

Accumulating Momentum, Strategizing Momentum, Riding Momentum: The Generation Logic and Implications of the Phenomenal Communication of the “Jiangsu City Football League (Su Chao)” from the Perspective of Participatory Culture

Zhang Chen

School of Physical Education and Health, East China Jiaotong University, Nanchang, China

Email: 1471178783@qq.com

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Abstract

Sports events serve as a pivotal carrier for advancing the development of mass sports, society, economy and culture. Adopting the perspective of participatory culture, this study employs literature review and logical analysis to dissect the generation logic of the phenomenal communication of the Jiangsu City Football League (“Su Chao”) and propose implications for the development of urban sports events in China. The study concludes that the generation logic of Su Chao’s phenomenal communication lies in three dimensions: regional cultural genes accumulate participatory potential energy, platform empowerment activates communication nodes, and emotional communities drive value fission. The implications are as follows: transform the event operation philosophy to realize the shift from competition-oriented standard to participatory cultural symbiosis; extend the industrial chain to drive the integration of sports event economy into ecological economy; innovate cultural symbols to form short-term viral hits that drive the long-term value-added of sports event IP, so as to promote the sustainable development of urban sports modernization with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords

Jiangsu City Football League (Su Chao), Participatory Culture, Phenomenal Communication, Sports Events

1. Introduction

In March 2024, the General Administration of Sport of China, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism jointly issued the Notice on Launching the Campaign of “Bringing Sports Events to Scenic Spots, Blocks and Business Districts”, which proposes embedding sports events into public life spaces [1]. Since its kick-off on May 10, 2025, the Jiangsu City Football League (hereinafter referred to as “Su Chao”) has rapidly gone viral after only three rounds of matches with the event philosophy of “national participation + urban glory”. It has evolved from a local competition into a phenomenally communicated sweeping across the internet, setting a record for the breadth, depth and sustainability of communication among similar events. It has broken away from the norm of “niche carnival” for urban sports events. The pioneering “ticket-stub economy” has subverted the traditional revenue model of sports events, extended the sports industry to all walks of life, and faithfully implemented national policy requirements. It has efficiently transformed event influence into real economic benefits, blazing a unique new path for urban sports development with distinctive innovative ideas.

Economically, the explosive popularity of “Su Chao” has not only boosted the football industry but also driven the overall cultural and tourism economy of Jiangsu Province. According to estimates by the Jiangsu Sports Industry Group, a single season of “Su Chao” is expected to drive a comprehensive economic benefit of over 300 million yuan, with an average increase of more than 20 million yuan per city, forming a “new engine” for urban economic development with football as the carrier. In terms of communication, statistics from the Hotspot Research Institute show that the total internet information related to “Su Chao” reached 649,500 items, and the views of related topics on Douyin exceeded 2 billion times, showing a non-linear and sustained growth of traffic. Non-media information accounted for 97.54%, while media information accounted for only 2.46% [2], breaking the monopoly model of sports events relying on media broadcasting rights.

In addition, among the 516 players of Su Chao, most are ordinary professionals such as couriers, teachers and programmers. Their “amateur identity” has dispelled the sacredness of professional events such as provincial leagues in the minds of the public. The regional cultural meme of “fragmented Jiangsu” has been endowed with new cultural symbolic expressions through “Southern Brother Rivalry”, “Chu-Han Hegemony” and other narratives [3], and has been sublimated into a new bond for provincial cultural identity. It is evident that the viral phenomenon of Su Chao goes beyond the marketing scope of traditional urban sports events. Its essence is a vivid interpretation of “participatory culture” proposed by Henry Jenkins, in which audiences transform from passive consumers into active content producers, communicators and co-constructors of meaning [4]. Therefore, taking “participatory culture” as the analytical perspective, this paper reveals the generation logic of Su Chao’s phenomenal communication by analyzing its

three-stage evolution mechanism of “accumulating momentum—strategizing momentum—riding momentum”, extracts practical implications for the development of sports leagues in China, and further provides a reference for exploring the modernization and sustainable development of urban sports events with Chinese characteristics.

1.1. Research Methods

This study adopts a combination of literature review and logical analysis to conduct a systematic investigation of Su Chao’s phenomenal communication.

Literature review: Literature retrieval was conducted through core databases including CNKI, Web of Science and Scopus, with keywords such as “participatory culture”, “urban sports events” and “phenomenal communication”. The screening scope covers academic papers, monographs, policy documents and official industry reports, excluding non-academic blog posts and duplicate literature, with valid documents finally selected for analysis.

Logical analysis: Based on the core connotation of participatory culture, this study constructs a three-stage analytical framework of “accumulating momentum-strategizing momentum-riding momentum”. By sorting out the event operation, communication data and public feedback of Su Chao, it logically deduces the interactive relationship between regional culture, platform technology and emotional community, and clarifies the internal generation logic of its phenomenal communication.

1.2. Core Concepts and Definitions

1.2.1. Participatory Culture

Participatory culture, as defined by Henry Jenkins, refers to a culture with relatively low barriers to entry for creative expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices, a belief that contributions matter, and a sense of social connection with one another. Unlike the top-down, one-way communication model of traditional media, it emphasizes the shift of audiences from passive consumers to active participants in content production, dissemination, and meaning co-construction. In the context of sports events, it manifests as the public’s spontaneous participation in match watching, discussion, content creation, and offline activities, forming a multi-dimensional interactive ecology.

1.2.2. Phenomenal Communication

This study defines phenomenal communication as the non-linear, explosive and sustained spread of a specific event or content that transcends its original niche audience, breaks through the boundary between professional and amateur fields, and generates extensive social attention, emotional resonance and spillover social and economic value beyond the event itself. It is not a single “viral hit” but a continuous, multi-level diffusion process driven by audience participation.

1.2.3. Participatory Potential Energy

Participatory potential energy refers to the latent willingness, ability and motivation of potential audiences to participate in the communication of an event, accumulated by regional cultural identity, audience's sense of belonging, and the accessibility of the event itself. It is the foundational driving force for the event's communication to break out of the circle, and is activated and released through platform empowerment and emotional resonance.

1.2.4. Value Fission

Value fission refers to the process in which the core value of an event, under the drive of participatory culture, is continuously decomposed, reconstructed and extended by participants, forming a multi-dimensional value system including communication value, social value, cultural value and economic value, thus realizing the transformation from single event value to comprehensive spillover value.

2. Appropriateness of Participatory Culture for the Phenomenal Communication of Su Chao

“Participatory culture” was first proposed by scholar Henry Jenkins through ethnographic analysis of the cultural production behaviors of TV drama fan communities. He found that after consuming their favorite popular texts, fans not only passively consume content but also actively “poach” texts and adapt and reproduce original texts according to their own ideas [5], forming creative practices independent of mainstream culture. Jenkins defined this behavior as “textual poaching”, emphasizing that fans challenge the authority of traditional media producers through appropriation and re-creation, revealing the early form of audiences shifting from cultural production to cultural consumption [6].

With the continuous research on participatory culture and changes in the media environment, Jenkins creatively linked “participatory culture” with “media convergence” in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, pointing out that media technology has broken the barriers between producers and consumers [7], treating both as interactive participants. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, he systematically defined “participatory culture” as a fan culture style characterized by freedom, equality, openness, inclusiveness and sharing, created on the Web 2.0 internet platform with all netizens as the main body, through identity recognition, active creation of media texts, dissemination of media content and enhancement of online communication [8]. Its core features include: 1) relatively low thresholds for artistic expression and civic participation, *i.e.*, low-threshold creation and expression reduce participation barriers; 2) strong support for creation and sharing of creations with others, and the transmission of information from experienced members to novices through informal apprenticeship, *i.e.*, community belonging and mutual assistance form emotional bonds; 3) members believing in the value of their own contributions, *i.e.*, individual actions influencing public narratives reflect the sense of value of members' contributions; 4) members feeling a certain

social connection with others, *i.e.*, strengthening identity through sharing to promote social connection [9].

Participatory culture is compatible with the phenomenal communication of “Su Chao” in three dimensions. First, subject compatibility. Traditional professional sports often marginalize ordinary people as “audience” or “consumers”, leaving them in a passive position in sports event practice and failing to truly awaken their subjectivity. In contrast, participants of Su Chao are also content producers [10], and live audiences generate real-time user-generated content (UGC) via mobile phones. For example, the video of “20,000 people climbing trees to watch the match” at Changzhou Olympic Sports Center was recorded by the audience in real time, and most content under the Douyin topic “Jiangsu Grassroots Football” is user-created. This aligns with the core of participatory culture, which emphasizes that fans, audiences or users (participants) are no longer mere spectators or consumers, but become content producers, communication nodes and co-constructors of meaning.

Second, communication compatibility. Participatory culture highlights that marginalized cultural consumers build their own cultural spaces through their own productivity, prompting media production to attach importance to audience experience [11]. Behind the phenomenal communication of “Su Chao” is the opening of content production authority by mainstream media, promoting the transfer of communication power from institutions to communities, and transforming audiences from information recipients to “partners” in communication. For instance, the government new media “Nanjing Release” triggered a traffic boom with meme-based articles such as “Competition First, Friendship Fourteenth”, achieving a single article reading volume of 770,000. It then guided the public to create secondary content by setting topics such as “Nanjing Salted Duck vs Lianyungang Swimming Crab” and “Affectionate Exchange Between Nanjing and Huai’an Before the Match”, spawning original hot memes such as “Never Forget Huai’an” and breaking the circle barriers on the supply side of new media products.

Third, cultural compatibility. Participatory culture is, in a form, a culture with informal mentoring that transfers knowledge from the most experienced groups to novices [12]. Netizens of Su Chao reconstruct regional cultural symbols through secondary creation, inheriting traditional culture in innovative ways. For example, the match between Xuzhou and Suqian was packaged as “Chu-Han Hegemony”, and Huai’an launched the slogan “The Great Sage Returns”, enabling traditional culture to gain modern expression. Evidently, the phenomenal communication of “Su Chao” is essentially a process of users actively participating in content production and meaning co-construction, which perfectly fits the theoretical core of participatory culture.

3. Generation Logic of Su Chao’s Phenomenal Communication: Structured Evolution of Threefold Potential Energy

From the perspective of participatory culture, the viral popularity of Su Chao is

no longer a mere football match, but a regional cultural event formed through the three-stage evolution of cultural potential energy accumulation, technical node activation and emotional value fission with the participation of audiences, users or fans.

3.1. Accumulating Momentum: Regional Cultural Genes Accumulate Participatory Potential Energy

The viral popularity of Su Chao is not accidental but an inevitable outcome of long-term accumulation. Rooted in Jiangsu's profound regional culture, Su Chao transforms cultural tension, emotional attraction and differential deconstruction into participatory potential energy through three mechanisms. First, transformation of the cultural tension of "fragmented Jiangsu". Jiangsu boasts a profound historical and cultural heritage, and each city has its own cultural characteristics. The event ingeniously transforms the historical and cultural differences among 13 cities in Jiangsu into an emotional bond of "adversarial unity", forming a regional culture of "one city, one meme". It translates historical culture into new cultural symbols through national participation and co-creation, inheriting historical culture in new forms. For example, the "Chu-Han Hegemony" between Xuzhou and Suqian echoes the historical narrative of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, triggering netizens to research cultural origins; the "Southern Brother Rivalry" between Nanjing and Nantong subverts the traditional authoritative perception of provincial capitals and stimulates participatory creation; the "Huaiyang Cuisine Derby" between Yangzhou and Wuxi highlights culinary cultural pride, constructing a communication community based on regional identity through cultural differentiation among cities. Moreover, the government takes the initiative to embrace memes to bridge the gap of official discourse and actively guide civic participation and expression. For instance, Nanjing Release's slogan "Competition First, Friendship Fourteenth" stimulates regional identity; Changzhou's self-mockery of "Jinzhou" (a pun on its consecutive losses) realizes the integration of official narrative and folk discourse, sublimating "mutual mockery" into "empathy". This national participatory communication transforms the government from a manager into a cultural co-conspirator, effectively eliminating the distance in traditional sports communication.

Second, emotional attraction of grassroots authenticity. Participatory culture emphasizes stimulating collective wisdom and a sense of belonging through shared identity, forming a closely interactive online community and fostering an inclusive and shared cultural ecology. Su Chao players are both participants and producers of communication content. Their dual identity constructs a strong sense of substitution, breaks the elite barrier of professional sports, and triggers public self-projection. For example, the video of Huang Weihong, a player from Zhenjiang, "blocking the ball with his face" went viral online, resonating emotionally with numerous students. It is such civilian hero narratives of "working during the day and training at night" that attracted 65.7% of the audience to attend

matches to “support their hometown team” [13]. The audience realizes the embodied expression of identity recognition by supporting grassroots teams.

Third, differential deconstruction of the seriousness of the competitive field. Unlike other “unattainable” leagues, Su Chao is rooted in the community and integrated into the aesthetics of urban life, dispelling the seriousness of the competitive field. For example, Changzhou citizens spelled out the team formation with dried radishes and dubbed tactical explanations, and interactive knowledge quizzes during halftime infused football with urban life atmosphere, reshaping the sports space in a mode against standardized sports norms. These “unscripted potential energies” become the “cultural genes” of UGC communication, providing cultural materials for subsequent fission communication.

3.2. Strategizing Momentum: Platform Empowerment Activates Communication Nodes

Strategizing momentum embodies the wisdom of assessing the situation. As an ancient saying goes, “He who can make use of the wisdom of all is fearless even of sages” [14], emphasizing the importance of collective wisdom. Su Chao skillfully leverages collective wisdom to reconstruct the communication ecology with online platforms (short-video platforms, etc.) through strategic planning and resource integration, forming a threefold communication chain of “technical empowerment, algorithm boosting and secondary creation”.

First, digital technical empowerment activates UGC production. Digital technical empowerment breaks the barriers of professional production, constructs a communication matrix of “national journalists”, and realizes the communication pattern of “first broadcast on large screens, in-depth broadcast on small screens”. According to the 56th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of June 2025, the number of internet users in China reached 1.123 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 79.7% [15]. Traditional content creation requires four steps: material collection, script writing, video editing and dubbing. Digital technical empowerment (intelligent editing tools, Douyin’s “one-click clip” function, etc.) has greatly lowered the threshold for user creation, delegating the right to record events from institutional media to ordinary audiences. For example, Changzhou Olympic Sports Center gave birth to a unique roof-watching phenomenon, and the “second venue” formed by fans shooting with mobile phones complements the official broadcast narrative. Meanwhile, in addition to on-site viewing, Su Chao uses 4K, 8K ultra-high-definition technology to set up large viewing screens in shopping malls, squares and other areas and display Su Chao-related information [16], deepening the media spectacle of “the city is the venue”. It also carefully designs short video clips, behind-the-scenes footage and interactive topics suitable for platforms such as Weibo, Douyin and Bilibili to stimulate UGC production. Data show that user-generated content accounted for more than 70% during the event [17]. This decentralized recording method reconstructs the tem-

poral and spatial dimensions of the event.

Second, algorithm logic boosts the viral spread of “iconic moments”. The platform grants traffic inclination to contrasting and dramatic content through a spectacular recommendation mechanism, skillfully using algorithm logic to expand communication potential energy. For example, topics such as Changzhou’s “stroke defense battle” (Changzhou → Diao Zhou → Jin Zhou → Yi Zhou) created by netizens due to consecutive losses and “Three Fools of Taihu Lake” were pushed to Weibo’s hot search list by the algorithm system within 24 hours. The simulated dinosaur interactive show during Changzhou’s home match against Nanjing became the most imposing cheerleading squad of the round. After being created and posted online by users, it gained exposure through algorithm recognition, forming a phenomenal communication event and enhancing online and offline user interaction.

Third, secondary creation extends the narrative dimension. Users transform event fragments into cultural symbols through diverse forms such as dialect dubbing, emoji adaptation and AI re-creation. For example, the bicycle kick video of Te, a player from Taizhou, was nicknamed “Su Chao has its own Ronaldo” by netizens, and was adapted into emojis, dialect commentary and other forms through secondary creation. The intangible cultural heritage displayed by Su Chao cheerleading squads triggered a chain reaction on Douyin after secondary creation, reflecting that individual actions influence public narratives and realizing the sublimation from a single event to a cultural motif. This platform-empowered communication model essentially constructs a closed-loop system of content production, distribution and reproduction. It lowers the creation threshold through digital technology, screens high-quality content through algorithms, and endows new meanings through user re-creation, forming a positive cycle among the three. Compared with the “center-periphery” structure of traditional sports communication, the Su Chao phenomenon demonstrates the multi-center network characteristics unique to participatory culture, providing a replicable paradigm for the digital communication of sports events.

3.3. Riding Momentum: Emotional Community Drives Value Fission

Riding momentum refers to the diffusion of potential energy and cultural construction. In the communication landscape of Su Chao, user participation is elevated to collective emotional recognition, realizing the dual transformation of communication value and economic value. First, collective effervescence strengthens community stickiness. Participatory culture emphasizes user-generated content and interaction. Individual users experience strong emotional resonance in group life, thereby strengthening social solidarity [18]. Su Chao strengthens community stickiness by breaking identity thresholds, creating spatial scenarios and conducting online and offline interactive rituals. In terms of breaking identity thresholds, Su Chao constructs a new community boundary based on regional identity by setting entry qualifications linked to household registration, student

status and place of birth, realizing emotional connection between individuals and groups. In terms of creating spatial scenarios, Su Chao extends football from stadium carnival to urban public spaces by setting up “second home” viewing points, realizing scenario creation of “global resonance”. In terms of interactive rituals, tens of thousands of Nanjing audiences voluntarily cleaned up garbage after the offline match in heavy rain, enabling individuals to strengthen identity and promote social connection through sharing. Online late-night interactions such as “Ah Huai, are you asleep?” and “Southern Brother, are you awake?” transform the competitive arena into an emotional connection field.

Second, reconstruction of regional spirit. Regional culture is not a static display object but a cultural IP activated with communication power, realized through symbolic reconstruction of historical context and anthropomorphic expression of urban culture. In short, from the perspective of symbolic reconstruction of historical context, the event ingeniously utilizes the fragmented competition of Jiangsu’s “Thirteen Taobao” to transform historical accumulation into event highlights. For example, the match between Huai’an and Lianyungang was dubbed the “Battle of the Real and Fake Monkey King”, elevating the competition to cultural alignment. Changzhou’s humorous self-mockery in the “stroke defense battle” dispels competition anxiety through irony, transforming failure into a spirit of facing setbacks beyond victory and defeat. The dramatic reconstruction of regional cultural symbols revives traditional culture in the digital era. From the perspective of anthropomorphic expression of urban culture, when cultural differences are actively presented as interesting oppositions, it can instead strengthen the sense of identity within the group. Su Chao actively forms differential oppositions of local culture, transforms urban characteristics into a communicable symbol system, and strengthens users’ local cultural identity. For example, the culinary cultural banter between Nanjing fans (“adding sugar to salted duck”) and Wuxi fans (“adding salt to peaches”) during the match expresses local culture through the “urban war on the tip of the tongue”.

Third, formation of a closed loop of cultural consumption. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that “we should deepen the construction of spiritual civilization in urban and rural areas, optimize the supply of cultural products and services, and empower economic and social development with culture”. The sustainability of the Su Chao phenomenon stems from emotional identity driving consumption behavior, forming an integrated ecology of “event-culture-tourism-consumption”.

Cross-border linkage of ticket-stub economy. Adopting the business model of “sports setting the stage, economy performing”, Su Chao accurately directs traffic to cultural and tourism consumption scenarios through the design of “ticket + cultural tourism packages”, effectively transforming traffic into sales volume. For example, Nanjing’s ticket linkage measures offering discounts at 30 scenic spots and catering with match tickets have driven the rapid development of the surrounding tourism industry.

Sustained development of the long-tail effect. The official government platform of Su Chao resonates with folk meme creators in communication, elevating the “fragmented region” meme to an emotional narrative of “cultural identity”, forming a communication pattern of “official momentum building, folk meme creating” and keeping event-related topics continuously popular on social media. In addition, the long-cycle design of the event enables in-depth linkage of urban culture, food and intangible cultural heritage, enabling local people to reshape their hometown complex due to the match and further promoting the transformation of “fragmented Jiangsu” from emotional connection to an economic closed loop.

4. Implications of Su Chao’s Phenomenal Communication for Urban Sports Leagues

4.1. Transform the Event Operation Philosophy to Realize the Shift from Competition-Oriented Standard to Participatory Cultural Symbiosis

Traditional urban sports events often take competitive results and professional level as core goals, characterized by high venue-based and closed features, which easily lead to an “elite competitive cocoon”. Under such features, their social significance and development path will gradually decline, resulting in disconnection between events and local communities and cultures. The core of Su Chao’s phenomenal communication lies in the event philosophy of “national participation + urban glory”, which abandons the development philosophy of traditional sports events focusing on competitive results. It expands player identities from professional athletes to diverse groups such as teachers, self-employed individuals and students, generating a sense of identity substitution of “I can also participate” for the audience. It breaks the one-way “performance-viewing” model of traditional sports events, faithfully practices the concept of “prosumer” in participatory culture, endows Su Chao with multi-dimensional and cross-border attributes beyond sports, and forms a new paradigm of “national event + global linkage”, providing a referable model for urban sports leagues in China.

Specifically: First, reconstruct event positioning. Position events as a display window for local culture and a bond for community interaction. On the one hand, set event themes in combination with urban cultural characteristics to deeply bind events with local culture. For example, the 2025 Jiangxi City Football Super League (Gan Chao) integrates the profound millennial ceramic culture into the event, creating a unique Jiangsu style and stimulating the sense of urban belonging of players and audiences, making the event a display platform for millennial ceramic culture. On the other hand, strengthen community labels, cancel the dual division of professional and amateur leagues, form teams based on administrative regions (such as Changzhou Team, Nantong Team), make events a symbol of community identity, and enhance residents’ sense of belonging.

Second, expand participants. Under the competition-oriented standard, event participants are limited to professional athletes, coaches and a small number of

fans, forming invisible barriers for public participation. From the perspective of participatory culture, it is necessary to attract participants of “all ages, multiple identities and cross-fields” and make events a “stage for public co-creation”. That is, formulate differentiated rules, lower the threshold for player participation, break the inherent concept that participants of sports events are generally high-level athletes, design flexible competition systems, balance competitiveness and mass participation, build a “high-level grassroots arena”, encourage cross-border players to participate, and stimulate national participation enthusiasm. Meanwhile, lower the communication threshold and upgrade the role of the audience. Transform the audience from “bystanders” to “participants” and enhance their sense of participation and discourse power.

Third, activate cultural genes. Traditional event communication focuses on scores, goals and rankings. From the perspective of participatory culture, Su Chao shifts the venue narrative to local cultural stories, personal stories and community collective memories, enhancing the cultural depth and emotional connection of events through story communication. For example, Changzhou Team’s first goal, achieving a breakthrough from 0 to 1, made players and audiences “laugh to tears”, reflecting the spirit of Changzhou people “admitting defeat but not giving up” and creating emotional memories among each other.

Fourth, build a community interaction ecology. Interaction is the foundation of participatory culture. Transform event venues into “community cultural hubs” by creating offline interaction spaces, and build a two-way interaction ecology among events, communities and participants by setting up online interaction platforms, transforming the audience from “one-way viewing” to “two-way co-creation”. For example, Su Chao’s official media stimulates emotional empathy of the audience through offline interaction and active online meme playing, driving national secondary creation.

4.2. Extend the Industrial Chain to Drive the Integration of Sports Event Economy into Ecological Economy

The realization of the commercial value of the Su Chao League is not simply to build a “sports +” model, but to construct a three-dimensional development model of “event as the core, industry as the support, ecology as the link” through horizontal cross-border coupling and vertical chain extension, driving the integration of sports event economy into ecological economy [19].

Specifically: First, take event IP as the core to build a full industrial chain ecology. In terms of event IP operation: Vertical deep cultivation. Learn from Su Chao’s “home and away system + regional league” model, create differentiated event IPs in combination with urban cultural characteristics, and enhance event recognition. For example, Gan Chao integrates red culture into football to highlight regional characteristics and improve event recognition. User stratification. Design event systems for different groups such as professionals, amateurs and teenagers to expand the base of participants. Technical empowerment. Collect on-

field data of participants through digital tools to provide marketing data for sponsors and sports equipment brands. For example, record athletes' sports data in a match through intelligent wearable devices and event management systems to provide accurate data for brand or media promotion. Meanwhile, develop personalized derivative services (custom training plans, health management, etc.) with the help of data.

Second, take ecological integration as the link to promote the collaborative development of "sports + multi-industries". "Sports + culture and tourism": Rely on events to design themed tourism routes and create immersive scenarios from event viewing to cultural tourism and ecological experience. For example, Yixing launched the "48 Hours in Yangxian" tourism route, linking events, tea gardens, bamboo seas and night markets to realize full-time consumption scenarios before, during and after the match.

"Sports + health": The diverse participants determine the non-professionalism of athletes in physical fitness and skills, which easily leads to sports injuries. Therefore, introduce professional medical institutions to provide sports injury assessment and rehabilitation guidance services on site, and cooperate with insurance companies to launch event accident insurance, health management and other products.

"Sports + environmental protection": Practice the concept of green development, implement low-carbon event standards, extend environmental education, and carry out public welfare activities such as afforestation and wetland protection at event venues to enhance public environmental awareness during events. For example, after Su Chao matches, fans take the initiative to pick up garbage and clean venues, realizing "zero-trace viewing".

It is evident that urban sports leagues need to break away from the thinking that events are the end point, take industrial chain extension as the starting point, transform event economy into long-term ecological value through the diversified integration of "sports +".

4.3. Innovate Cultural Symbols to Form Short-Term Viral Hits That Drive the Long-Term Value-Added of Sports Event IP

The practical experience of Su Chao shows that urban leagues can realize the rapid viral spread and sustained value-added of event IP through the three-dimensional strategy of "cultural symbol innovation, short-term viral hit catalysis, long-term IP operation".

First, excavate local cultural genes and design unique cultural symbols. Innovate visual symbols and endow events with unique regional logos. Event cities can excavate local intangible cultural heritage, integrate urban landmarks or historical allusions, design team emblems, mascots or main visuals, create visual symbols with recognition, and form unique memory points. For example, Su Chao cartoonizes mascots of 13 cities such as Nanjing salted duck and Suzhou hairy crabs, embroiders them into intangible cultural heritage fabric footballs, forming a

cross-border symbol of “football + intangible cultural heritage” and promoting the IPization of regional culture.

Innovate narrative symbols and construct event stories. Excavate historical events related to cities and sports, integrate them into event background stories, select players, coaches or fans with local characteristics, and tell their stories with cities and events through documentaries, short videos and other platforms to form emotional resonance. For example, Su Chao named the match between Xuzhou and Suqian “Chu-Han Hegemony 2.0”, combining historical confrontation with modern football to form cultural narrative.

Create immersive experience cultural scenarios and enhance audience participation. Design characteristic ceremonies at the beginning of matches and add interactive experience areas (intangible cultural heritage food, skill experience) during matches to make audiences become cultural communicators.

Second, create short-term viral hits to enhance event attention. On the one hand, create event topics through event marketing. The official takes the initiative to launch urban football short video challenges or create related topics, and releases suspense information such as “mystery guests” before the start of the season to attract users to imitate characteristic football skill challenges or create cultural theme content. For example, Village BA and Su Chao trigger national interaction by inviting superstars to the venue. On the other hand, launch limited-edition marketing to create a sense of scarcity. Set up event cultural and creative product stores in business districts and transportation hubs, display co-branded products and historical relic replicas, and launch limited commodities such as match commemorative tickets and player-signed jerseys, stimulating communication through lottery purchase and social sharing.

Third, establish a long-term mechanism to realize the sustained value-added of IP. Clarify event positioning and prevent excessive entertainment. Both amateur and professional events must have certain ornamental value as the core. Therefore, events need to balance the “golden section” between entertainment and professionalism, clarify event positioning, strictly maintain competitive norms inside the venue, and expand entertainment space outside the venue. For example, severely punish violence inside the venue, safeguard the authority of referees, set up urban cultural show venues outside the venue, and develop event IP derivatives, realizing the model of “professional inside, entertaining outside”. Learn from the model of Western leagues, establish an interworking mechanism with the professional system, and provide opportunities for outstanding amateur players to trial for professional teams.

Operate fan communities and build emotional bonds. On the one hand, launch a member points mechanism to realize the transformation from traffic to retention. For example, record users’ viewing and consumption behaviors for points, which can be exchanged for co-branded products or priority ticket purchase rights, improving users’ secondary consumption behavior. On the other hand, set up a UGC incentive mechanism online to encourage fans to create event-related

content (short videos, pictures and texts), and excellent works can obtain official exposure or rewards. Organize regular offline activities to transform event attention into cultural life participation and build emotional bonds between users and events.

5. Research Limitations and Prospects

Although this study systematically reveals the generation logic of the phenomenal communication of “Su Chao” from the perspective of participatory culture, certain limitations remain. First, the explosive spread of Su Chao was built upon Jiangsu’s relatively strong economic foundation, highly popularized digital infrastructure, and a mature short-video content ecosystem—resource endowments that are not equally available in all provinces. Second, Jiangsu’s “fragmented” yet competitively cohesive cross-city cultural identity provided a unique breeding ground for the event’s dramatic narratives and emotional mobilization; in provinces with relatively underdeveloped economies, weaker cultural tensions between cities, or more homogeneous identities, such emotional energy may be difficult to activate to the same degree. Therefore, the three-stage communication model of “accumulating momentum—strategizing momentum—riding momentum” distilled in this paper, along with the related implications, still needs to be adapted to local realities when extended to other provinces or even to urban sports events at other levels. Future research may conduct multi-case comparative analyses to test and refine the boundary conditions and applicability limits of this model.

6. Conclusions

Sports events play a key role in promoting national fitness and the development of the sports industry. The phenomenal communication of “Su Chao” is not only a practical achievement of sports events but also confirms Jenkins’ view that the core power of communication is shifting from institutions to participating communities. Its three-stage communication evolution of “accumulating momentum, strategizing momentum, riding momentum” reveals the essential nature of phenomenal communication of sports events in the new media era, that is, adhering to the people-centered development philosophy and making users the protagonists of the story.

The successful practice of Su Chao shows that urban sports leagues need to transform the event operation philosophy to realize the shift from competition-oriented standard to participatory cultural symbiosis; extend the industrial chain to drive the integration of sports event economy into ecological economy; innovate cultural symbols to form short-term viral hits that drive the long-term value-added of sports event IP. This is not only a transformation of sports events but also provides a new path for the development of sports events, and a reference for the innovative expression of traditional Chinese culture, elevating a sports event into a cultural ceremony with national participation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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