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The Influence of Marathon Races on Building a City's Brand and Cultural Identity

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Abstract. In today's fierce urban competition, shaping city brand culture has become one of the important ways to enhance the city's soft power. In this background, marathon events, as a globally popular urban cultural activity, have become an important platform for city brand building with their strong economic benefits, media communication power and cultural influence. This study mainly analyzes how marathon races can achieve in-depth construction of city brands from three aspects: event communication, cultural interaction and universal participation. It also uses literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and documents. At present, academic research on marathon events focuses more on the economic and tourism effects, but there is still a gap in the deeper impact on urban cultural identity and brand communication. Therefore, based on the city brand theory and social identity theory, this paper systematically sorts out the communication mechanism, cultural interaction path and social identity effect of marathon events in affecting the shaping of city brand culture, providing theoretical reference and practical inspiration for city brand shaping.

Keywords: Marathon Races, City Brand, Cultural Shaping, Brand Communication.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the increasingly fierce competition in city brands. As a mass sports activity that has rapidly emerged in recent years, marathon races have gradually become an important carrier for cities to promote their brand image and spread local culture. Exploring the role mechanism and impact path of marathon races in shaping urban brand culture is of great significance for deepening theoretical research and practical guidance on the integrated development of sports events and urban brands. This study mainly analyzes how marathon races can achieve in-depth construction of city brands from three aspects: event communication, cultural interaction and universal participation. It also uses literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and documents. The advantage of this method is that it can systematically sort out the research results of predecessors, summarize the core theoretical viewpoints, provide a solid theoretical foundation and analysis framework for the research, and facilitate the in-depth research. The ultimate goal of this study is to reveal the key role and innovative path of marathon races in promoting the cultural communication of urban brands. In order to achieve this goal, the urban brand theory, experience economy theory and social identity theory were comprehensively applied, and it was proposed that the cultural communication depth of

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the event should be emphasized to achieve the effective transformation of the event effect into the urban brand effect.

2. Literature review

With the continuous development of city brand theory, more and more scholars have begun to pay attention to the potential of large-scale sports events, especially marathons, in shaping city brand culture. Kavaratzis pointed out in From City Marketing to City Branding: Towards a Theoretical Framework for Developing City Brands that the construction of city brands is not only a marketing behavior, but also a social construction process. It promotes the organic dissemination of the city image by integrating the city's cultural connotation, public value, and social identity [1]. Under this theoretical framework, marathon events, as a deeply participatory urban activity, are gradually being seen as an effective vehicle for city brand communication. At the same time, El-Dabt, L., AlReshaid, F., Park, K., AlBuloushi, N., &Al-Enzi in Sustainable strategic nation branding through sports: leveraging soft power via mega-event hosting. Large-scale sporting events can play a key role in city branding and external communication by building a city's image and strengthening emotional and social connections [2]. In their study Brand and empowerment: digital operation of city marathon brands - taking Hangzhou Marathon as an example. Qin Xiao and Yu Xinhang took the Hangzhou Marathon as a research object and analyzed its digital operation strategy. They pointed out that the event not only has obvious advantages in terms of brand exposure and media communication, but also enhances the city's cultural identity and brand stickiness through the embedding of cultural content and the extensive participation of citizens [3]. Although existing studies have initially revealed the importance of marathon events in brand communication, most of them focus on dimensions such as event marketing, media effects, or audience perception. There is still a lack of research on "how marathon, as a concrete cultural narrative practice, can trigger urban cultural resonance and social emotional connection." In particular, theoretical discussions on how marathon can "scenario" and "experience" urban culture and achieve the transformation of urban image from visual cognition to emotional identification through the physical participation and emotional projection of participants and spectators are still insufficient.

Therefore, based on the city brand theory, this paper will deeply analyze the role of marathon events in city branding from the two levels of cultural practice and communication mechanism, especially focusing on its function in stimulating urban emotions, reproducing cultural characteristics and constructing social identity, trying to fill the theoretical gap in current research on cultural narrative and public participation mechanism. Through this analysis, it is helpful to expand the research perspective of city brand construction, enrich the academic discussion on the integration of sports events and urban culture, and provide theoretical support and path inspiration for brand communication strategies at the practical level.

3. The communication mechanism of marathon races in city brands

Marathon events provide a high-frequency, high-exposure and high-participation communication platform for the dissemination of city brands. Its communication mechanism can be understood from the following four dimensions:

First, marathon races have the function of focusing on the dissemination of visual symbols. Marathon routes usually connect the city's landmark buildings, natural landscapes, and cultural heritage to form a visual city guide. In addition, event photos, live broadcast footage, and social platform content continue to reproduce the city's spatial image. Participants' views on the event's

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brand image may be influenced by urban elements. By integrating urban elements into the marathon experience, the event stands out with its unique brand image [4]. Excellent track landscapes not only strengthen runners' spatial cognition and memory of the city, but also, through continuous media amplification, create a city brand image with communication power and cultural depth. Due to its highly mediated spatial presentation ability, marathon races have become one of the most representative event mechanisms in the visual expression of urban culture. It makes the city no longer just a background board to be seen, but the protagonist under the feet of participants and in the camera.

Secondly, marathon races carry the symbolic function of conveying the city's spirit. With its creators' spirit of pursuing challenges, perseverance, and self-breakthrough, the marathon has become an ideal tool for shaping the city's image [5]. It echoes the values of vitality, innovation, and tolerance that the city wants to convey. For example, the Boston Marathon uses "perseverance" as an external expression of the city's spirit, successfully transforming the spirit of sports into a part of the city's cultural image.

Thirdly, marathon events also have a mechanism for reproducing local culture. By adding local cultural elements to the event, for example, the Fuzhou Marathon has set up performances with local characteristics such as Min Opera on the track, prepared free Fuzhou specialty snacks at the end of the race, and added cultural souvenirs to the race packs, finisher packs, and the Marathon Expo [6]. The event not only spreads the city's unique culture, but also reconstructs the relationship between residents and tourists and local culture, stimulating the process of "cultural re-identification".

Finally, the political and image-building functions of marathon events. For a long time, sports and politics have been complementary. The government has created a good environment for the event, achieved all goals, and produced good comprehensive benefits [7]. Marathon events also play an important role in political functions and city image construction. As a highly public sports event, the organization and implementation of the event demonstrate the ability of local governments in resource coordination, urban governance and public services, and embody the process of "visualization of governance capabilities". At the same time, marathon events have also been incorporated into the city's strategic communication system, becoming an important platform for promoting political achievements and responding to national development strategies (such as "Healthy China" and "National Fitness"). Through ritual settings, the attendance of political figures and the guidance of media discourse, the marathon is not only a window for the performance of urban culture, but also a political communication carrier with symbolic significance and policy communication functions, further enhancing the visibility and legitimacy of the city in the national context.

4. Case analysis and comparison of city marathon

Marathon events are important carriers of cultural expression and urban communication. Different cities have developed their own distinctive brand images in terms of event positioning, content expression and cultural strategies according to local conditions. The following uses Xiamen, Yangzhou, Tokyo and New York as four representative cities as cases to conduct a comparative analysis from the dimensions of natural landscape, cultural narrative, governance capacity and global communication, and explores how marathon events can be deeply integrated with city brands, thereby promoting differentiated brand construction.

Xiamen Marathon has long used "ecological city" as its brand tone. The race route is surrounded by mountains and the sea, and is shaded by trees, fully demonstrating Xiamen's natural endowment and ecological concept as a coastal city. Since its inception, the event has emphasized "green

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environmental protection". Through measures such as plastic-free events, smart supplies, and recycling mechanisms, the environmental protection concept has been embedded in the entire event operation system. Ecological environmental protection has been taken into consideration at all stages of the event operation, including the construction of temporary venues, project settings, competition system determination, and race route selection. These measures have established long-term concepts of sustainable development such as environmental resource views and environmental ethics for the hosting of sports events [8]. More importantly, Xiamen Marathon has gradually pushed the logic of "universal participation" to the cultural level. With the help of music stations, folk customs exhibitions, and local cultural activities, the brand temperament of "ecology + humanity" has been conveyed to every participant and media audience, forming a recognizable city image.

The Yangzhou Jianzhen Marathon focuses on culture, with the indomitable spirit of "Jianzhen's voyage to the East" and the unique qualities that match the spirit of marathon as its main attraction [2]. It has created a half marathon with a unique style. The route covers landscape nodes such as the Slender West Lake and the Ancient Grand Canal, allowing participants to immerse themselves in the ancient charm of Jiangnan while running. During the event, there are also supporting activities such as "Yangzhou Morning Tea" experience, market fairs, and intangible cultural heritage performances, creating a strong local cultural scene. This approach of combining traditional culture with modern event narratives has effectively strengthened the cultural depth of the city brand and the emotional stickiness of citizens, making marathon one of the important mechanisms for cultural communication. Unlike Xiamen, which emphasizes ecological vitality, the Yangzhou Marathon uses a narrative method of "slow pace and rich culture" to strengthen its cultural image as a city where tradition and modernity coexist.

As one of the six major marathon events in the world, the Tokyo Marathon has become an important part of Tokyo's city image with its brand temperament of efficiency, order and integration. The event integrates urban spaces such as the Imperial Palace, Shinjuku and Sensoji Temple, which symbolize modernity and tradition, so that the "ancient capital style" and "future city" can be juxtaposed in the event. At the same time, the event has extreme management of details (such as zoned start, volunteer ratio, and spectator guidance). Since it requires the joint efforts of the whole society, their active participation and the positive attitude shown by the wider community enable the organizing committee to utilize and maximize the social utility of the event by organizing post-race parties, festivals, and seminars. The successful bidding and hosting of large-scale sports events demonstrate the good competitiveness of the city [9]. It not only checks the service capabilities of government departments and social organizations, but also tests the level of urban infrastructure and environmental health, and reflects the participation and comprehensive quality of local residents [10]. This undoubtedly reflects the core values of Japan's social order and service culture. This highly organized event management model has enhanced the credibility and institutional image of the city brand, demonstrated the "cultural interpretation" of modern urban governance, and also invisibly strengthened Tokyo's brand positioning of "efficiency and civilization". The international influence of the event further promoted Tokyo's global recognition as an "Asian hub city".

The New York Marathon is the most typical example of the combination of marathon events and multiculturalism. As one of the world's largest and most extensive urban marathons, the New York Marathon spans five major boroughs, connecting diverse communities such as Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. Each region presents its unique cultural features at the event. The event emphasizes both the spirit of competition and the power of the community. Family running groups, charity runners, and runners from immigrant communities together constitute the multi-faceted narrative structure of the event. By hosting events, communities can be encouraged to celebrate

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unique local cultures, cultivate local pride, create a sense of local participation, and generate excitement, thereby bringing economic benefits [11]. Through the event, New York has concretized the city spirit of "inclusion", "freedom", and "diversity" into cross-cultural running actions, building a city brand image with great emotional tension and international communication power.

To sum up, the organization and expression of marathon events in different cities reflect the differentiated strategies adopted by various places based on their own resource endowments, historical culture and brand positioning.

5. Discussion and suggestions

Although cities around the world are currently actively using marathon events to enhance their brand image and have achieved certain results in visual communication, spiritual transmission, cultural embedding and political symbolism, a series of problems have still been exposed in the process of practice, and further theoretical deepening and strategic adjustment are urgently needed.

First, from the perspective of communication content, many city marathon events tend to be homogenized in route design and visual presentation, lacking unique local cultural expressions. Visual symbols are the first impression of city brand communication. If they cannot reflect the recognition of regional culture, the image of the event will be blurred and the communication effect will be weakened. Therefore, it is recommended that cities strengthen the visual implantation of local cultural landscapes and spiritual symbols in event planning, and through carefully designed routes, event identification systems and communication media, runners can form spatial memories and cultural associations during the running process, thereby enhancing the recognition and memory points of the city image.

Secondly, some city marathon events have a clear tendency towards commercialization, and brand communication relies too much on corporate sponsorship and media exposure, ignoring the cultural depth and public value of the event itself. This utilitarian operation model weakens the cultural appeal and long-term influence of the event on citizens, and is not conducive to the sustainable construction of the brand image. Therefore, the relationship between "market logic" and "cultural logic" should be rebalanced, and more public welfare elements and cultural narrative dimensions should be introduced on the premise of ensuring the sustainable operation of the event, so as to promote the transformation of the event into a cultural event with spiritual value and social significance.

Thirdly, from the perspective of public participation, with the rapid increase in the number of national marathon events, some cities have experienced fatigue in participation mobilization and decreased media attention, and the popularity of the event has shown a "short-term" trend. This not only affects the social communication power of the event, but also weakens its role in the construction of the city brand. In this regard, it is recommended that cities design "year-round" and "normalized" urban running cultural activities outside the event, such as marathon experience camps, urban night runs, online marathon platforms, etc., to extend the life cycle of the event effect by creating a normalized running community and cultural identity circle, and realize the transformation of the brand image from "one-day heat" to "continuous co-construction". In addition, the choice of the event date should also be included in the overall communication strategy to avoid the attenuation of communication effectiveness due to time scheduling conflicts. On the one hand, we should try to avoid the "intensive schedule" when large-scale domestic marathons are held, such as April and November each year when many events are held in many places across the country, resulting in excessive dispersion of media attention and runner resources; on the other hand, we should combine local climate conditions, festival arrangements and tourism off-seasons to

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reasonably plan the event time and enhance the comfort of participation and urban linkage of the event. For example, the event can be arranged on commemorative days or local festivals that have symbolic significance to the city's culture. This will not only help enhance the cultural attributes of the event, but also enable the simultaneous superposition of the marathon and city memory, thereby enhancing citizens' emotional belonging and identification.

Finally, in terms of communication paths and participation mechanisms, most current events still rely on traditional media reporting and on-site participation, lacking the integration and innovation of digital technology. Considering that digital media has become the core field of contemporary urban communication, it is recommended to increase the combination of events and digital communication, such as introducing virtual reality (VR) event experience, augmented reality (AR) guided tours, and social media interactive check-in mechanisms, to achieve in-depth integration of online and offline. At the same time, use big data and user portrait technology to accurately push urban cultural content, enhance runners' event experience and cultural identity, and expand the multi-level communication boundaries of urban brands. In the future, when cities use marathons to build their brands, they should pay attention to the runner service management and cultural scene extension design of the event, integrate local characteristic culture with the event, and increase the participation of citizens and runners. At the same time, use digital communication and virtual interaction to expand the influence of the event, improve event efficiency, event safety, and event civilization, so that brand culture can achieve two-way expansion of "online and offline" and "local and global".

Marathon events have evolved from a mass sports activity to an important venue for urban cultural narrative and brand communication. With its unique participation mechanism and cultural embedding method, it promotes the city's image transformation from "being seen" to "being recognized". In the diverse practice of shaping urban brand culture, marathon provides an integrated paradigm that integrates cultural experience, social interaction and spatial narrative. In the future, cities should tap into their cultural communication potential, use events as a medium, tell good city stories, inspire citizen recognition, and expand global influence.

6. Conclusion

The research results of this study are: marathon events construct four major communication mechanisms through visual symbol focus, spiritual symbol communication, cultural reproduction and political image, combined with spatial narrative, emotional resonance and cultural interaction paths of universal participation, which significantly enhances the recognition and cultural identity of the city brand. Case comparison further verifies that differentiation strategies (such as Xiamen ecological humanities, Yangzhou cultural immersion, Tokyo efficient order, New York diversity and tolerance) can effectively transform events into the core carrier of urban cultural narrative. Therefore, the research conclusion is that marathon events have become a key medium to promote the transition of cities from "spatial entities" to "emotional brands". Its essence is a social ritual to achieve urban cultural governance and brand co-shaping through embodied practice.

This study provides a lot of valuable references for future research in this direction, mainly affecting the three dimensions of theory, practice and decision-making. On the theoretical level, it fills the gap in the research on the role chain of sports events driving urban cultural identity, injecting a new perspective of embodiment and scenario into brand theory; on the practical level, it reveals the real dilemmas such as homogeneity, commercialization and short cycle, and proposes optimization paths such as strengthening cultural symbols, balancing public welfare and business, normalizing community operations and integrating digital technology; on the decision-making

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reference level, it provides a brand building paradigm for cities with different endowments through cross-case empirical evidence.

Future research should focus more on the following directions for in-depth exploration, including quantitative verification of micro-group cultural identity, cultural narrative effectiveness of VR/AR and metaverse technology, construction of long-term brand asset tracking model for events, synergy mechanism of green operation and continuation of community culture, and comparative analysis of brand construction rules in cross-cultural contexts, so as to deepen the understanding and application of marathon events as a tool for urban cultural governance.

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