

Research on Commercialization Pathways of Marathon Event IP Integration with Folk Culture——Analysis Based on Enhancing Event IP Recognition and Cultural Influence

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Abstract:

With the sustained positive development of China's economy, people are paying more attention to the spiritual value brought by sports events, and domestic marathon events continue to develop. This paper addresses the current situation of severe homogenization and insufficient integration of folk culture in China's marathon events. Combining questionnaire surveys and case analyses, this study focuses on three core issues: audience cognitive preferences, differences in cultural presentation effects, and the balance between commercial and cultural objectives. By analyzing domestic and international event operation practices and comparing marketing strategies of different marathon events, it points out shortcomings in domestic events such as low cultural added value, homogenized derivatives, and lack of experiential mechanisms. Through research, three breakthrough paths and optimization suggestions are proposed to construct event cultural genes, create immersive experiences, and leverage policy-market synergy. The aim is to promote the evolution of events from traffic monetization to emotional connection, achieving a win-win situation for commercial value and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Marathon events, homogeneity of derivatives, immersive experience.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the significant rise in awareness of both overall physical fitness and public health, the

number of marathon events in China has seen an explosive growth. According to data from the Chinese Track and Field Association, the number of registered marathon and related road running events in China

has increased dramatically, from just a few dozen events a decade ago to nearly 2,000 events in 2024. The number of participants has also surpassed 10 million [1]. This phenomenon marks the evolution of marathons from a professional competitive sport into a “phenomenal” sports IP with broad public engagement, profound social influence, and immense commercial development potential. As a synthesis of event brand value, cultural essence, and commercial operations, the commercial value and social impact of event IPs have become increasingly prominent, serving as a crucial engine for driving the upgrading of the sports industry and urban brand development.

However, as the scale of sports events expands rapidly, a critical issue has become increasingly evident: severe homogenization. Many competitions exhibit striking similarities in core elements—including track design, event themes, supporting activities, visual identity, merchandise development, and brand communication strategies—, lacking distinctive differentiation and regional cultural markers. This homogenization directly results in blurred brand recognition, insufficient participant loyalty (stickiness), and scarce memorable highlights, turning numerous events into “cookie-cutter” spectacles that struggle to stand out in fierce market competition. Therefore, although event activities can gain short-term traffic and influence due to certain demographic advantages, they cannot evolve into cultural brand IPs with lasting vitality and emotional resonance.

Meanwhile, China’s rich and diverse regional folk cultures, as unique cultural treasures, hold profound historical significance. They also possess distinct aesthetic value, strong emotional resonance, and vibrant narrative potential. These cultural elements should serve as excellent materials for creating differentiated event IP and highlighting local charm. However, current domestic marathon events generally suffer from systemic deficiencies and superficial applications in integrating folk culture. Cultural elements are often merely used as visual symbols (such as engraved medals, printed race uniforms) or isolated cultural performances (such as songs and dances at the starting/end points), failing to deeply integrate into the core processes, participatory experiences, and value transmission of the events, resulting in a disconnect between “culture” and “sports”. This superficial combination not only fails to reflect the true value of local cultural customs but also cannot enhance the cultural and emotional value that the event itself provides to participants.

At a time when the global sports landscape is shifting towards a focus on experience and cultural dimensions, consumers’ expectations from sporting events have evolved to encompass more than just the sport itself. There is now a growing demand for deeper cultural immersion and emotional resonance. By organically integrating folk culture

into marathon event IP operations, organizers can not only effectively overcome homogenization issues while enhancing brand recognition, cultural depth, and value proposition, but also activate cultural heritage preservation and drive synergistic development of related industries. This model has achieved a win-win situation in terms of economy, returns, and social culture. Taking global marathon events as an example, such as the Boston Marathon, which combines brand culture with clothing brands to launch classic jackets; the Tokyo Marathon, which collaborates with traditional stores to integrate technology and culture into product design; and the London Marathon, which enhances its influence by building a community through charity fundraising, these cases all demonstrate the positive impact of culture on the intellectual property (IP) of marathon events and contribute to long-term success. However, there are still significant challenges in integrating domestic marathons and sports events. First, limited practical experience has resulted in monotonous fusion models. Second, cultural presentations remain superficial, lacking narrative storytelling and immersive brand operations with long-term planning. Cultural elements are often introduced as temporary measures rather than sustainable symbols. The imbalance between commercialization and cultural preservation leads to either excessive commercialization that erodes cultural essence or overemphasis on cultural displays at the expense of commercial sustainability. These bottlenecks hinder the potential for marathons to enhance their value through cultural integration.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the core theme of “Commercialization Pathways for Integrating Marathon Event IP with Folk Culture”. It aims to address key questions: How can systematic and innovative integration strategies effectively transform regional folk culture into critical drivers for enhancing event IP visibility, influence, and commercial value? Specifically, the research combines two methodologies: questionnaire surveys to examine audience perceptions, preferences, participation willingness, and evaluations of cultural integration in marathons; and case studies analyzing successful cultural empowerment practices in global benchmark events (e.g., Boston, Tokyo, London Marathons) versus explorations and shortcomings in domestic events (e.g., Shaoxing, Xi’an, Lanzhou Marathons). Through comparative analysis, the study explores how folk cultural elements can evolve from “traffic monetization” to “emotional connection” in event IP development via pathways like “cultivating cultural DNA”, “creating immersive experiences”, and “policy-market synergy”. This ultimately achieves dual objectives of commercial value creation and cultural heritage innovation.

2. IP Operation Mode of Marathon Event

2.1 Create a Series of Events

2.1.1 Derivative development: cultural symbol system beyond pragmatism

The Boston Marathon has pioneered an emotional monetization model through its signature product—the Boston Jacket. By incorporating historical elements through strategic color adjustments, the organizers introduced a 2024 blue-themed jacket paying homage to the iconic 1976 edition. This design achieved a staggering 200% price premium in the secondary market, with retail prices reaching \$500 while production costs stood at just \$60 – a result of strict purchase eligibility requirements for participants. These jackets are only sold to participants and staff members because this marketing strategy is based on scarcity and exclusivity. As a result, sales of the Boston Marathon

jackets exceeded 80 units, generating a revenue of \$14.4 million. The profit margin for these jackets accounted for approximately 65% of the total sales revenue from the merchandise. These results clearly demonstrate that the collaboration between the Boston Marathon and the apparel brand has significantly enhanced the event’s brand visibility. This strategy has become an integral part of the Boston city’s image and continues to attract a large number of runners and spectators to participate in the event, thereby enhancing its overall impact.

2.1.2 Expand the event ecology

The stratified penetration of the race ecosystem has expanded its commercial reach. First, Boston Marathon employs a pyramid-style event matrix to segment participants into different demographics, catering to all age groups. As shown in the table 1, junior event participants earn corresponding Boston Marathon points, which can be redeemed for registration discounts at adult categories. Currently, this point redemption conversion rate stands at approximately 40%.

Table 1. Analysis of event hierarchy and commercial value and scale

Level of competition	Representative projects	Business Value Points	Participation scale (2025)
Elite layer	Full marathon	Sponsoring Core	33000
The mass level	B.A.A.5K run	Low threshold traffic (registration fee \$50)	10,000
Future user layer	Teen 1 mile run	Household consumption (derivatives + training)	8,000
The philanthropic layer	Wheelchair marathon	Brand reputation	150

Beyond the Boston Marathon, the Tokyo Marathon has also significantly enhanced its overall influence through technology-driven cultural storytelling strategies. This is demonstrated through two key approaches. First, functional innovation in race gear: The organizers integrated core timing chips with luggage tray functions to create customizable name-engraved chip luggage tags priced at \$45 for participants, achieving practical extensions of technological applications in the event. Second, cultural IP collaborations: Partnering with Nakagawa Shoichi Shop—a time-honored Tokyo retailer—the marathon launched merchandise featuring Edo-style patterns, including compression towels and ukiyo-e-themed cups [2]. Leveraging local cultural elements, this product line achieved a 150% cultural premium rate, further strengthening the event’s distinctive cultural identity [3]. bringing an identity-affirming, urban-exploring, and culturally-immersive holistic experience. Its premium - priced derivative products and fan loyalty are a vivid manifestation of the “experience economy,” where consumers are willing to pay a premium for unique experiences [4].

2.2 Philanthropy Model

For instance, the London Marathon has successfully integrated historical legacy with social responsibility. In 2024, China achieved a historic breakthrough in the field of sports. For the first time, the same amount of prize money was awarded to wheelchair athletes and able-bodied athletes. This undoubtedly achieved equality in sports. This innovative model broke through the boundaries of sports and significantly enhanced the brand value and social influence of the event. It was widely recognized by the public, the government, and all sectors of society. Since its inception in 1981, the marathon has raised over £1.3 billion in donations [5]. The 2025 edition saw participation reach a record-breaking 56,000 runners, with approximately 1,400 charities participating. Charity slots are allocated through tiered sales: partner organizations purchase these slots at significantly higher prices than public registration fees (e.g., average charity slot cost £2,000-2,500 per person in 2025, compared to £50-100 for public lottery entries) [6]. While charity slots command substantially higher fees than public entries, the event imposes no minimum

fundraising thresholds. Through multiple charity websites, the reporter found that most event organizers require participants to donate between £2,000 and £2,500 for the 2025 London Marathon. Many runners have set up crowdfunding pages on platforms like just giving to raise funds. If the scale of the London Marathon is what makes it stand out, then this event undoubtedly embodies its unique values. Moreover, corporate sponsorships and brand partnerships have generated substantial returns for the event. Firstly, the London Marathon has been sponsored by Virgin Money (2010-2025), with annual sponsorship revenue estimated at £5-8 million (approximately RMB 45-72 million). Secondly, a multi-tier sponsorship system—including official timekeeper TAG Heuer, sports apparel from New Balance, and beverage sponsor Lucozade—has created total annual sponsorship income exceeding £20 million. The growth in external revenue is primarily driven by registration fees, merchandise sales, media licensing, and expenses related to consumer travel. Regarding registration fees, the standard for 2025 is between £49 and £120 (the exact amount varies based on the channel and time period), which is expected to attract 56,000 participants. This is projected to generate between £3 million and £6 million in revenue. In terms of merchandise sales, the focus will be on finisher t-shirts, commemorative plaques, and city-themed badges. Broadcasting rights: The BBC holds long-term domestic broadcasting rights and distributes international rights to over 200 countries, generating annual revenue of £15 million [7]. Tourism consumption: The event attracts over 500,000 visitors during weekends, creating £150 million in revenue for London's hospitality, catering, and retail sectors [8]. Additional income: Since its inception, the marathon founders set dual objectives: maximizing charitable contributions and providing participants with enjoyment and achievement.

Through analyzing the operational model of the London Marathon, the study identifies key replicable strategies. First, dual-driven philanthropy and commercialization: By offering premium charity slots and corporate sponsorships to generate stable revenue streams, while enhancing social welfare attributes to boost long-term brand value (e.g., implementing “equal prize money for wheelchair athletes and able-bodied participants” in 2024). Second, asset-light cultural operations: Reducing reliance on physical merchandise development (e.g., Tokyo Marathon's smart luggage tags) by focusing on charity crowd funding and urban economic ecosystems, thereby minimizing rigid costs in cultural integration.

3. Cultural Experience and Lack of Mechanism of Domestic Competitions

Through the overseas marathon operation model, the

study have identified current challenges and shortcomings in domestic marathon IP commercialization. First, the lack of cultural value stems from superficial application of cultural elements. Most events merely incorporate city-related motifs into medals and race wear designs without deep cultural storytelling. Take Lu You-themed Shaoxing Marathon as an example: it only features engraved words on medals and poetic check-in spots along the course, failing to create an immersive experience blending sports and literature. In contrast, Boston Marathon with a century-long legacy and New York Marathon transform central park landscapes into race narratives, where cultural IPs have become the soul of events [9]. Second, derivative products suffer from severe homogenization, with over 70% of event merchandise limited to practical items like T-shirts and key chains, lacking regional characteristics and emotional resonance [10]. Although Xi'an Marathon initially introduced themed towels, subsequent product iterations failed to evolve into lasting cultural symbols. Cultural activities during events mainly consist of one-time elements like opening ceremony performances and post-race markets, lacking sustained engagement. For instance, while Lanzhou Marathon is renowned for its city spirit, it has not developed enduring cultural programs comparable to Boston or New York Marathons. This results in participants' engagement with cultural elements remaining at the photo-taking level rather than emotional resonance.

4. Optimization Suggestions

4.1 Build the Cultural Genes of the Event and Bind the Cultural Symbols

Take the cultural marathon model of Shaoxing as an example. By transforming local historical figures and intangible cultural heritage into race course themes, such as Suzhou Marathon integrating garden culture into its design to create scenic transformations every 5 kilometers, participants can unlock garden-related anecdotes at each milestone. This approach innovates cultural consumption scenarios by converting single commemorative items into cultural carriers. For instance, Xi'an Marathon offers city wall-themed souvenirs, while Wuhan Marathon issues Yangtze River-themed collectibles that combine blockchain technology for digital preservation and sharing.

4.2 Create an Immersive Cultural Experience, Inject Emotional Stories

Domestic marathons face a notable narrative disconnect, particularly evident in the separation between cultural elements and core running experiences, which fails to effectively resonate with runners' emotional responses. Ac-

cording to data from the “Marathon Participant Behavior Report (2025)”, 85% of surveyed runners believe cultural components in domestic races often remain superficial “background elements” rather than being deeply integrated into the overall event atmosphere. Organizers could learn from New York Marathon’s “city-as-stage” concept

by establishing interactive cultural zones along the course. The first step of the breakthrough strategy is to design story nodes. Take the local cases of Xi ‘an Marathon, Hangzhou Marathon and Quanzhou Marathon as examples, as shown in the table 2 below.

Table 2. Emotional value analysis of track process model

Track phase	Emotional purpose	Localization cases
origin	sense of ceremony	Xi ‘an: Morning bell tolls + armor formation to send off
on passage	Immersion	Hangzhou: “Tea Fighting Arena” will be set up in the West Lake section (tea snacks and Song-style tea vouchers will be provided)
terminal point	belongingness	Quanzhou: “Maritime Silk Road Clearance Documents” will be issued at the end (stamped and certified to complete the race)

The Second Path to Breakthrough: Anchoring Individual Value to Achieve Deep Integration between Sports Narratives and Personal Experiences. Taking Suzhou’s urban characteristics as an example, the study can design a full-cycle personal narrative framework centered on the core IP of “Garden Culture”:

During the pre-race phase, runners are provided with a garden-themed digital brochure template to fill in personalized details such as their race motivations and impressions of Suzhou gardens, creating exclusive “pre-race messages.” Upon completion, the system automatically integrates participants’ data (including finish times, routes taken, and track photos) with pre-race entries to generate digital albums featuring iconic garden elements like the Humble Administrator’s Garden and Lingering Garden, enhancing emotional connections between participants and the event. Concurrently, physical silk scroll merchandise is developed to replicate core content from the digital albums (such as finish certificates, personalized messages, and garden illustrations). Leveraging Suzhou’s intangible cultural heritage in silk craftsmanship and referencing successful event-related creative product conversions, this scroll is projected to sell over 10,000 units.

5. Conclusions

This study addresses the core issues of severe homogenization and insufficient integration of folk culture in China’s marathon events. By comparing international benchmark cases with local practices, it proposes a commercialization path for event IP through cultural empowerment. The research identifies three major shortcomings in current domestic events: low cultural added value (e.g., Shaoxing Marathon’s superficial use of Lu You’s poetry), homogenized derivatives (over 70% basic categories like T-shirts and keychains), and lack of experiential mechanisms (cultural activities becoming superficial), leading

to emotional disconnection and lack of long-term brand value. International experiences reveal breakthrough directions. The Boston Marathon creates scarcity derivatives through an “emotional monetization” model (e.g., limited-edition jackets with 200% premium pricing) while the Tokyo Marathon achieves cultural premium through technological carriers (chip luggage tags) and local cultural collaborations (Edo-style pattern accessories). The London Marathon constructs social value ecosystems through a dual-driven charity model (raising over £130 million annually). These cases demonstrate that successful cultural integration must simultaneously achieve dual objectives of commercialization and emotional resonance. Based on this, the study proposes localized approaches: First, build cultural genes by deeply binding regional symbols and developing cultural collectibles using technologies like blockchain. Second, design immersive narratives to trigger emotions through layered track scenarios (initial sense of purpose-mid-race immersion-final sense of belonging). Third, policy-market synergy: governments provide intangible cultural heritage resources support while operators develop light-asset experiences (e.g., Suzhou garden digital albums + silk scroll artworks). The research conclusion emphasizes that event IPs should transition from “traffic monetization” to “emotional connection,” achieving dual value enhancement of commercial benefits and cultural heritage through three strategies: systematic cultural symbolization, personalized experiences, and operational scarcity. Future research could further explore how VR/AR technology empowers immersive experiences and strengthen differentiated development of intangible cultural heritage resources across China’s diverse regions.

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