early research on digital nationalism focused on the mechanisms of expression and mobilization of nationalist sentiment in cyberspace. Scholars have pointed out that digital platforms have engendered more participatory, affective, and symbolic forms of nationalism⁹, characterized by the memefication and playful mockery of discourse¹⁴, giving rise to a “joking nationalism”¹⁵; the emotional “echo chamber” effects produced by algorithmic and stratified communication¹⁶; and the emergence of participatory collective actions such as the “Diba Expedition.”¹¹

In recent years, research has witnessed a marked offline turn. Bernroider *et al.*¹⁷ showed how online connective action turns into offline collective action, and Schneider¹⁸ analyzed the interaction of Chinese digital nationalism across the online–offline nexus. Research on Chinese fandom has further shown that idol attachment and participation in online fan communities are associated with stronger fandom nationalism, demonstrating how entertainment-based identification can become linked to national belonging.¹⁹ Offline esports spectatorship constitutes a representative case within this turn: it inherits the characteristics of online digital nationalism while situating them within a temporary space of physical gathering and sensory immersion, making it a crucial intermediate link for examining the social integration of digital nationalism.

2.1.2. Contemporary extensions of media event theory

In the current context of media fragmentation and audience empowerment, however, esports events, as commercial entertainment products, have seen their authority and monopoly status dissolve. Earlier, Dayan and Katz²⁰ conceptualized major live broadcasts such as the Olympic Games and the moon landing as “sacred moments” that interrupt daily routines, summoning society-wide attention and reinforcing national identity. Subsequently, scholars have revisited Dayan and Katz's theory, analyzing its applicability in the digital age and emphasizing three core dimensions: “liveness,” “control,” and “participation.”²¹ Today, audiences deeply intervene in the weaving of meaning through danmaku (barrage comments), social media topics, secondary creation, and offline spectatorship, transforming these events into participatory rituals.²² Couldry and Hepp²³ further showed that audience practices may involve compliance and resistance at the same time. Accordingly, this paper

conceptualizes the offline spectatorship space as a hybrid media ritual space where global narratives converge with local interpretations, and where the collective production of emotions proceeds in parallel with their performance.

2.1.3. *The embodied turn of the “imagined community”*

Anderson¹² defined the nation as an imagined community formed through the creation of “homogeneous, empty time” by print capitalism. In the digital age, livestreaming technology has produced more precise “experiences of simultaneity”²⁴, with global viewers fixing their gaze on the same teamfight at the very same second. This “sense of the present as a moment we are living through history together and of intertwined destiny” far surpasses the asynchronous simultaneity brought about by print.²⁵ Digital platforms have also given rise to highly effective micro-communities based on regional leagues and teams.²⁶

More crucially, there is the corporeal turn of the “imagined.” In fact, the connection between physical gathering and collective emotion has deep theoretical roots in sociology. As early as his study of religious life, Durkheim²⁷ advanced the concept of “collective effervescence,” and Collins²⁸ later developed the theory of “interaction ritual chains.” These classic expositions provide a sociological foundation for understanding the embodied emotions in offline esports spectatorship. Subsequently, scholars have emphasized that nationalism is a form of “embodied emotional practice”^{29,30}, with the core proposition that national identity is not only reproduced cognitively through symbols but also constructed affectively through bodily practices and sensory experiences. Offline esports spectatorship serves as a site wherein the “imagination” of the digital age is sensorially encoded and bodily grounded; through on-site visual, auditory, and interactive experiences, spectators attain immersive collective memory and emotional resonance.¹ The jointly watched livestream footage unifies sightlines, synchronized cheers and chants merge individuals into a collective acoustic wave, and bodily contacts such as high-fives and clapping directly transmit emotion.^{13,31} These multi-sensory, corporeally synchronized practices transform the abstract cognition that “we are LOL Pro League (LPL) supporters” into an embodied sense of co-presence. At the same time, Billig’s⁸ concept of “banal nationalism” reminds us that the reproduction of national identity does not rely solely on sporadic ritual moments, but also permeates every detail of everyday consumption and entertainment practices, and the performance of regional league identification in esports spectatorship is a contemporary manifestation of this very logic.

2.2. Esports spectatorship as event culture

A fourth body of work approaches esports spectatorship without reference to nationalism. It is useful here precisely because it establishes what can be explained without that frame. Comparative research on viewing modes finds that attending an event in person and watching a stream satisfy partly distinct motivational profiles, with co-located attendance associated more strongly with social and atmospheric gratifications than with the informational ones that dominate online viewing.⁵ Work on the affective properties of event venues shows that atmospheric elements such as crowd density, sound, and visual staging shape spectators’ emotional responses and their intention to return.⁴ Studies of esports as an experience economy document how events, peripherals, and fashion are assembled into a consumable whole¹, while research on regional event markets traces how a city converts online attention into physical attendance and local economic activity.² Commercial analyses extend this to sponsorship, showing that the perceived fit between brand and event mediates the value spectators derive from consumption.³² Research on the emotional texture of LOL spectatorship identifies the affective peaks and the shared interpretive work that characterize the viewing experience.³³

Taken together, this literature establishes that a substantial part of what happens in an offline viewing venue—heightened emotion, atmospheric absorption, social pleasure, consumption—requires no national frame to be explained. We take this seriously rather than treating it as a rival account to be set aside. It fixes the baseline against which the present study operates. Our claim is not that offline spectatorship generates intense collective emotion, which this work has already shown, but that, under certain conditions, that emotion becomes attached to national referents and that this attachment occurs through identifiable spatial, sensory, bodily, and narrative operations.

The literature reviewed above supplies a solid foundation, but three gaps remain. First, although work on digital nationalism has registered an offline turn, most of it stops at establishing that the turn exists; there is little processual analysis of the micro-mechanisms by which a physical venue converts diffuse online feeling into a felt sense of collective identity. Second, media event theory was built around the ceremonial broadcast that monopolizes attention. Offline esports spectatorship is commercial and participatory; its ritual structure and its emotional logic both differ, and whether the classic framework transfers has not been tested. Third, imagined community theory and its later sensory and embodied extensions indicate a direction but stop short of an operational model. What

is missing is a framework that holds the spatial, sensory, bodily, and narrative dimensions together and shows how they interlock to produce a community.

2.3. Analytical framework: The four-dimensional generative mechanism of the sensorial imagined community

It is precisely on the basis of the above research gaps that this study focuses on the empirical field of offline esports spectatorship, which embodies both digital nationalist practices and the characteristics of embodied ritual, and proposes the “sensorial imagined community” as an integrative analytical framework. This framework concretizes the sensory and bodily dimensions of Anderson’s¹² “imagined community” concept and reveals its generative mechanism through four intertwined dimensions: spatial anchoring, sensory synchronization, bodily co-presence, and narrative negotiation. Table 1 summarizes how each of the four dimensions engages with the literature on which it draws.

It is necessary to clarify that this study’s retention of the term “imagined community” is grounded in the core insights of Anderson’s¹² theory. The community is “imagined” precisely because, even in the case of the smallest nation, its members can never all know one another, and the boundaries of the community extend far beyond the scope of face-to-face interaction. Although the spectators gathered in the cinema are in a state of face-to-face co-presence, as they cheer, high-five, and shout, the “we” they imagine and perceive extends far beyond the several dozen people physically present. They are aware that at this very moment, millions of LPL supporters across the country and around the world are watching the same match in unison, sharing the same tension and ecstasy. In other words, offline bodily co-presence does not eliminate the need for “imagination”; rather, it provides sensory anchoring and experiential corroboration for imagining a larger community. The collective bodily responses of those present render that larger, invisible “we” more credible and

real. It is precisely this dual operation—“confirming the absent through the present, verifying imagination through the senses”—that constitutes the theoretical distinctiveness of the sensorial imagined community vis-à-vis Anderson’s¹² original formulation.

It is also necessary here to delineate the operationalized understanding of “digital nationalism” adopted in this study. This study does not narrowly equate digital nationalism with explicit political stances or declarations of national allegiance; rather, it approaches digital nationalism as a spectrum-like composite phenomenon⁹, encompassing various levels ranging from an unconscious sense of regional league belonging and the collective sharing of competitive honor, to the conscious activation of the “China vs. Korea” narrative frame, and further to overt expressions of patriotic sentiment. In the context of esports spectatorship, the regional league system is itself a commercial transplantation of the nation-state competition framework. Although the metaphorical mapping between the “LPL region” and “China” is not an automatic equivalence, it has been repeatedly constructed by tournament narratives, media discourse, and fan culture into a highly accessible resource for identification. Therefore, this study focuses not on whether participants hold a self-conscious nationalist stance but on how, in the practical process of regional league identification, nationalist sentiment functions as an activatable cultural resource that is mobilized, performed, and experienced to varying degrees under specific spatial and bodily conditions.

This spectrum-based definition also obliges us to separate two terms that are often used interchangeably. Digital nationalism refers to a process and a field: the ways in which national sentiment is produced, circulated, and mobilized within digital infrastructures, including platform affordances, algorithmic curation, memetic reproduction, and fan-community discourse.^{9,18} It names a condition of the communicative environment rather than

Table 1. The four-dimensional framework of the sensorial imagined community in dialogue with the literature

Dimension	Core mechanism	Literature in dialogue	Analytical focus
Spatial anchoring	Re-localization and Re-signification	Lefebvre ³⁷ ; Abdel-Ghani ³⁵	Symbolic transformation and spatial discipline
Sensory synchronization	Synchronic compression of collective emotional rhythm	Anderson ¹² ; Jordheim & Ytreberg ²⁵	From “empty time” to “surging time”
Bodily co-presence	Embodied conduction of emotion	Durkheim ²⁷ ; Collins ²⁸ ; Ismer ²⁹ ; Sullivan ³⁰	High-fives, hugs, and other embodied practices
Narrative negotiation	Weaving of meaning and consolidation of collective memory	Jenkins & Carpentier ²² ; McCauley <i>et al.</i> ² ; Billig ⁸	Meme-making culture and critical interpretation

any single act. National identity expression, in contrast, refers to discrete communicative acts through which individuals or groups make national belonging explicit: saying “our Chinese team,” waving a flag, or framing a match as a China–Korea confrontation. The two are closely related, but they are not equivalent. Digital nationalism can persist as a latent affective resource without generating any explicit expression, and isolated expressions of national identity can occur entirely outside digital circuits.

The distinction matters for this study because the four-dimensional mechanism we propose is precisely an account of the conversion between them. Offline spectatorship does not create national sentiment from nothing, nor does it merely amplify sentiment that already exists. It supplies the spatial, sensory, bodily, and narrative conditions under which a diffuse and largely latent digital nationalism is, at particular moments, converted into concentrated and observable acts of national identity expression, which are then sedimented back into online space as shareable material. Digital nationalism is thus both the input to the process and its residue; the expression of national identity is its visible output. Holding the two apart allows a more precise question than “is this nationalism?” We can ask instead under what conditions a latent resource becomes an explicit act, which is what the analysis below sets out to answer.

The sensorial imagined community does not start from nothing. It works on sentiment that has already accumulated online, where tournament streams and social media activity do the initial affective work. Both streams converge on the offline venue, which then functions as a generative apparatus. The physical properties of the cinema, its darkness, its enclosure, and its air of ritual, anchor diffuse online feeling in a specific material site and set the four-dimensional mechanism in motion. Spatial anchoring, bodily co-presence, narrative negotiation, and sensory synchronization then reinforce one another in a loop rather than a sequence. What the loop produces is collective identity in embodied form, which settles into cultural memory and community capital and flows back online, completing the reproductive cycle of digital nationalism (Figure 1).

3. Research subjects and methods

We worked within an interpretivist paradigm and used a qualitative case study design. A close description of one information-rich case showed how nationalist sentiment acquired bodily cohesion through sensory and physical practice inside an offline viewing venue.

3.1. Research field and participants

Fieldwork was conducted in two commercial cinemas in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province: Yaolong International Cinema (Yingbin Plaza branch) and Chengfeng Cinema (Qianshan branch). Zhuhai is a hub city in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, and its open and plural cultural life gives emerging youth cultures such as esports room to take hold. The two venues differed in scale and equipment. Chengfeng is large and well equipped, which produced a sense of occasion; Yaolong is more compact, which made interaction feel closer. For the S15 tournament, the organizer converted both into hybrid spaces that combined esports elements with ordinary cinema arrangements, and the contrast between them made the pair well suited to observing embodied practice.

We focused our research on the local fan community “Jinyi LOL Fan Spectatorship” and the four spectatorship events it co-organized with the aforementioned cinemas during the S15 World Championship in 2025. Attendance was not recorded by the organizers, and the figures given here are the first author’s on-site estimates based on observed seat occupancy in the two auditoriums; across the four events, they ranged from roughly 80 to 150 spectators. We reported them as estimates rather than counts because no ticketing data were made available to us. Figure 2 shows one of the four events in progress. Employing a purposive sampling strategy, we selected 11 key actors from these events as research participants, including 1 core organizer and 10 participants, so as to ensure coverage of diverse perspectives ranging from planning to experience.

3.2. Research methods and data collection

The study combined participant observation with semi-structured interviews. Data were collected between October and November 2025. In terms of participant observation, the first author adopted a “participant-as-observer” role, attending all four offline spectatorship events and joining the associated online WeChat group (344 members) from October 14, 2025, to November 9, 2025. This produced 23 hours of offline fieldwork and more than one month of online group observation. The observation focused on three core dimensions: (i) spatial configuration and material culture; (ii) patterns of social interaction and emotional expression among organizers, core fans, and general spectators; and (iii) the complete ritual process from pre-match warm-up to post-match communication. All observations were supplemented by detailed fieldnotes and audiovisual materials captured with permission.

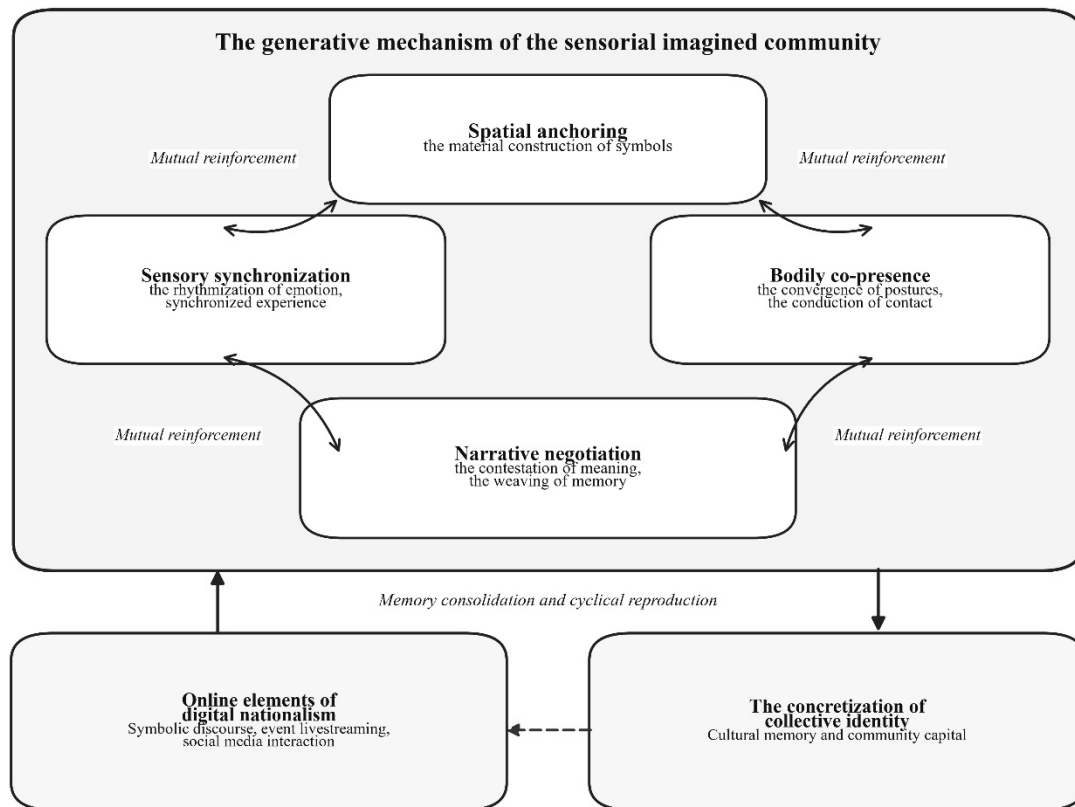


Figure 1. The generative mechanism model of the sensorial imagined community



Figure 2. General view of an auditorium during one of the screenings (photograph by the first author; identifiable faces have been irreversibly pixelated)

For in-depth interviews, the study adopted a purposive sampling strategy³⁴ and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 key actors, including both event organizers and participants (Table 2). The interview guide was designed around the four analytical dimensions of the “sensorial imagined community,” while remaining open and flexible so as to capture emergent themes. The average interview duration was approximately 78 minutes. One interviewee (I-06) had attended the events with a friend rather than out of any prior involvement with the community and was unable to speak to most of the topics covered in the interview guide. That interview was therefore not quoted in the analysis. We recorded the case here rather than passing over it, because it bears on the boundary condition set out in **Section 5**: without prior affective investment, the mechanism described in this paper has little to work with.

Analysis was theory-driven. We used the four dimensions of the sensorial imagined community as *a priori* categories, sorted the fieldnotes and interview transcripts into them, and drew on representative quotations to show how each dimension operated in practice.

4. Findings

The sections that follow draw on more than a month of online and offline observation, along with interviews with 11 participants, to show how the imagined community of the digital age is built through the senses within one local venue. We take the four dimensions in turn.

4.1. Spatial anchoring

The primary function of the offline spectatorship space is to provide stable spatial anchoring for fluid digital nationalist sentiments, a process whose essence lies in participants’ practice of the “re-localization” and “re-signification” of the commercial cinema.³⁵ At the event site, the cinema’s regular posters were replaced with S15 promotional posters and banners; the LOL theme song played on a loop in the background; and a support item distribution point was set up at the ticket checkpoint, where spectators could present their tickets to receive a complimentary gift package containing support banners for their teams, luminous wristbands, handheld banners, inflatable cheering sticks, commemorative paper ticket cards, and some small snacks. At the same time, spectators could buy a discounted popcorn-and-cola snack combo on-site. The cinema space thus retained its inherent sense of order while being infiltrated and transformed by esports elements, becoming a temporary cultural space situated between cinema and competition venue. Organizer I-11 explained the reasons for choosing the cinema as follows:

The first reason is that renting a cinema is relatively low in cost. The second is that the very format of esports competition is entirely screen-based, so that is precisely the cinema’s advantage. It needs to be dark around you—once the lights go off, all attention is forcibly concentrated onto that giant screen—that’s what allows everyone to watch comfortably. (Interviewee I-11, personal communication, November 21, 2025)

Table 2. Summary of basic information of interviewees

Interviewee code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Esports viewing experience	Interview date	Interview duration	Travel time to the viewing venue
I-01	M	25	Government staff	10 years	November 15, 2025	75 min	1 h
I-02	M	30	Financial worker	11 years	November 15, 2025	80 min	30 min
I-03	M	28	Mechanical engineer	12 years	November 15, 2025	65 min	1 hour
I-04	F	29	Freelancer	8 years	November 15, 2025	60 min	1 h
I-05	M	28	Business bidding specialist	10 years	November 16, 2025	82 min	20 min
I-06	F	28	Freelancer	1 year	November 20, 2025	55 min	30 min
I-07	F	37	Internet industry	5 years	November 20, 2025	79 min	20 min
I-08	M	25	Graphic designer	7 years	November 20, 2025	120 min	30 min
I-09	M	33	Real estate industry	10 years	November 21, 2025	68 min	10 min
I-10	F	29	Corporate employee	12 years	November 26, 2025	56 min	40 min
I-11	M	25	Student	10 years	November 21, 2025	120 min	30 min

The way in which on-site technology and spatial superposition created a “sensory community” corroborated McLuhan’s³⁶ proposition that “the medium is the extension of man.” The organizer carried out meticulous semiotic modifications of the cinema hall. The Invictus Gaming (IG) team banner hung at the cinema entrance, beside the support-material distribution point, forming an indexical frame that bundled and superimposed global tournament culture onto local community identity. Space being a social product³⁷, the cinema was, at this moment, transformed through practical action into an “LPL home ground” imbued with collective emotional significance. The experience of Interviewee I-10 corroborated this effect:

The moment I stepped into the cinema hall and saw the IG team banner hanging at the very front, I immediately felt that this was no longer an ordinary cinema—it was our home ground. (Interviewee I-10, personal communication, November 26, 2025)

Calling the auditorium a home ground shows what spatial anchoring does: it gives an abstract sense of community something concrete to attach itself to. Spatial anchoring also reached the participants themselves, through objects they wore and carried. Matching team shirts, IG and Top Esports among them, along with handheld banners, national flags, and team stickers, added a further layer to the symbolic system and turned regional and national allegiance into markers worn on the body. Interviewee I-04 described the recognition these objects made possible:

I was wearing an IG T-shirt. While queuing, the guy in front of me turned around, saw the logo, smiled, and gave me a thumbs-up. Without any need for words, we knew we were on the same side. (Interviewee I-04, personal communication, November 15, 2025)

As a team from the LPL (China’s mainland region), IG has had its emblem repeatedly encoded in international tournaments as a synonym for “Chinese esports”; wearing it thus constitutes an unconscious participation in the metaphorical mapping between “region” and “nation.” At the same time, this instantaneous recognition grounded in shared symbols enacts, at the micro level, what Anderson¹² termed the “fraternal love” of the community. Objects carry memory, emotion, and identity.³⁸ In this context, support items are not merely consumer products, but also serve as credentials and performative props for participating in a form of patriotic consumption³⁹; the individual body becomes an active marker of community boundaries, continuously reproducing the distinction between “us” and “them.”

The black-box physical properties of the cinema itself

provided conditions conducive to community cohesion.⁴⁰ Once the lights were turned off, the external world was sealed off, and the giant screen together with the surround sound system became the sole sensory source, creating a deeply immersive space. The class and occupational differences that are accentuated in everyday life were temporarily suspended in the darkness, and the shared identities of “LPL supporter,” “esports fan,” or “player who loves LOL” were pushed to the foreground. Core fans, having purchased tickets in advance, occupied the best seats, while newcomers were scattered along the periphery; this seating segmentation silently demarcated internal community boundaries. Here, space was more than a container; its physical attributes shaped patterns of social interaction and the intensity of collective emotion, thereby laying the foundation for the subsequent sensory synchronization.

4.2. Sensory synchronization

Offline viewing compresses the reach and simultaneity that digital media supply into one intense, local sensory experience. Anderson, following Walter Benjamin, called the temporal frame on which national imagination depends “homogeneous, empty time.” The point of that phrase is not that such time contains no emotion. It is that the modern nation-state depends on a secular and evenly flowing conception of time, within which anonymous members scattered across many places can picture one another’s coexistence by reading the same thing at the same moment. Offline spectatorship changes the texture of that experience. The simultaneity Anderson described is asynchronous and inferred: readers in different places read the same newspaper and infer that others are doing likewise. Simultaneity in the auditorium is immediate and available to the senses. Through the synchronized responses of the people around them, their cheers, their held breath, their sighs, spectators confirm at the level of sensation that everyone present is going through the same thing at the same second.

Each match followed a standardized ritual opening sequence: the theme song, the opening animation, and the hosts’ introductions. As the theme song resounded, the chatter in the cinema hall quickly subsided, heads turned synchronously toward the screen, and bodily postures adjusted accordingly, marking a collective transition from “everyday time” to “event ritual time” and ushering participants into a state of egalitarian communal fusion.⁴¹ Interviewee I-02 drew the following contrast:

Watching the livestream at home, you get easily distracted; time feels fragmented. But here, everyone just instantly gets into the zone. This feeling of being

enveloped by a collective rhythm is something you do not get online. (Interviewee I-02, personal communication, November 15, 2025)

Offline collective spectatorship reinforced the sacredness of the event livestream as the ritual “center”⁴²; synchronizing itself affirmed the ritual order. Collective emotion did not remain high throughout. It rose and fell sharply in step with events in the game. A successful Level 1 invasion drew a wave of appreciative noise, a pentakill produced several seconds of screaming and applause across the whole auditorium, and a costly mistake brought a single collective groan. Because every match pitted the LPL (China’s mainland region) against the LOL Champions Korea (LCK) (Korea region), these swings were more polarized than they would otherwise have been. Interviewee I-05 compared the experience to a concert:

It is just like listening to a concert—the battles in the game are the melody, and we, the audience, our reactions are the harmony. Everyone’s responses are almost reflexively synchronized. Especially in those moments of sudden eruption, it is utterly overwhelming; and especially when our Chinese team wins a team fight, that is when the most exultant cheering comes out. (Interviewee I-05, personal communication, November 16, 2025)

Here, the referent “Chinese team” directly achieves discursive equivalence from region to nation, marking a leap of nationalist sentiment from implicit regional league affiliation to explicit national identity. At the same time, this second, precise emotional synchronization transcends the slowly formed synchronous imagination through reading depicted by Anderson, creating a sense of reality of “shared experience” that is instantly intense and directly verifiable through hearing and bodily postures, giving rise to a highly cohesive affective public grounded in real-time shared emotions.⁴³

Synchronization was most extreme at the moments that settled a match. During the tense stretches of the semifinals, the auditorium went completely quiet, spectators leaning forward with their eyes fixed on the screen. That silence was not an absence of feeling but a saturation of it, held in place by tension. When one side won a fight, the noise broke all at once, and the swing from near-silence to full volume worked as a mechanism for storing and then releasing collective emotional energy. It sharpened the sense of shared fate considerably. The elation or flatness of the closing minutes pushed synchronization to its highest point, and interviewees remembered those moments most vividly afterward. They became the anchor points of the community’s collective memory.

4.3. Bodily co-presence

What offline space adds, and what nothing online replaces, is that collective emotion can be carried, amplified, and checked through visible posture and direct physical contact. This is what we mean by bodily co-presence: it turns an imagined relationship into something socially real.

Throughout each event, spectators’ bodies gave away what they were feeling. At tense moments, the whole audience leaned forward, hands clenched or over their mouths. After a piece of skillful play, they leaned back together, hands spread in astonishment. After a defeat, whole rows slumped in their seats, shaking their heads. This non-verbal behavior was highly imitative and spread quickly. Interviewee I-08 described it:

The guy sitting to my left clenched his fist, and without realizing it, you find your own hand balling up too. It is as if your body no longer belongs to you alone, but is connected to the entire venue. (Interviewee I-08, personal communication, November 20, 2025)

This phenomenon of postural convergence aligns with the fundamental proposition of embodied cognition theory: cognition, emotion, and bodily states are inseparable.⁴⁴ Collective bodily postures not only reflected emotion but, through mutual observation and imitation, actively shaped and reinforced emotion itself, externalizing individual feelings into a visible and unified collective bodily spectacle and endowing the community with a tangible, visceral sense of reality.

Direct physical contact, within the limits of what felt permissible, did more than shared posture. After a win, explosive high-fives and embraces between neighbors were the standard form of celebration, whether or not the people involved knew each other. Following one comeback, the first author watched spectators in the front row turn around to trade air high-fives with strangers behind them. After a loss, the gestures were smaller: a hand on a neighbor’s shoulder, a nod. Interviewee I-01 recalled one such moment:

Watching AL (an LPL team) win two matches and enter the final game of the BO5. The guy next to me was a complete stranger, but we both jumped up at the same moment, and then, completely naturally, we just high-fived. In that instant, the ecstasy was not something that belonged to one person alone—it was tangibly transmitted through that high-five. We did not even add each other on WeChat afterward, but I remember that feeling with particular vividness. (Interviewee I-01, personal communication, November 15, 2025)

This momentary physical contact constituted the most condensed, materialized instant of the emotional community. In this context, the high-five became a shared, legitimized social technique for expressing collective euphoria.⁴⁵ It transcended words and symbols, effecting a direct exchange of emotional heat between bodies and creating a brief yet extraordinarily intense experience of fusion, thereby greatly enhancing both the authenticity and the intensity of the sense of belonging.

Bodily co-presence also allowed emotion to be discharged in larger and more theatrical ways. After a win, the whole audience stood and cheered, some jumping, some throwing support items into the air and then retrieving them. After a loss, they sat in low spirits and left in silence, the atmosphere thick with disappointment. Neither response was simply a reaction to the result; both carried a moral charge. Practiced collectively, they wrote a sense of shared fate, and of shared credit and shared shame, into the participants' senses and muscle memory. No online interaction offers anything comparable.

4.4. Narrative negotiation

Without the weaving of meaning, sensory shock and bodily resonance readily dissipate into transient emotional fluctuations. The ultimate consolidation of the sensorial imagined community depends on establishing and circulating a shared meaning system, a process realized through online-offline hybrid "narrative negotiation."² Participants are not passive recipients of official narratives, but active interpreters, critics, and re-creators.

The official broadcast built a grand narrative around regional glory and fighting for the LPL, but on-site reception was uneven. When things were going well, that language drew a strong response. When the team was playing badly, it drew silence, booing, and sometimes mockery: when a commentator urged the audience to trust that the players could adjust, the room laughed and shouted at him not to jinx it. Spectators were clearly capable of reading against the grain. Even so, the region-as-nation frame remained the most powerful container available for diffuse feeling. Interviewee I-03 admitted as much:

Although I knew it was a commercial competition, the moment the commentator said "China vs. Korea showdown," my adrenaline immediately surged. It felt like we were not just watching a game, but participating in something more significant. (Interviewee I-03, personal communication, November 15, 2025)

This "something more significant" refers to imagining a collective national identity activated by narrative. Alongside this, the on-site and online communities

produced a great deal of local discourse, most visibly in the form of memes. Spectators combined players' moves with internet catchphrases to make jokes on the spot, which then traveled through WeChat groups and around the auditorium, tightening both solidarity and boundaries. Post-match discussion mixed tactical analysis with culturally essentializing commentary, attributing losses to poor composure at critical moments and wins to a bold, aggressive Chinese style of play. Interviewee I-05 offered a reading of this kind:

That round of decision-making was way too hasty. The Korean team is just like a robot, and Faker, especially, has an incredibly steady mentality. (Interviewee I-05, personal communication, November 16, 2025)

Tying tactical questions to an essentialized regional temperament is a common way local narratives construct identity and mark off another. Narrative negotiation circulated faster and settled more firmly because the media space was hybrid. Spectators often watched on two screens at once, so a joke made in the room could reach the WeChat group within minutes, while trending topics and statistical comparisons online fed back into how people in the auditorium read the match as it happened. The result was a dense network of negotiation over meaning. In the days after each match, the community produced reviews, statistical breakdowns, edited player videos, and meme compilations; through the off-season it kept going with transfer and roster talk. Interviewee I-11 made the point directly:

The end of the match is only the beginning. What truly binds everyone together are the discussions that go on for days after the match. It becomes a shared story that belongs to all of us. (Interviewee I-11, personal communication, November 21, 2025)

Through collaborative digital practices, the community transformed a transient media event into structured collective memory.³³ In this way, ephemeral emotional experiences were captured and solidified through narrative practices, forming a cultural narrative and memory capital that sustains the continued existence of the community. Table 3 summarizes what the four dimensions produced across the four events, the evidence on which each rests, and the point at which each contributed to the conversion of latent sentiment into explicit expression.

The four dimensions did not run in sequence. They formed a loop in which each fed the next: space supplied the field within which synchronization could happen, synchronization set off bodily response, bodily practice generated local narrative, and narrative gave the space and the practices their meaning while calling the next gathering

into being. What the loop generated was a hybrid identity, that of the player-patriot, grounded in the consumption of a global esports product yet saturated with local national feeling, and performed differently depending on the situation.

5. Discussion

Drawing on fieldwork at offline screenings during the 2025 LOL World Championship in Zhuhai, this study has traced the micro-mechanisms by which online nationalist sentiment becomes an embodied form of collective identity through spatial, bodily, and narrative practice. The sections below address the framework's theoretical implications and its limits.

5.1. The theoretical implications of the sensorial imagined community

Anderson held that the community is imagined through “homogeneous, empty time,” with asynchronous textual reading as the core mechanism, creating in the

reader's mind an illusion of “existing in the same time.”¹² However, our study found that, in the context of offline esports spectatorship, a fundamental displacement of the mechanism of community imagination has taken place: it is no longer textual reading, but the synchronous participation of bodies. Concretely, spatial anchoring fixes global symbols in local sites; sensory synchronization transforms “empty time” into “surging time” saturated with collective emotion; and bodily co-presence enables emotion to transcend symbolic systems and circulate directly through embodied contacts such as high-fives and hugs. This means that, under the condition of the body's re-entry into the communication process, the driving force of community imagination has shifted from “cognitive construction” to “sensory connection”: “we” is no longer merely something imagined, but a real sensation that is jointly seen, jointly heard, and jointly touched. This displacement does not negate Anderson¹², but extends the core mechanism of his theory from the cognitive domain into the sensory and bodily domains.

Table 3. Synthesis of the four dimensions: Practices, evidence, and conversion effects

Dimension	Key observed practices	Representative evidence	Conversion effect (latent sentiment → explicit expression)	Link to the next dimension
Spatial anchoring	Cinema posters replaced with tournament banners; team banner hung at the entrance threshold; support items distributed at the ticket check; jerseys, flags, and stickers worn on the body; core fans seated centrally, newcomers at the periphery	I-11 on cost and enforced darkness; I-10 “no longer an ordinary cinema—it was our home ground”; I-04 on wordless recognition of an IG shirt while queuing	Fixes a globally circulating symbolic repertoire in one material site; turns league affiliation into a visible, wearable boundary marker	Supplies the enclosed sensory field that synchronization requires
Sensory synchronization	Standardized ritual opening of theme song, animation, and host introductions; emotional peaks and troughs locked to in-game events; collective silence during semifinal stalemates followed by acoustic eruption	I-02 contrasting collective rhythm with fragmented attention at home; I-05's concert analogy and the shift to “when our Chinese team wins a team fight”	Compresses Anderson's inferential simultaneity into directly perceptible simultaneity; I-05's renaming of a league side as a national one marks the surfacing of the latent frame	Triggers the bodily responses analyzed next
Bodily co-presence	Postural convergence, leaning forward, clenched fists; high-fives and embraces between strangers; air high-fives exchanged across seat rows; collective standing and item-throwing in victory; consolatory shoulder-patting in defeat	I-08 on involuntarily clenching his own fist in imitation; I-01 on a high-five with a stranger, vividly remembered despite no subsequent contact	Verifies the imagined “we” through physical contact; converts a cognitive claim of membership into a felt one	Generates the shared experience that narrative subsequently encodes
Narrative negotiation	Contested reception of official commentary, including laughter and cries of “Do not jinx it!”; on-site meme production circulated to WeChat groups within minutes; dual-screen viewing; post-match review posts, statistical analyses, and video edits	I-03 on adrenaline surging at “China versus Korea”; I-05's essentializing reading of Korean composure; I-11 “the end of the match is only the beginning”	Encodes sensory and bodily experience into transmissible meaning; consolidates episodic emotion into community memory capital	Endows space and practice with significance and summons the next gathering

It is worth pointing out further that the “sensorial imagined community” proposed in this study and the “banal nationalism” theorized by Billig⁸ are not two diametrically opposed pathways; rather, they form a mutually embedded, synergistic relationship in the practice of offline spectatorship. Billig⁸ emphasized that national identity is unconsciously reproduced in everyday discourse, objects, and habitual practices, with subjects hardly needing to be aware that they are “doing nationalism.” In the fieldwork of this study, there indeed existed a great deal of banal, everyday nationalist practice: for instance, participants casually referring to LPL region teams as “the Chinese team,” or wearing team jerseys without any awareness that they were engaging in political identity expression. These everyday, unreflective symbolic consumptions constituted the underlying soil upon which the sensorial imagined community could be activated. Because the metaphor of “region = nation” had already been banally accepted in everyday spectatorship practices, the ritualized practices in offline space could rapidly elevate it into intense collective emotion. In other words, the everyday permeation revealed by Billig⁸ provided the foundation for identification, while the sensorial imagined community, through active ritualization (participants purchasing tickets, donning support items, and engaging in collective bodily practices within a designated space), abruptly heated this everyday identification into a high-intensity collective emotional condensation within a matter of hours. The key difference lies in their core medium: Billig’s⁸ pathway is mediated by cognition and discourse, whereas the present framework is mediated by sensory experience and bodily practice, with embodied contacts such as high-fives and hugs creating a pathway of emotional transmission that discourse cannot substitute. This is not a negation of Billig, but an unveiling of a parallel pathway for nationalist emotional condensation under conditions of digital media and participatory culture.

Furthermore, research on digital nationalism often homogenizes its subjects; however, through in-depth interviews, this study reveals that even within emotionally charged offline spectatorship communities, complex identifications exist concerning the connection between “esports” and “nationalism.” Among the 11 interviewees, four (I-01, I-02, I-07, I-09) expressed a cautious stance. I-07 stated bluntly: “This is just a gaming competition, a product of capital operations; there is no need to forcibly drag it into patriotism.” (personal communication, November 20, 2025) I-09 similarly believed that supporting the LPL stemmed from competitive appeal and player preferences, “having little to do with whether one is patriotic or not” (personal communication, November 21, 2025). This represents a depoliticized interpretive framework,

indicating that the digital generation of youth possesses considerable media literacy and critical consciousness, enabling them to deconstruct official or mainstream discourse.¹⁰

These participants were not at odds with the surrounding atmosphere. They showed a situational tolerance. I-01 said: “Although I personally do not think that way, I completely understand it, and I also feel that the atmosphere is quite nice” (personal communication, November 15, 2025). I-02 read the collective cheering as “more like a way to vent emotions and seek recognition; there’s no need to blow it out of proportion” (personal communication, November 15, 2025). This suggests that identification among these young people is fluid and, to a degree, strategic. They keep a cognitive distance from grand narratives while accepting the emotional energy and the sociability those narratives generate, and they move between positions as the situation requires.

The presence of these free-floating members tells us something about a community built on sensory synchronization and bodily co-presence. Such a community can hold internal disagreement about meaning because it is an emotional community and a community of practice before it is a community of shared conviction. So long as the emotional rhythm and the physical practices are shared, differences in interpretation can be set aside for the duration. That is much of the appeal of collective ritual offline: it produces shared experience rather than agreement. The cohesive force of the sensorial imagined community comes precisely from its ability to offer an embodied common ground on which incompatible readings can rest, so that people who disagree can still find belonging and enjoyment in the same room.

5.2. Conceptual boundaries: What the sensorial imagined community adds

Because the framework proposed here draws on several established traditions, it is reasonable to ask whether it names a genuinely distinct object or simply recombines existing ones. We therefore set out what the sensorial imagined community does that each of its neighbors does not.

Durkheim’s²⁷ collective effervescence explains how co-present bodies generate emotional intensity, but it was formulated for gatherings whose membership is bounded by the gathering itself; it does not address how participants come to feel connected to a far larger population that is absent. Collins’s²⁸ interaction ritual chains specify the micro-conditions of successful ritual—bodily assembly, barriers to outsiders, shared focus, shared mood—and trace how emotional energy accumulates across encounters;

here too the analytic unit is the encounter and those inside it. Media event theory in the Dayan and Katz²⁰ tradition does address a dispersed national audience, but its object is the ceremonial broadcast that monopolizes attention and interrupts routine, whereas the commercial, participatory, and at times irreverent viewing we observed departs from that model in both ritual structure and emotional logic. Affective publics in Papacharissi's⁴³ sense capture how sentiment aggregates and circulates through networked platforms, but they are constituted discursively and at a distance, and the body plays no part in the account.

What the sensorial imagined community isolates is the operation that none of these describes on its own: the use of present bodies to authenticate an absent collectivity. The spectators in the auditorium do not exhaust the “we” they feel part of, and they know it. Their synchronized gasps and high-fives function as evidence—sensory, immediate, and hard to doubt—that the far larger and permanently invisible community of LPL supporters is real and is feeling the same thing at the same second. Effervescence supplies the intensity, ritual chains supply the mechanism of accumulation, media event theory supplies the occasion, and affective publics supply the online substrate; what we add is a specification of how a small co-present group comes to serve as a sensory instrument for verifying a large imagined one. We would characterize this as a specification rather than an invention, and that is the honest claim to make for it.

A related question is how we can tell whether the emotional intensity recorded here belongs to nationalism at all rather than to esports fandom as such. The two are genuinely difficult to separate, and we do not claim to have isolated one from the other. We can, however, state the grounds on which the analysis distinguishes them.

The first ground is that participants themselves draw the distinction. Four of the 11 interviewees (I-01, I-02, I-07, I-09) explicitly refused the national reading while continuing to take part with evident enthusiasm. I-07's remark that “this is just a gaming competition, a product of capital operations; there is no need to forcibly drag it into patriotism” (personal communication, November 20, 2025) is not a report of low involvement—I-07 attended the events and enjoyed them—but a rejection of one particular interpretation of that involvement. If competitive excitement and national sentiment were the same thing, this position would be incoherent. That it is available to participants, and that several occupy it, indicates two separable registers.

The second ground is linguistic. The analysis does not treat loud cheering as evidence of nationalism. It treats as evidence the specific moments at which the referent of

collective enthusiasm shifts from the team to the nation: I-05's “when our Chinese team wins a team fight” (personal communication, November 16, 2025), in which a club competing in a regional league is renamed as a national side, and I-03's account of adrenaline surging at the commentator's “China versus Korea showdown” (personal communication, November 15, 2025), in which the frame rather than the play produces the reaction. These are observable transitions in reference, not inferences drawn from volume.

The third ground is internal to the fieldwork and comparative. All four events involved LPL–LCK fixtures, so the national frame was continuously available; it was not, however, continuously activated. Emotional peaks tied to skillful play, such as a successful Level 1 invasion or a pentakill, were narrated afterward in technical terms, whereas peaks tied to the China–Korea framing were narrated in essentializing cultural terms, as in I-05's characterization of Korean players as robotic. The same bodies produced comparable acoustic responses; what differed was the meaning attached to them, and it is in that attachment, not in the arousal itself, that we locate nationalism.

A deliberately modest claim follows. We do not argue that offline spectatorship produces nationalists, nor that the intensity recorded here is nationalist intensity in its entirety. We argue that nationalism is available in this setting as an activatable cultural resource, that the four-dimensional mechanism describes the conditions under which it is activated, and that fandom and national sentiment are best understood here as overlapping rather than identical. That overlap is also why the community can accommodate members who decline the national reading without their ceasing to belong.

5.3. Structural conditions of the sensorial imagined community

Before turning to those conditions, we should state the status we claim for the framework. We intend the sensorial imagined community as a middle-range account rather than as either a universal theory or a description valid only for one cinema in Zhuhai. The four-dimensional mechanism is, we argue, portable: wherever a dispersed and affectively invested online population converges on a physical site to watch a mediated contest, the same four operations should be identifiable. What is not portable is the intensity of the outcome, which depends on conditions that vary considerably between settings. This case revealed three such conditions.

The framework set out above rests on one community in one city. Any empirical study is embedded in particular

structural conditions, so it is worth asking directly where this account can be expected to hold and where it cannot.

First, the core condition of this framework lies in participants' prior emotional investment in a specific object of identification (region/nation), and in the fact that this emotion has already undergone fermentation and mobilization within online digital space. Schneider's¹⁸ research on the online–offline interaction of digital nationalism shows that the accumulation of online emotion is a necessary prerequisite for its transformation into offline practice. The observations of this study further corroborate this logic: joining the “Jinyi LOL Fan Spectatorship” community already implies an existing basis of identification with the LPL region. Without this condition—for instance, in spectatorship activities directed at groups with no pre-existing emotional bond—the generative intensity of the sensorial imagined community may be significantly attenuated. The one interviewee in our study who attended without prior involvement (I-06, who came with a friend) could not speak to most of the dimensions we asked about. It is a single case, and we do not rest anything heavy on it, but it points the same way.

Second, the “rituality” of media events constitutes another crucial condition. Dayan and Katz's²⁰ media event theory emphasizes that major media events summon collective attention by interrupting everyday routines. This study finds that in a tournament like S15, which involves a high level of emotional investment, the rituality of the media event provides emotional fuel for sensory synchronization; whereas in regular-season events, even when the same spatial and bodily practices are present, the intensity of emotional synchronization may be greatly reduced. This implies that the generative mechanism of the sensorial imagined community may operate in different modes across different types and emotional intensities of media events.

Third, the identification frame has to be culturally available. Mapping region onto nation is not automatic; it needs a stock of cultural resources to sustain it. In this case, the long history of Chinese and Korean competition in esports, the narrative traditions built up around the LPL, and the personal followings of individual players together supply that stock and make talk of regional glory usable. Where comparable history and narrative traditions are absent, whether the frame can be activated at all is an open empirical question.

6. Practical implications

The findings carry implications for those who organize esports viewing events, and more broadly for clubs and rights holders seeking to build durable local audiences.

The first concerns spatial design. The organizers in this study achieved a great deal with modest resources: they replaced posters, hung a team banner where everyone would pass it, and handed out physical support items at the ticket check. What made these choices effective was not expenditure but sequence and placement. The banner worked because it sat at the threshold, framing everything that followed; the support items worked because spectators received them before entry, so they carried the event's symbols on their own bodies into the auditorium. Organizers seeking to reproduce this effect should treat the entry route, rather than the auditorium alone, as the primary site of design. The darkness and enclosure that I-11 identified as the cinema's chief advantage also suggest that venue selection should prioritize sensory enclosure over seating capacity, which runs against the intuition that a bigger room makes a better event.

The second concerns managing emotional rhythm. Collective emotion at these events was punctuated rather than sustained, and its peaks came from the interaction between in-game events and the ritual scaffolding around them. The standardized opening of the theme song, animation, and host introduction did substantial work in converting a dispersed audience into a synchronized one before play began; events that start abruptly forgo this. Equally, the period immediately after the final match, which organizers often treat as dispersal time, was where much of the community formation happened. Building in a short structured post-match segment, instead of raising the lights and clearing the hall, is a low-cost intervention with disproportionate returns.

The third concerns retention. The community studied here sustained itself between events through its WeChat group and through the meme and review content its members produced. From an organizer's perspective, this content is not a by-product but the mechanism by which a one-off audience becomes a returning one. Encouraging and archiving it is likely to do more for retention than conventional promotional messaging. Sjöblom *et al.*⁵ found that live attendance and online spectating satisfy partly distinct sets of needs; our findings suggest a complementary point: the offline event is valuable to organizers less as a substitute for online viewing than as a generator of the social ties that keep online audiences attached.

One caution should be noted. The mechanisms described in the current study can be deliberately engineered, and the national frame is among the most reliably effective resources available to an organizer. We would not recommend amplifying it instrumentally. Several participants in this study valued these events precisely because they could take part without accepting

that frame, and an event designed to make the national reading unavoidable would probably lose them.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations qualify the claims made above. The study rests on a single community in a single city across a single tournament season. Zhuhai's position in the Greater Bay Area, and the particular composition of the Jinyi community, shape what was observed. A community centered on newer viewers, or one in an inland city with a different relationship to esports infrastructure, might show the same four dimensions operating with substantially different weights. The portability claimed above is a claim about mechanism rather than about outcome, and it needs testing in settings that differ on these axes.

The tournament season matters as well. S15 was a high-stakes international competition in which LPL teams met LCK opponents throughout, which is close to the most favorable possible condition for the mechanism we describe. Regular-season viewing, domestic fixtures, and tournaments without a salient national counterpart would supply the harder tests. Longitudinal work following one community across several seasons would also establish whether the community capital we observed accumulating actually persists, which a single-season design cannot show.

The researcher's position requires acknowledgment. Fieldwork was conducted by a member of the community rather than by an outsider. This made access, rapport, and reading in-group humor possible, but it also carries evident risks: familiarity can render the taken-for-granted invisible, and interviewees speaking to a fellow fan may perform belonging more readily than to a stranger. We attempted to counter this by recruiting participants who dissented from the dominant framing and by giving their accounts substantial weight in the analysis, but we cannot claim the position was neutral.

Finally, the analysis is theory-driven. Using the four dimensions as a priori categories brought order to a large and unruly body of material, but it also means that phenomena falling outside those categories were less likely to be noticed. An inductive study of the same field might identify dimensions this framework does not contain: the role of commercial actors in shaping the event, for instance, or the experience of spectators who attend with no team allegiance at all. Both appeared at the edges of our data and were not pursued.

Three questions should be noted. The first is whether the mechanism operates in offline viewing communities

outside China, where the mapping between a regional league and a nation is weaker or absent altogether. The second is whether it operates in esports settings with no national frame at all, which would test whether the sensorial mechanism is genuinely separable from the nationalist content it carried here. The third is whether the same conversion between latent and expressed identity occurs in non-esports live-viewing settings such as football screenings, awards ceremonies, or election-night gatherings, where the theoretical stakes are similar but the media form differs.

8. Conclusion

Through a close study of the "Jinyi LOL Fan Spectatorship" community in Zhuhai during the 2025 World Championship, this article has addressed why and how nationalist feeling takes an embodied form within esports culture. The offline venue is not a passive container for entertainment. It is an active apparatus that generates a sensorial imagined community. Through four interlocking dimensions, spatial anchoring, sensory synchronization, bodily co-presence, and narrative negotiation, sentiment that circulates online is converted into bodily performance and into the reproduction of meaning, and a hybrid player-patriot identity is generated in the process.

Theoretically, the article extends Anderson's¹² imagined community into embodied territory by proposing the sensorial imagined community as an analytical model. Under conditions of digital media, the basis on which a community is imagined has shifted from asynchronous reading to synchronous sensory experience and bodily memory, and Anderson's¹² empty time becomes a surging time saturated with collective feeling. The study also identifies a micro-mechanism of digital nationalism that might be summarized as diffusion online, consolidation offline. Social media is where feeling ferments and spreads; bodily co-presence offline supplies a kind of authentication that nothing else provides, closing the loop of emotional identification. Furthermore, the case shows that nationalist sentiment can lodge deep inside everyday entertainment consumption and be performed through the self-organized practices of an interest community, which is how a small scene comes to bear on a large question.

Through the microscopic lens of a cinema in Zhuhai, this study captured an embodied digital national community being imagined and practiced within an ordinary, sensory cultural setting, and it offers a small but sharply focused window onto nationalism in the digital age.

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors

Data curation: Zhengxuezi Ji

Formal analysis: Zhengxuezi Ji

Investigation: Zhengxuezi Ji

Methodology: All authors

Supervision: Ming Ma

Writing–original draft: Zhengxuezi Ji

Writing–review & editing: Ming Ma

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee of City University of Macau (Approval No. FHSS250256). All procedures involving human participants complied with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants. Before each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All personal identifiers have been removed, and interviewees are identified by code.

Consent for publication

Not applicable. All interview data were anonymized and reported using participant codes, and no personally identifiable information is included in this article. Therefore, consent for publication was not obtained.

Availability of data

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because the consent arrangements for this qualitative study guarantee participant anonymity and confidentiality. Interview guides and observation records are supplied as supplementary file, and de-identified excerpts are included in the manuscript. Further information is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

1. Brock T, Crawford G. The esports experience economy: a multiple-case study of esports events, peripherals and fashion. *Internet Res.* 2025;35(5):1821-1842.
2. McCauley B, Tierney K, Tokbaeva D. Shaping a regional offline eSports market: understanding how Jönköping, the 'City of DreamHack', takes URL to IRL. *Int J Media Manag.* 2020;22(1):30-48.
3. China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association. 2024 China Esports Industry Report. Accessed August 3, 2026. <https://www.cgigc.com.cn/details.html?id=08de2652-4f5d-4a16-8f75-b6fc533568fd&tp=report>
4. Jang WW, Kim KA, Byon KK. Social atmospherics, affective response, and behavioral intention associated with esports events. *Front Psychol.* 2020;11:1671.
5. Sjöblom M, Macey J, Hamari J. Digital athletics in analogue stadiums: comparing gratifications for engagement between live attendance and online esports spectating. *Internet Res.* 2020;30(3):713-735.
6. Hwang Y, Fisackerly W, Heere B. Team identification in esports: the benefits of localizing an esports team. *Sport Mark Q.* 2024;33(2):135-149.
7. Xue H, Newman JI, Du J. Narratives, identity and community in esports. *Leisure Stud.* 2019;38(6):845-861.
8. Billig M. *Banal Nationalism*. London, UK: Sage; 2010.
9. Mihelj S, Jiménez-Martínez C. Digital nationalism: understanding the role of digital media in the rise of 'new' nationalism. *Nations Natl.* 2021;27(2):331-346.
10. de Assunção C. LUSITANOS LET's GO! From banal to joking nationalism in Portuguese esports spectatorship. In: *2025 IEEE Conference on Games (CoG)*. IEEE; 2025:1-4.
11. Wu X, Fitzgerald R. Internet memes and the mobilization of a 'one-China' cyber nationalist campaign: the case of the 2016 Diba expedition to Taiwan. *Soc Semiot.* 2024;34(4):697-719.
12. Anderson B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev ed. London, UK: Verso; 2016. <https://www.versobooks.com/products/1126-imagined-communities>
13. Ekdahl D, Ravn S. Social bodies in virtual worlds: intercorporeality in esports. *Phenomenol Cogn Sci.* 2022;21(2):293-316.

doi: 10.1108/INTR-02-2024-0138

doi: 10.1080/14241277.2020.1731513

doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01671

doi: 10.1108/INTR-07-2018-0304

doi: 10.1080/02614367.2019.1640778

doi: 10.4135/9781446221648

doi: 10.1111/nana.12685

doi: 10.1109/CoG64752.2025.11114220

doi: 10.1080/10350330.2023.2183113

doi: 10.1007/s11097-021-09734-1

14. Way LCS. Trump, memes and the alt-right: emotive and affective criticism and praise. *Russ J Linguist.* 2021;25(3):789-809.
doi: 10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-3-789-809
15. Hakoköngäs E, Halmesvaara O, Sakki I. Persuasion through bitter humor: multimodal discourse analysis of rhetoric in internet memes of two far-right groups in Finland. *Soc Media Soc.* 2020;6(2).
doi: 10.1177/2056305120921575
16. Padri AR. Psychopolitics on social media: an interdisciplinary analysis of emotion, authority, and online mobilization. *Interdiscip J Humanit (INJURITy)*. 2025;4(3):158-162.
doi: 10.58631/injurit.v4i3.1424
17. Bernroider EWN, Harindranath G, Kamel S. From connective actions in social movements to offline collective actions: an individual level perspective. *Inf Technol People.* 2022;35(8):205-230.
doi: 10.1108/ITP-08-2020-0556
18. Schneider F. *China's Digital Nationalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2018.
doi: 10.1093/oso/9780190876791.001.0001
19. Liao X, Koo AZX, Rojas H. Fandom nationalism in China: the effects of idol adoration and online fan community engagement. *Chin J Commun.* 2022;15(4):558-581.
doi: 10.1080/17544750.2022.2088587
20. Dayan D, Katz E. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1992.
doi: 10.4159/9780674030305
21. Brügger N. Media events in an age of the web and television: Dayan and Katz revisited. *Nord J Media Stud.* 2022;4(1):37-55.
doi: 10.2478/njms-2022-0003
22. Jenkins H, Carpentier N. Theorizing participatory intensities: a conversation about participation and politics. *Convergence.* 2013;19(3):265-286.
doi: 10.1177/1354856513482090
23. Couldry N, Hepp A. The continuing lure of the mediated centre in times of deep mediatization: media events and its enduring legacy. *Media Cult Soc.* 2018;40(1):114-117.
doi: 10.1177/0163443717726009
24. Coleman R. Making, managing and experiencing 'the now': digital media and the compression and pacing of 'real-time'. *New Media Soc.* 2020;22(9):1680-1698.
doi: 10.1177/1461444820914871
25. Jordheim H, Ytreberg E. After supersynchronisation: how media synchronise the social. *Time Soc.* 2021;30(3):402-422.
doi: 10.1177/0961463X211012507
26. Yin Y. 'My baby should feel no wronged!': digital fandoms and emotional capitalism in China. *Glob Media China.* 2021;6(4):460-475.
doi: 10.1177/20594364211041681
27. Durkheim E. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Fields KE, trans. New York, NY: Free Press; 1995 (Originally published 1912). Accessed September 5, 2026. <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Elementary-Forms-of-Religious-Life/Emile-Durkheim/9780029079379>
28. Collins R. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2014.
doi: 10.2307/j.ctt13x0rs3
29. Ismer S. Embodying the nation: football, emotions and the construction of collective identity. *Natl Pap.* 2011;39(4):547-565.
doi: 10.1080/00905992.2011.582864
30. Sullivan GB. Collective emotions: a case study of South African pride, euphoria and unity in the context of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. *Front Psychol.* 2018;9:1252.
doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01252
31. Ekdahl D, Ravn S. Embodied involvement in virtual worlds: the case of eSports practitioners. *Sport Ethics Philos.* 2019;13(2):132-144.
doi: 10.1080/17511321.2018.1475418
32. Noh Y, Ryu Y, Kim K. eSport consumption and sponsor brand equity: the mediating role of congruence. *Front Psychol.* 2025;16:1594068.
doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1594068
33. Cauteruccio F, Kou Y. Investigating the emotional experiences in eSports spectatorship: the case of League of Legends. *Inf Process Manag.* 2023;60(6):103516.
doi: 10.1016/j.ipm.2023.103516
34. Campbell S, Greenwood M, Prior S, et al. Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples. *J Res Nurs.* 2020;25(8):652-661.
doi: 10.1177/1744987120927206
35. Abdel-Ghani T. Film intervention in public space: a phylogenetic spatial change. *J Public Space.* 2020;5(4):107-122.
doi: 10.32891/jps.v5i4.1384
36. McLuhan M. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; 1994. Accessed September 5, 2026. <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262631594/understanding-media/>
37. Lefebvre H. *The Production of Space*. Nicholson-Smith D, trans. Oxford, UK: Blackwell; 1991 (Originally published 1974). Accessed September 5, 2026. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Production+of+Space-p-9780631181774>

38. Marschall S. 'Memory objects': material objects and memories of home in the context of intra-African mobility. *J Mater Cult.* 2019;24(3):253-269.
doi: 10.1177/1359183519832630
39. Spielmann N, Maguire JS, Charters S. Product patriotism: how consumption practices make and maintain national identity. *J Bus Res.* 2020;121:389-399.
doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.05.024
40. Chen S. Research of immersive theatre from audience perspective. *J Educ Humanit Soc Sci.* 2025;47:154-160.
doi: 10.54097/xx7yz440
41. Haggard S. Communitas revisited: Victor Turner and the transformation of a concept. *Anthropol Theory.* 2025;25(3):313-337.
doi: 10.1177/14634996241282143
42. Couldry N. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice.* Cambridge, UK: Polity; 2012. Accessed September 5, 2026. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Media%2C+Society%2C+World%3A+Social+Theory+and+Digital+Media+Practice-p-9780745639208>
43. Papacharissi Z. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2014.
doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.003.0006
44. Niedenthal PM. Embodying emotion. *Science.* 2007;316(5827):1002-1005.
doi: 10.1126/science.1136930
45. Mauss M. Techniques of the body. *Econ Soc.* 1973;2(1):70-88.
doi: 10.1080/03085147300000003