

Co-Viewing, Tweeting, and Facebooking the 2012 Presidential Debates

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of watching political debates with others—whether the others are personally present or linked via social media. Co-viewing theory suggests that watching television with others, in comparison to solo viewing, increases viewing enjoyment and duration. Research about watching political debates suggests that the experience may make viewers feel emotionally negative and insecure, especially when their favored candidate is attacked. Debate viewers may also relish “being part of” an event of national importance. These possibilities suggest that engaging in social watching behaviors, whether face-to-face and/or via social media, will amplify the positive experiences of debate viewing potentially by providing opinion-confirmatory information. In turn, this may increase the likelihood of watching more debates and sticking with each debate longer. These predictions are strongly supported with a sample of American newspaper subscribers, whose political reporters had participated in a paper-sponsored debate-watch/tweet program.

Keywords

new media/social media, presidential debates, Twitter, Facebook, co-viewing, multiple screens

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A social media platform provides individual users with a location to build a public profile, communicate with others, view the others they are connected with, and see the connections made by others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). “Social media” is a generic term for many different media platforms, including social networks like Facebook, MySpace, or Google+; blogs like Blogger or WordPress; microblogs like Twitter and Tumblr; and digital content-sharing platforms like YouTube or Flickr (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). A recent census of social media sites found that 60% of Americans use a social media website and 39% of Americans use social media sites for political purposes (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012).

The focus of this article is on whether social television watching, including both face-to-face and social media interactions, can make an individual’s debate watching experience (DWE) more positive and lead to watching more (and more of) debate events. The literature about adult co-viewing suggests that socializing with others while watching television is a frequent activity (Lee & Lee, 1995; Lull, 1980; Schmitt, Woolf, & Anderson, 2003). Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in fact, showed that 60% of television time involved co-viewing. Mora, Ho, and Krider (2011) pointed out that proprietary British research (Foote, 2004) shows that co-viewers are more attentive to television and watch longer than do solo viewers. Mora, Ho, and Krider (2011) also demonstrated that co-viewing increases an individual’s consumption of television over solo viewing by 10% and reduces the number of channels visited by 3%. In a demonstration of co-viewing power relevant to the digital world, Haridakis and Hanson (2009) showed that co-viewing motives (so I can talk to other people about what’s going on, so I can be with other members of the family or friends, and because it is something to do when friends come over) are strongly predictive of increased watching of YouTube videos and sharing them via social media.

Csikszentmihalyi and Kubey (1981) report that television watching with others is a “significantly more challenging, cheerful and sociable experience” than watching alone (p. 324). Lee, Heeter, and LaRose (2010) showed that co-viewing adults have more positive perceptions of programs and enjoy them more. There is also evidence that co-viewers tend to be psychographically similar to each other (Lull, 1980; Mora, Ho, & Krider, 2011). Hocking (1982) offers additional psychological concepts about how viewing with others enhances the experience. Watching a football game on television by oneself, in comparison to attending a game, is different in terms of “intra-audience” effects. Audience members at the game exhibit observable responses to the events of the game and these provide information (e.g., whether a call on the field was good or bad?) and cues about the affect they are experiencing.

Based on this literature, we define “social watching” as television viewing with others (co-viewing) and television viewing while engaging with social media like Facebook and Twitter. We posit that watching while interacting with others digitally will result in effects similar to co-viewing, that is, more enjoyment of and attention to television content, and longer viewing periods with less channel switching. However, we also posit that social media-based social watching is unlikely to be as powerful in its effects as co-viewing because the “others” of social media are unlikely to be as

psychographically similar to one's self as often occurs in interpersonal co-viewing situations. In addition, watching with friends and family potentially provides a more immediate linking between television content and the response of others than the flow of comments through a social medium.

Live Annotation of Political Events

One of the main dimensions of social watching concerns what has been termed "live annotation" of political events (Shamma, Kennedy, & Churchill, 2009). Political events are those with sufficient status, salience, and importance to be televised. Live annotation implies that individuals to provide commentary about the event and to view commentary about the same event posted by other people utilizing a social media platform. Twitter is uniquely situated to offer live annotation through the use of hashtags. A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by the number sign (#) and used as a label. Hashtags can be searched so that all tweets containing them can be collected, and users can then post to that same stream. Of course, there can be live annotation of any televised event, from scripted programs (e.g., *Blacklist*), to reality programs (e.g., *Dancing with the Stars*), to commercials (Thinkbox, 2009), to sports.

Social Media Use During the 2012 Debates

During each of the 2012 U.S. presidential debates, there was extensive social media use. Pew Research Center for People and the Press reported that during the first presidential debate 11% of the audience used a second screen (computer or mobile device) while they watched the debate on television (2012). That debate showed the highest level of tweeting activity for any U.S.-based political event up until that time, with users generating more than 10.3 million tweets related to the first debate (using "#debate") throughout the day of the debate (Twitter Blog, 2012a). During the second presidential debate, Twitter activity decreased, exhibiting only 7.2 million tweets, a 30% decline ("Twitter at the town hall debate," 2012b). The third presidential debate showed the lowest tweeting level, with only 6.5 million tweets posted (Twitter Blog, 2012c). Despite fewer tweets, an early report showed that discussion about the debates increased on Facebook in later debates, demonstrating that users were using both social media platforms to talk about the debates (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Watching Political Debates

Although there are scores of scholarly studies of the antecedents and consequences of watching presidential debates, there is little examination of the DWE itself. Presidential debate proponents have long advocated watching the debates with others (e.g., Carlin & McKinney, 1994), but there has been no measurement of how many people watch debates alone, with a family member, or with people outside immediate family. In this section, we connect the co-viewing literature with theory about the

functionality of watching televised debates with others, further exploring explanations of why watching while interacting with social media and viewing face-to-face with others are likely to enhance the experience of watching debates.

One of the most consistent effects of debate watching is that it stimulates people to seek additional information, which they usually accomplish by consuming news about the candidates and issues and by talking with others. Cho and Ha (2012) demonstrated three psychological processes that occurred during debates and led to increased need for information: increased negative emotional arousal, increased doubt about one's own beliefs, and enjoyment of experiencing a shared event. Each of these processes is further explored.

First, because debates are all about conflict, negative emotions may be aroused, as individuals see their preferred candidate attacked. According to the social cleavage theory of political parties, each political party is made up of specific sociological groups (e.g., Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Therefore, as individuals watch political opponents attack their candidate, they may feel as if their social group is being attacked, resulting in negative emotions. Of course, this suggests that they will seek information consistent with their partisanship to alleviate the negative feelings—and thus the overall effect will be an increase in support for one's own candidate, which is also known to be a common effect of debate watching (McKinney & Warner, 2013).

Second, as viewers are exposed to arguments discrepant with their own beliefs, they may feel increasingly uncertain about their own beliefs. Feeling uncertain also inspires a need for information from others, particularly others belonging to the same party. As deeply held political beliefs are threatened by counterinformation, individuals are psychologically motivated to find supportive information to maintain previously held beliefs (Anson, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2009).

Third, because a debate is a "shared collective experience" among millions of Americans, individuals may gain a sense of belonging to the country and being a part of things. This experience may lead people to increase efforts to communicate with others who are also sharing the experience creating feelings of solidarity with a group. Thus, the collective experience is likely to result in a more positive DWE.

Cho and Ha (2012) found that increased discussion with others after a debate created greater feelings of support for the individual's own party than just watching a debate alone. Further, conversations with others satisfy the need for information after debate exposure. This implies that face-to-face social watching (FTF) with others or using social media like Facebook and Twitter to interact with others during the debate itself is likely to satisfy the same information needs. It is likely that the others with whom a person watches (friends and family) share one's political views, and this should help alleviate the negative affect caused by attacks on one's own candidate (Lull, 1980; Mora et al., 2011). Social media can provide information about what more distant others think.

For example, the most talked about moments in the 2012 debates began to appear on social media quickly after they were uttered. In the first debate, Republican candidate Mitt Romney said that he planned to end the public broadcasting subsidy even

though he “liked Big Bird.” In the second debate, Romney referred to “binders full of women” in answer to an audience question about pay equity. Discussion about firing Big Bird and possessing “binders full of women” quickly spread on social media (Phillip, 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence that individuals who communicate about controversial political topics via Twitter are unlikely to be exposed to content that is inconsistent with their own partisanship (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). This suggests that tweeting and following twitter postings is likely to yield content supportive to the partisanship of the debate watcher, although perhaps not as supportive as that obtained via FTF.

In view of the literature on co-viewing, social media use during debates, and the need for information following a debate, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Talking with others in person while watching a debate will lead to the most positive DWE, interacting with others via a social medium will lead to the second most positive DWE, and engaging in both types of social watching will result in a more positive experience than watching alone.

Hypothesis 2: Talking with others in person while watching a debate will be associated with more sustained watching of each debate and watching more of the four debates, interacting with others via a social medium will be second in enhancing debate watching and both types of social watching will enhance the amount of debate watching more than solo viewing.

Given that the intent of the hypotheses is to connect social watching, both face-to-face and social media based, with how positive people thought the DWE was and how much of the debates they consumed, it was important to apply prior control on other variables known to be important antecedents of debate watching. The most important variable in predicting a variety of political responses is campaign interest. Those with higher interest watch more debates (e.g., Chaffee & Dennis, 1979; Lemert, 1993). Another important variable is how much people talk with each other about the campaign. More talk is associated with more political participation (e.g., Cho & Ha, 2012; McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1979; Patterson, 2002) and with greater consumption of campaign news (e.g., Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009).

Viewer demographics are also important. Research has shown that presidential debate watchers are older, have higher incomes, and are more highly educated (Kenski & Jamieson, 2011). Kenski and Stroud (2005) reported that those who are already interested in politics are likely to continue to watch the rest of the remaining debates in a series to enrich their knowledge of the campaign issues and candidates. Also, those who are most strongly partisan (Republican or Democrat) are more likely to watch than those less strongly partisan. Therefore, campaign interest, campaign talk, political media use, and demographics will be controlled before evaluating the connection between social watching and the DWE.

Finally, the literature does not provide much guidance about what antecedent conditions lead people to be more likely to engage in social watching of debates. Therefore, we pose four research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the predictors of FTF during debates?

Research Question 2: What are the predictors of Twitter use during debates?

Research Question 3: What are the predictors of Facebook use during debates?

Research Question 4: What are the predictors of total social watching (i.e., the use of both face-to-face and social media based) use during debates?

The hypotheses, the theoretical rationale for them, and the documented growth of interest by news organizations to engage with social media (Farhi, 2009; Schulte, 2009), led us to partner with two large daily newspapers to create a hashtag for debate tweeting. Those hashtags were heavily promoted by the newspapers to their print and online readers, along with a request that they tweet with political reporters during the 2012 presidential and vice presidential debates. Immediately after the last debate, we sampled the newspaper print and online subscriber lists to invite readers to report whether they watched the debates; what their experience of watching them was like; and whether they watched alone, face-to-face with others, and/or interacted with a social medium during the debates. It is their responses that provided the tests of the hypotheses and research questions here.

Method

Newspaper subscribers from the two major metropolitan newspapers that had sponsored the debate tweeting, one from a southeastern and the other from a southwestern state, were contacted via email and invited to participate in an online survey regarding these topics in exchange for entrance in a drawing to win one of the six US\$250 checks. In addition to their possible exposure to the opportunity to tweet to their newspaper's debate hashtag during the four debates, newspaper readers tend to pay more attention to politics in general and debates in particular than the general population (Benoit & Hansen, 2003). The email was distributed to 4,000 subscribers immediately after the last debate. All the participants completed the survey online. A total of 716 individuals completed the survey and were entered into the drawing (a response rate of 18%). However, one newspaper also put a button on their front page that would take respondents to the survey, and we were unable to determine how many participants came from that source.

The sample included more males than females ($n = 381$, 54.4%; female, $n = 319$, 45.6%; 16 not reporting sex) and the average age was 57.9 years ($SD = 13.25$, 49 not reporting age). The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian ($n = 604$, 84.4%), while fewer identified as African American ($n = 25$, 3.5%), as Spanish or Hispanic origin ($n = 20$, 2.8%), as an Asian American or Pacific Islander ($n = 14$, 2.0%), as

Native American ($n = 7$, 1.0%), as multiracial ($n = 4$, 0.6%), or as other ($n = 26$, 3.6%; 16 individuals not reporting race). Many respondents had earned a bachelor's degree ($n = 285$, 39.8%), though the sample was also made up of individuals who had only earned a high school diploma ($n = 34$, 4.7%), completed some college ($n = 167$, 23.3%), earned a professional degree (including master of arts, Juris Doctor, or doctor of medicine; $n = 198$, 27.7%), or had a doctoral degree ($n = 17$, 2.4%) with 15 individuals not reporting education level. Household income was measured using an ordinal grouping variable. The modal income group was between US\$50,000 and US\$74,999 per year ($n = 133$, 18.6%). The sample leaned toward the conservative side of the political ideology spectrum ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 2.45$; scale from 1 = *extremely liberal* to 10 = *extremely conservative*). A significant portion of the sample watched the debates with others (64.53% of sample, $n = 462$), tweeted (8.37%, $n = 60$), or interacted with Facebook (15.08%, $n = 108$) during the debate, with 15.94% of the sample engaging in any combination of two or more types of social watching activity during the debate series ($n = 114$), and 14.41% of the sample engaged in all three types of social watching behaviors ($n = 103$). Also, 23.76% of the sample watched alone ($n = 170$).

Variables

Demographic variables. A variety of measures were used as controls in the analysis. Several self-report variables were included that need little explanation, including sex (dichotomous and operationalized with the *male* = 0 and *female* = 1) and age. Education level and income were also measured and operationalized with ordinal grouping variables with low numbers corresponding to a low level of education and income while high numbers correspond to higher levels. Partisanship was measured and controlled for using a simple ideological placement scale ranging from 1 (*extremely liberal*) to 10 (*extremely conservative*).

Campaign talk. This variable included the average score from four questions that each participant was exposed to, including "About how often have you talked with other people about the campaign in the past week?" on a 5-point scale ranging from *very often* to *very rarely* and three separate questions that asked how much the participant had talked with others (including friends, family, students/professors, and coworkers) about each debate on a 5-point scale ranging from *very frequently* to *I didn't talk with others about the debate* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$; $M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.02$).

Campaign interest. This variable was composed from the average of two questions that asked "How informed do you think you are about the presidential campaign?" on a 5-point scale ranging from *very well informed* to *very uninformed* and "How interested would you say you are in the presidential campaign?" on a 5-point scale ranging from *very interested* to *very uninterested* (Pearson $r = .43$, $p < .001$; $M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.66$). This scale was adapted from that used in past research (McKinney, Rill, & Gully, 2011).

Political media use. Political media use was calculated by averaging the results of two questions: “About how often have you read or watched media coverage of the campaign in the past week?” on a 5-point scale ranging from *very often* to *very rarely* and “How often would you say you’ve read, seen, or heard news stories about the debates?” on a 5-point scale ranging from *very often* to *very rarely* (Pearson $r = .57, p < .001; M = 4.48, SD = 0.67$). This portion of the political media use variables was adapted from use in past research (McKinney et al., 2011).

Debate social watching. For each debate individually, the participants indicated which, if any, debate socializing behaviors they engaged in including “watched with at least one other person,” “communicated with others via Facebook,” and “communicated with others via Twitter.” The participants were instructed to mark all activities they participated in during each debate. Based on these responses, three variables, FTF ($M = 2.29, SD = 1.75$), Facebook social watching (Facebook; $M = 0.45, SD = 1.14$), and Twitter social watching (Twitter; $M = 0.28, SD = 0.95$), were created to represent each activity. These variables were calculated by summing the number of debates for which the participant engaged in each activity. For example, if the participant watched no debates with another person, then their FTF score is 0; but if they watched two debates with at least one other person, then the FTF score is 2.

The three individual debate social watching variables were used separately and summed together to create a total debate social watching (sum social watching) variable in separate tests. This allowed explorations of three aspects of social watching individually and together to gain a more complete understanding of the social watching phenomenon ($M = 3.02, SD = 2.31$).

DWE. This variable represented the participants’ enjoyment of the DWE. It was the average score on a suite of statements with 7-point Likert-type answers ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, including “I learned a lot from watching the debate(s),” “I enjoyed evaluating the candidates during the debate(s),” “Watching the debate(s) increased my enthusiasm about voting,” “It’s important to me that my opinions about the debate(s) are heard,” “I enjoyed watching the debate(s),” and “I think watching the debate(s) is important” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92; M = 5.09, SD = 1.33$). Exploratory factor analysis utilizing principal component analysis indicated that this scale was a unidimensional measure, accounting for 67.91% of the variance in the measures with an Eigenvalue greater than 1. Following its use as a dependent variable, DWE was also used as a control variable.

Debates watched. The second dependent variable examined refers to the proportion of each debate watched. Each participant was asked if they “did not watch,” “watched some,” or “watched all” of each debate. The “did not watch” answer was assigned a 0, the “watched some” answer was assigned a 1, and the “watched all” answer was assigned a 2. Finally, the sum of these scores for each of the four debates was calculated to provide a scale ranging from 0 indicating that the participant watched no part

of any debate to 8 indicating that the participant watched all of each debate ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 2.74$). A total of 82.94% of the sample watched at least part of first presidential debate ($n = 593$), 75.24% of the sample watched at least part of the vice presidential debate ($n = 538$), 80.42% of the sample watched at least part of the second presidential debate ($n = 577$), and 77.20% of the sample watched at least part of the final presidential debate ($n = 77.20$). A portion of the sample (10.49%, $n = 75$) did not watch any part of any of the debates.

Analysis

First, a Pearson correlation matrix of all variables was examined. This matrix served as a check for collinearity among the variables as well as to examine the simple relationships proposed by the hypotheses. Ordinary least squares hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the effects of the independent variables after the control variables' effects were removed. In each regression, the first block contains only control variables and the second block contains the variables of theoretic interest.

Results

The first-order correlations of all variables are shown in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 suggested that talking with others in person while watching a debate would lead to the most positive DWE, interacting with others via a social medium would lead to the second most positive DWE, and both types of social watching will be more positive than watching alone. Table 1 shows that FTF had the highest correlation with the DWE, and Facebook and Twitter, although also correlated, were related at a lower significance level.

The regression analysis in Table 2 reinforced the first-order correlations. The control variables were entered into the first block of the hierarchical regression, which provided a significant fit to the data, $F(8, 558) = 48.45$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 41.0% of the variance on the dependent variable ($R^2 = .41$). Engaging in general campaign talk and political media use were positively related to the DWE, while age was negatively related to DWE. The second block was then entered into the regression equation and included the variables of theoretic interest. The second model was also a significant fit to the data, $F(11, 555) = 38.67$, $p < .001$, accounted for 43.4% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .43$), and increased the variance accounted for by the regression significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(3, 555) = 7.81$, $p < .001$. However, Facebook and Twitter's effects on DWE were not significant when compared with that of FTF. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 supported in that watching all three of the social watching variables were positively related to DWE. However, in the regression, FTF accounted for so much of the variance that Twitter and Facebook were not significant.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that talking with others in person while watching a debate would be associated with more sustained watching of each debate and watching more of the four debates, interacting with others via a social medium will be second in

Table 1. First-Order Correlation Matrix of All Variables Used in Analysis.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1. DWE | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Debates watched | .68*** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. FTF | .41*** | .59*** | — | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Facebook | .08* | .07 | -.07 | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Twitter | .07* | .11** | -.05 | .24*** | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Sum social watching | .39*** | .53*** | .70*** | .54*** | .49*** | — | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Political media use | .48*** | .50*** | .35*** | .10** | -.01 | .31*** | — | | | | | | | |
| 8. Campaign talk | .62*** | .63*** | .44*** | .13** | .07 | .43*** | .57*** | — | | | | | | |
| 9. Campaign interest | .37*** | .39*** | .28*** | .01 | -.04 | .20*** | .54*** | .48*** | — | | | | | |
| 10. Partisanship | .12** | .09* | .07 | -.04 | -.14*** | -.02 | .02 | .14*** | .05 | — | | | | |
| 11. Sex | .02 | -.07 | -.09* | .12* | .01 | -.00 | -.13** | -.03 | -.13*** | -.13** | — | | | |
| 12. Age | .07 | .18*** | .13** | -.16* | -.38*** | -.14 | .19*** | .15*** | .23*** | .17*** | -.17*** | — | | |
| 13. Education | -.07 | -.08* | 0.03 | -.03 | .01 | -.03 | -.01 | -.01 | .06 | -.07 | -.10** | -.04 | — | |
| 14. Yearly income | -.01 | -.01 | .04 | -.08 | -.11** | -.05 | .01 | .03 | .09* | .10* | -.16*** | -.08* | -.31*** | — |
| Mean (SD) | 5.09 (1.33) | 5.16 (2.74) | 2.29 (1.75) | 0.45 (1.14) | 0.27 (0.94) | 3.02 (2.31) | 4.48 (0.67) | 3.56 (1.02) | 4.52 (0.66) | 1.36 (4.03) | 0.45 (0.50) | 57.87 (13.25) | 3.00 (0.90) | 4.58 (2.18) |

Note. Partisanship: high = liberal; low = conservative; DWE = debate watching experience; FTF = face-to-face social watching.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Regression Equation Predicting Debate Watching Experience (DWE).

| | β | SE | t Value | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-----|----------|-------------------------------------|-----|---------|
| Constant | | .46 | 2.67** | | .47 | 2.48** |
| Sex | .03 | .09 | 0.90 | .04 | .09 | 1.30 |
| Age | -.07 | .00 | -1.99* | -.05 | .00 | -1.38 |
| Education | -.04 | .05 | -1.23 | -.04 | .05 | -1.17 |
| Yearly income | -.03 | .02 | -0.71 | -.02 | .02 | -0.63 |
| Partisanship | .05 | .02 | 1.49 | .06 | .02 | 1.75 |
| Campaign talk | .51 | .05 | 11.95*** | .43 | .06 | 9.71*** |
| Campaign interest | .04 | .08 | 1.06 | .04 | .08 | 1.06 |
| Political media use | .17 | .09 | 3.84*** | .15 | .09 | 3.55** |
| FTF | | | | .17 | .03 | 4.68*** |
| Facebook | | | | .00 | .04 | 0.12 |
| Twitter | | | | .06 | .05 | 1.50 |
| Model fit | $F(8, 558) = 48.45*** (R^2 = .41)$ | | | $F(11, 555) = 38.67*** (R^2 = .43)$ | | |

Note. FTF = face-to-face social watching; SE = standard error.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Regression Equation Predicting the Amount of Debate Watched.

| | β | SE | t Value | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-----|----------|-------------------------------------|-----|----------|
| Constant | | .81 | -5.28*** | | .78 | -5.74*** |
| DWE | .45 | .07 | 12.17*** | .38 | .07 | 10.93*** |
| Sex | -.05 | .16 | -1.76 | -.02 | .15 | -0.86 |
| Age | .12 | .00 | 3.89** | .15 | .01 | 4.96*** |
| Education | -.03 | .09 | -0.83 | -.02 | .08 | -0.83 |
| Yearly income | -.00 | .04 | -0.21 | .00 | .04 | -0.01 |
| Partisanship | -.06 | .03 | -2.12* | -.04 | .03 | -1.55 |
| Campaign talk | .27 | .11 | 6.46*** | .17 | .10 | 4.36*** |
| Campaign interest | .05 | .14 | 1.25 | .05 | .13 | 1.37 |
| Political media use | .08 | .15 | 2.12* | .07 | .14 | 2.03* |
| FTF | | | | .30 | .05 | 9.94*** |
| Facebook | | | | .00 | .06 | 0.11 |
| Twitter | | | | .12 | .09 | 4.09*** |
| Model fit | $F(9, 552) = 76.31*** (R^2 = .55)$ | | | $F(12, 549) = 77.56*** (R^2 = .63)$ | | |

Note. DWE = debate watching experience; FTF = face-to-face social watching; SE = standard error.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

enhancing debate watching and both types of social watching would enhance the amount of debate watching more than solo viewing. FTF had the strongest correlation to debates watched, Facebook use was not significantly correlated, and Twitter use was significantly related but not at the same level as FTF.

The regression analysis in Table 3 reinforced this finding. Notice that DWE has now been added as a control independent variable. The control variables were entered

Table 4. Regression Equation Predicting Face-to-Face Social Watching.

| | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|---------|
| Constant | | .69 | -1.87 |
| Sex | -.05 | .14 | -1.21 |
| Age | .05 | .01 | 1.27 |
| Education | -.03 | .08 | -0.80 |
| Yearly income | .04 | .03 | 1.11 |
| Partisanship | -.01 | .03 | -0.13 |
| Campaign talk | .37 | .08 | 7.61*** |
| Campaign interest | .00 | .12 | 0.08 |
| Political media use | .11 | .13 | 2.20* |
| Model fit | $F(8, 576) = 19.25^{***} (R^2 = .21)$ | | |

Note. SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

into the first block. The control model was a significant fit to the data, $F(9, 552) = 76.31$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 55% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .55$). A positive DWE, age, engaging in campaign talk, and political media use were all positive predictors of watching more debates. Also, liberals tended to watch more debates. Adding the variables of theoretic interest in the second block also showed a significant fit to the data, $F(12, 549) = 77.56$, $p < .001$, accounted for 63% of the variance in amount of debate watching ($R^2 = .63$), and increased the variance accounted for by the model significantly, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $F(3, 549) = 36.81$, $p < .001$. Those who watched the debates with others and tweeted during the debates watched more of those events, and a person watching with another person watched more debate than a person who used Twitter while watching a debate. This provides partial support for Hypothesis 2, given that communicating on Facebook was not associated with watching more debate.

Research Question 1 focused on exploring what the antecedent conditions were for engaging in FTF behaviors. Regression analysis was used to explore this research question. The FTF variable was used as the criterion variable, while the demographics and political campaign engagement variables were used as predictor variables (see Table 4). The model predicting FTF behavior was a significant fit to the data, $F(8, 576) = 19.25$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 21% of the variance in the criterion variable ($R^2 = .21$). Engaging in more campaign talk and political media use were both associated with watching the debate with others in person.

Research Question 2 isolated the Facebook social watching variable and explored what led to increased social watching engagement using Facebook. Regression analysis was used to explore this research question. The Facebook social watching variable was used as the criterion variable, while the demographics and political campaign engagement variables were used as the predictors (see Table 5). The model

Table 5. Regression Equation Predicting the Amount of Facebook Social Watching.

| | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|-----|----------|
| Constant | | .51 | 0.37 |
| Sex | .08 | .10 | 1.92 |
| Age | -.18 | .00 | -4.18*** |
| Education | -.00 | .05 | -0.04 |
| Yearly income | -.09 | .02 | -2.03* |
| Partisanship | -.01 | .02 | -0.17 |
| Campaign talk | .13 | .06 | 2.47* |
| Campaign interest | .00 | .09 | 0.06 |
| Political media use | .08 | .10 | 1.50 |
| Model fit | $F(8, 576) = 5.61^{***} (R^2 = .07)$ | | |

Note. SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Regression Equation Predicting the Amount of Twitter Social Watching.

| | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------|
| Constant | | .36 | 7.51*** |
| Sex | -.12 | .07 | -3.20** |
| Age | -.44 | .00 | -11.13*** |
| Education | .02 | .04 | 0.55 |
| Yearly income | -.19 | .02 | -4.80*** |
| Partisanship | -.11 | .01 | -2.75** |
| Campaign talk | .17 | .04 | 3.56*** |
| Campaign interest | .02 | .06 | 0.35 |
| Political media use | -.08 | .07 | -1.59 |
| Model fit | $F(8, 576) = 21.52^{***} (R^2 = .23)$ | | |

Note. SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predicting Facebook social watching behavior was a significant fit to the data, $F(8, 576) = 5.61, p < .001$, and accounted for 7% of the variance ($R^2 = .07$). Engaging in more campaign talk was associated with increased Facebook social watching behaviors. Also, age and income were negatively associated with increased Facebook social watching behaviors, indicating that younger and people with less income tended to engage in such behaviors more.

Research Question 3 isolated the Twitter social watching variable and explored what led to increased social watching engagement using Twitter. Regression analysis was used to explore this research question. The Twitter social watching variable was used as the criterion variable, while the demographics and political campaign engagement variables were used as the predictors (see Table 6). The model was a significant fit to the data, $F(8, 576) = 21.52, p < .001$, and accounted for 23% of the variance

Table 7. Regression Equation Predicting the Sum Social Watching.

| | β | SE | t Value |
|---------------------|---|-----|----------|
| Constant | | .89 | 1.80 |
| Sex | -.04 | .18 | -1.14 |
| Age | -.23 | .01 | -5.92*** |
| Education | -.02 | .10 | -0.43 |
| Yearly income | -.09 | .04 | -2.25* |
| Partisanship | -.05 | .04 | -1.32 |
| Campaign talk | .41 | .10 | 8.79*** |
| Campaign interest | .01 | .16 | 0.23 |
| Political media use | .09 | .16 | 1.93 |
| Model fit | $F(8, 576) = 23.76^{***}$ ($R^2 = .25$) | | |

Note. SE = standard error.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

($R^2 = .23$). In the model, engaging in more campaign talk was associated with increased Twitter social watching behaviors. Also, age and income were negatively associated with increased Twitter social watching behaviors, indicating that younger and people with less income tended to engage in such behaviors more. Finally, men and liberals tended to engage more in Twitter social watching behaviors than women and conservatives.

Research Question 4 focused on exploring what attributes made a person more likely to be a social debate watcher. Regression analysis was used to explore this research question. The sum of social debate viewing activities was used as the criterion variable, while the demographics and political campaign engagement variables were used as the predictors (see Table 7). The model predicting social debate watching was a significant fit to the data, $F(8, 576) = 23.76$, $p < .001$, and accounted for 25% of the variance ($R^2 = .25$). In this model, engaging in more campaign talk increased social watching behaviors. Age and income were negatively associated with increased social watching behaviors, meaning that younger people and poorer people were more likely to watch debates socially.

Discussion

This project explored the impact of social watching, including watching with a person and using social media to interact with others, on the individual's political DWE and his or her likelihood to watch more debates. The co-viewing, social media, and political debate literature led us to expect that individuals would likely socially watch debates with others similar to themselves. We acknowledged that interpersonal watching was more likely to involve psychographically more similar others than watching while using social media. Watching the debates with these similar others would likely provide the individual with information that alleviated the negative effects of debate

viewing (associated with the high-conflict nature of debates) as well as amplify an individual's feelings of being connected to a mass cultural event.

The results of this study provide some interesting insights into the social watching phenomenon. The most striking finding here is the degree of influence that FTF has on the experience of viewing the debates and loyalty to viewing, in the sense of how many of the four debates were watched and the proportion of each debate watched. We conclude that FTF social watching is a powerful motivating force to watch more debates because it leads to increased enjoyment of the DWE. However, even when controlling for the positivity of the DWE, FTF social watching still strongly predicted watching more debates. This indicates that there are perhaps other aspects of the social watching phenomenon that lead to more debate watching, not accounted for by enjoying the debate. It might be that when others are watching, there is an increase in the sense of the "importance" of the debates or that the "shared collective experience" is more intense or more salient. A person watching alone clearly knows many others are watching, but actually observing others' responses may add feelings of excitement and arousal.

When compared to the digital forms of social watching, FTF has a greater effect on both how positive the DWE is and the number and amount of debates watched. Although they have less impact than interpersonal watching, Facebook and Twitter are equally related to intensity of the viewing experience. Twitter use, however, was significantly related to the total amount of debate viewing, whereas Facebook use was not. The higher impact of interpersonal over mediated watching "with others" suggests that arousal and affect may be important mediators of the effects on enjoyment and amount of debate watching. Further research should examine the impact of the two forms of others on viewer arousal and whether it mediates the debate viewing variables.

Also interestingly, Twitter use while watching a debate was not associated with campaign talk, campaign interest, or political media use, three variables that past research has associated with watching a greater number of political debates (Chaffee & Dennis, 1979; Cho & Ha, 2012; Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009; Lemert, 1993; McLeod et al., 1979). However, Facebook use while watching the debates was positively correlated with political media use and campaign talk but not campaign interest. This might suggest that Twitter use is not perceived as a political tool as much as Facebook is, but that both are seen as tools to connect with others for all kinds of purposes. Determining the political role of Twitter and Facebook will be an important phenomenon to look at as their use matures. It is also of interest to note that unlike Twitter and Facebook watching, FTF watching during the debates is highly positively correlated with campaign talk, campaign interest, and political media use. This is likely because the cluster of political interest variables, following elections in the news, watching debates, and being interested in campaigns is so dependent on talking with others (e.g., Eveland, 2004)

The strong impact of FTF was predicted by our social watching theory and supported by these data. If people do indeed experience negative affect from the pounding their "side" takes and if those attacks by the other side on "their candidate" makes them

more uncertain about their own beliefs, and social interactions with like-minded others can help alleviate those negative experiences, our findings about the positive impact of FTF make a lot of sense. Of course, the desire to share the “big event” excitement with huge numbers of other citizens may also lead to an enhanced effect of social watching. Just what causes the pattern of enhancement of social watching on the viewing experience and additional viewing of debates must await further research.

Our findings of the impact of demographics, media use for political information, partisanship, and talk about the campaign add further to the validity of these findings. As many studies have found, our data show that political media use in general is highly related to the DWE and the amount of debate viewing, as are talking with others about the campaign, being interested in the campaign, and being older. Interestingly, we did not find any differences due to gender, which is probably consistent with the fact that in debates where the topic is of particular interest to women, women watch more than men (e.g., when Sarah Palin was the vice presidential candidate), while in other cases men watch more. In the 2012 election, there was high interest by both men and women.

Also, being liberal was associated with a more enjoyable DWE and more watching of the debates. Prior research suggests that partisanship effects vary considerably as a function of the idiosyncrasies of elections. In 2012, it was posited that once the first debate appeared to have been “won” by Romney, the interest by Democrats in subsequent debates was considerably enhanced. This might serve as an explanation for the high association between Democratic affiliation and debate enjoyment and amount of watching.

Limitations

The primary limitation is our sampling of newspaper readers. We did this because we were searching for people who had tweeted to the newspaper hashtags for the debate to see what impact it had on their debate watching. However, we did not find enough of them who had used the newspaper hashtag, so we examined tweeting in general instead. Of course, newspaper subscribers are not representative of all Americans, but rather are more interested in public affairs and politics, have higher incomes and more education, and are older (McLeod et al., 1979). Thus, it remains for further research to determine whether the results seen in this convenience sample hold up with a sample closer to representative of the U.S. public in general.

Also, based on the survey nature of our method, we cannot make any causal claims. Our social watching theory predicts that there is an effect of social watching on debate enjoyment and watching more debates; however, this causal relationship is impossible to explore, given these data. Given the findings that social watching behaviors were related to the dependent variables of interest, but were not related to other variables that are antecedents of debate viewing (campaign interest, campaign talk, and political media use) strengthens our argument that the process flows in the hypothesized direction. However, future research should experimentally explore the causal direction of these processes.

Conclusion

This study found strong relationships between watching the debates face-to-face with others and enjoying the debate more and watching more debates. Also, using Twitter to watch with others was associated with watching more debates. It remains for further research to delve into what happens cognitively and emotionally to partisans as they watch presidential debates and how they experience debates—as well as whether they decide to invest in further watching of debates. What is clear, however, is that there are positive impacts of viewing with others—whether they are in the same room or available via the various ways that people relate to social media.

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