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The Social Logic and Operational Mechanisms of Mass Sports Events Breaking Out of Traditional Boundaries: Illustrated by the Example of "Super League of Suzhou"

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Abstract: The 2025 Jiangsu Provincial Urban Football League ("Su Chao") has become a groundbreaking phenomenon in mass sports events, achieving remarkable success with a 176-day tournament schedule, over 2.43 million live spectators, and more than 2.2 billion online viewers. Drawing on human economics, media context theory, and collaborative governance frameworks, this study constructs a three-dimensional analytical model of "cultural identity–media empowerment–industry integration" to systematically examine the developmental logic and operational mechanisms behind Su Chao's viral success. Key findings reveal that the league's success stems from: deep-rooted regional cultural integration fostering local identity, new media platforms reshaping communication ecosystems to enable participatory engagement, and multi-stakeholder collaborative governance unleashing synergistic effects across cultural, sports, tourism, and commercial sectors. The core insights emphasize that sustainable mass sports events must adhere to people-centered development principles, establish long-term mechanisms integrating cultural preservation, innovative development, and shared benefits, and transition from event-driven models to ecosystem-driven growth. This research provides theoretical insights for understanding the social value and economic potential of mass sports events in the digital economy era.

Keywords: "Super League"; Mass Sports Events; Cultural Identity; Media Empowerment; Industrial Integration.

1. Problem Statement

In 2025, the Jiangsu Provincial Urban Football League (commonly known as "Su Super League") became a nationwide sensation with remarkable statistics: a 176-day tournament featuring 85 matches, attracting over 2.43 million live spectators and 2.2 billion online viewers, while related topics garnered over 100 billion views. This phenomenon quickly captured national attention and emerged as a hot topic during the 2026 National People's Congress sessions, hailed as a prime example of consumption-driven economic growth. Subsequently, urban football leagues such as "Gan Super League," "Xiang Super League," "Meng Super League," "Yunnan Super League," and "Northeast Super League" emerged one after another, creating a rapid expansion trend across China.

Amid the growing enthusiasm, several fundamental issues urgently require academic responses: First, how to overcome resource constraints? Local community sports events generally face challenges such as funding shortages, limited venues, talent scarcity, and weak promotion. Take the early stages of "Suzhou Super League" as an example – a barbecue restaurant initially sponsored matches with just 15,000 yuan. As the event gained momentum, sponsorship fees skyrocketed to 3 million yuan, reflecting unique resource mobilization strategies. Second, how to convert traffic into sustained growth? The "Suzhou Super League" achieved "1 yuan tickets driving 7.3 yuan in consumption," while the "Hunan Super League" generated 13.679 billion yuan in cultural tourism revenue. However, experts point out systemic issues including fragmented top-level planning, fragile industrial ecosystems, event homogenization, and inefficient operations. The core challenge lies in transitioning from event-driven models to ecosystem cultivation, transforming temporary popularity into lasting impact. Finally, how should sports sociology address this emerging phenomenon? As a new form of mass sports, "City Super Leagues" transcend the traditional dichotomy between competitive sports and public sports, calling for innovative theoretical frameworks.

This study takes the "Suzhou Super League" as a core case study, incorporating other "City Super League" competitions, to explore the social logic and operational mechanisms behind the breakout success of local sports events. The findings aim to provide theoretical references and practical insights for the sustainable development of similar sporting events.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Current Status and Development of Mass Sports Event Research

Existing research primarily examines mass sports events through three perspectives: First, the cultural identity perspective, which emphasizes the role of local competitions in fostering community cohesion and cultural heritage preservation. Feng Jiafu et al. noted that the "Su Super League" deeply integrates with regional culture, strengthening its intrinsic momentum through heightened local identity awareness [1]. Second, the communication studies perspective focuses on how new media reshape the dissemination ecosystem of sports events. Grounded in Meirowitz's media situation theory, studies employ the "new media-new scenarios-new behaviors" analytical framework to explore how grassroots competitions like the "Village Super League" and "Foshan La Liga" redefine communication contexts and influence participant behaviors [2]. Third, the industrial integration perspective investigates the economic impact of the "sports+" model. Liang Qiang

proposed that cultural resonance, technological innovation, and ecosystem synergy constitute three core pathways for transitioning event engagement from "popularity-driven" to "system-driven" models.

However, existing studies predominantly focus on single dimensions and lack integrated analysis of the 'out-of-the-circle' mechanisms for mass sports events. Particularly, the 'Super League' phenomenon involves multiple factors such as cultural identity, media dissemination, and industrial integration, necessitating the establishment of a comprehensive analytical framework [3].

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Three-Dimensional Integration of Cultural Identity, Media Empowerment, and Industrial Integration

Based on the literature review, this study establishes a three-dimensional analytical framework comprising "cultural identity, media empowerment, and industrial integration":

2.2.1. Cultural Identity Dimension

From a humanistic economics perspective, Dai Xiang and Song Yue argue that "Suzhou Super League" revitalizes football events into cultural IPs with both humanistic depth and economic vitality by deeply exploring the regional cultural characteristics of thirteen cities in Jiangsu Province and employing "Suzhou-style humor" as a narrative tool [4]. This process follows the transformation chain of "cultural symbols → emotional capital → symbolic consumption."

2.2.2. Media Empowerment Dimension

Research by Li Jinbao and Xia Zi'ang reveals that the explosive popularity of "Super League" stems from the generation of strong folk discourse—comprising the folk narrative reconstruction of official discourse, the online interpretation of folk discourse symbols, and the new media dissemination of urban regional cultural symbols. These elements collectively outline the driving mechanism behind the viral success of mass sports events. Media serves not only as a communication tool but also as a resource organizer that reshapes the event ecosystem [5].

2.2.3. Industrial Integration Dimension

Wang Chengbin, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), pointed out that' the Suzhou Super League has set an example in promoting the integrated development of culture, tourism, sports, and commerce through sports events, stimulating consumption vitality in areas such as "culture+", "tourism+", and "sports+". The core of industrial integration lies in transforming transient competitive activities into sustainable urban brand assets [6].'

3. The Generation Logic of "Super League" Going Viral

3.1. Cultural Foundations: Emotional Mobilization of Local Identity

The fundamental success of the "Super League" lies in "winning the hearts and participation of the general public." During the 2025 season, the tournament attracted over 2.43 million live spectators, averaging more than 28,000 per match. All seven matches at Nanjing Olympic Sports Center drew crowds exceeding 60,000, with the final setting a record high of 62,329 attendees. These figures validate the insights of Feng Jiafu and colleagues: For local sports events to achieve sustainable development and widespread influence, the key lies in fostering cultural identity rooted in regional heritage.

Shui Qingxia, a National People's Congress deputy and women's football coach at Shanghai Sports School, shared her immersive experience of the "Suzhou Super League": "I made a special trip to the venue, queued up to buy egg pancakes and various souvenirs, fully immersing myself in the fan culture. People travel to an entire city for a single match—not just to watch the score, but to experience that harmonious, participatory atmosphere, a true immersion in lifestyle." This observation reveals the essence of mass sports events: they are no longer elite competitive spectacles but lifestyle choices and vehicles for emotional resonance [7].

This emotional mobilization was vividly demonstrated in the dissemination of "Super Jiangsu". The video titled "Those with Shared Roots Are Brothers", produced by Jiangsu Radio and Television, sparked a nationwide cultural tourism relay. The series of short videos garnered over 170 million views across platforms, with 200,000 real-time bullet comments per episode and total program exposure exceeding 3.8 billion impressions. This validates Liang Qiang's perspective: the core value of sporting events lies in emotional resonance, and through viral propagation, event information can rapidly spread among audiences.

3.2. Media Empowerment: From Linear Communication to Participatory Communication

The viral success of "Suzhou Super League" vividly demonstrates the core proposition of media situational theory: new media creates new scenarios, which in turn catalyze new behaviors. While traditional sports events rely on professional media outlets for centralized coverage, the initial surge in popularity of "Suzhou Super League" stemmed from the rapid spread of short videos spontaneously filmed by fans and tourists on social media platforms. This user-generated content model dismantled communication barriers, allowing the most authentic and emotionally resonant match scenes to directly engage hundreds of millions of internet users.

The research by Li Jinbao and Xia Zi'ang elucidates the generative logic of "Super Su" folk discourse: Official narratives lower cognitive barriers through folk storytelling initiatives (e.g., interactive formats like "Dialect Challenge Competitions" and "Dialect Knowledge Stations"), while folk discourse enhances dissemination through networked symbolic interpretations. Urban cultural symbols achieve diffusion via new media platforms [8]. This "official guidance–folk creation–platform diffusion" model establishes a sustainable content production ecosystem.

Scholars have characterized this communication model as a combination of "horizontal dissemination" and "vertical dissemination": horizontal dissemination expands audience reach by lowering information barriers, ensuring broader visibility; vertical dissemination delivers content precisely to niche audiences through user profiling and content tagging, targeting interested individuals. The synergy between these mechanisms created the nationwide attention effect seen in the "Suzhou Super League" phenomenon [9].

3.3. Industrial Integration: Transformation Mechanism from Traffic to Increment

The economic impact of "Su Super" has been remarkable. Data shows that during the 2025 season, A-level tourist

attractions in host cities saw a 17.4% year-on-year increase in visitor numbers, while cross-regional cultural tourism spending through UnionPay channels rose by 27.1%. Following last season's engagement of nearly 40 partners, the 2026 "Su Super" season welcomed a prestigious sponsorship lineup featuring 24 renowned enterprises. The public lottery for 32 micro-enterprise sponsorship slots attracted over 3,000 small businesses and individual entrepreneurs to actively participate [10].

The Taizhou team's remarkable comeback to victory serves as a prime example of industrial integration. By positioning the event as "a strategic pillar and core IP for urban development," Taizhou established a collaborative framework featuring "government guidance, market-driven operations, and shared benefits for organizers and participants." Within two weeks post-event, the city saw a 37.6% year-on-year surge in tourist arrivals and a 42.1% increase in total consumption. Shopping malls and night markets experienced average foot traffic growth exceeding 40%, with revenue rising over 25%. Leveraging the event's momentum, Taizhou's morning tea brand expanded nationwide, establishing 13 flagship stores in first-tier cities including Beijing and Shanghai. This has propelled it into a billion-yuan industry with annual footfall surpassing 10 million visitors.

The logic of this transformation chain lies in the following sequence: event IPs accumulate traffic through media dissemination, which is then absorbed by cultural and tourism scenarios. Consumption achieves value-added through industrial integration, and the added value is consolidated through brand building. Dai Xiang and Song Yue summarized this as the transformation mechanism of "cultural IP—emotional connection—economic value."

4. The Expansion and Comparison of the "Urban Supermarket" Phenomenon

The "Super League of Jiangsu" set the trend, inspiring numerous imitators. The upcoming "Northeast Super League" in 2026, jointly organized by the sports bureaus of Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Inner Mongolia provinces, will feature eight city-based teams. Li Pengyu, deputy to the National People's Congress and deputy secretary of Shenyang Municipal Committee, captured the essence with his viral slogan: "If you don't live near Shanhaiguan, you're missing out on Northeast China's ultimate cool." He emphasized: "This time, the stars aren't professional players—these are workshop mechanics turning wrenches, post-work soccer stars scoring spectacular goals, schoolyard boys sunburned by the sun, and fire brigade members and delivery riders showcasing their' wild ball skills.' Our mission is to reignite this passion in the purest aspects of everyday life!"

The "Xiang Super League" has pioneered a differentiated IP system under the "One City, One Brand" concept. Yongzhou boosted commercial district foot traffic and revitalized its nighttime economy by establishing "second and third spectator venues," creating a vibrant atmosphere where "the city buzzes with energy and prosperity." Shaoyang transformed football matches into a city's spiritual symbol through the virtual IP "Brother Bao," forging emotional connections with fans.

The "Yunnan Super League" demonstrates the unique role of sports events in fostering ethnic unity. Zhang Weidong, a deputy to the National People's Congress and Governor of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, remarked: "On the pitch, players from diverse ethnic backgrounds demonstrate seamless teamwork; in the stands, spectators from all communities cheer in unison; beyond the arena, tourists experience local cuisine and cultural traditions. This sporting event has strengthened bonds and deepened mutual recognition among participants."

The common experience from these cases is that the success of mass sports events does not lie in simple imitation of professional competition models, but rather in the creative activation of local cultural resources and in embedding the events within the systemic framework of urban development [11].

5. Challenges and Countermeasures

5.1. Major Challenges Currently Facing

Bao Mingxiao, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and honorary dean of the China Institute of Sports Development at Beijing Sport University, pointed out that the "City Super League" series of events has developed rapidly in recent years, but localities need to pay attention to establishing competition systems suitable for their own conditions and characteristics. "Our past competition systems were mainly prepared for athlete training, but future competition systems suitable for developing the sports economy should be more oriented towards the general public."

Specifically, the industry currently faces three major challenges: First, the "homogenization dilemma" where competitions exhibit excessive similarity in content design and cultural expression, lacking distinctive memorable elements and appeal. Second, the "emotional connection gap" as many events fail to establish meaningful emotional engagement platforms, reducing audiences to one-time visitors rather than loyal fans. Third, the "traffic conversion failure" where technological applications often remain superficial, lacking deep integration and systematic operational frameworks.

From a systems theory perspective, Feng Jiafu et al. identified six major structural challenges, revealing that 'city-competition coupling' constitutes a dynamic, complex, and meticulously managed systems engineering endeavor.

5.2. Sustainable Development Pathways

Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the following countermeasures and recommendations:

5.2.1. Establishing a Long-term Mechanism of "Cultural Preservation-Innovative Development-Benefit Sharing"

Dai Xiang and Song Yue pointed out that the 'Super Su' phenomenon faces potential issues such as excessive commercialization of cultural symbols and lifecycle management of emotional resonance, necessitating the establishment of long-term mechanisms to ensure the sustainable development of local cultural IPs.

5.2.2. Establish a comprehensive evaluation system for the "Beaconing Intensity-Emotional Retention Rate-Conversion Chain"

Liang Qiang proposed that future efforts should focus on exploring the application of cutting-edge technologies like the metaverse in event traffic management, leveraging data-driven approaches to enhance operational efficiency.

5.2.3. Improve the policy support system

Shui Qingxia, drawing on her experience in organizing competitions, pointed out that the current transparency of competition-related information is insufficient, and the approval procedures are relatively cumbersome. It is necessary to further enhance support by moderately simplifying the approval process while encouraging greater participation from social forces.

5.2.4. Promoting the transition from "event-driven" to "ecosystem cultivation"

The strategic choice of cities should transcend the simplistic mindset of merely "hosting" events and shift toward "symbiotic" development based on their inherent resource endowments. Only by not being confined to specific models can broader impact and dissemination be achieved.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

6.1. Main Findings

Firstly, the breakout phenomenon of the "Super League" is not an accidental surge in traffic, but rather a systematic restructuring of mass sports in the era of mediaization. It demonstrates that competitions rooted in local communities and serving the public can also generate significant social impact and economic value.

Secondly, the core secret to the event's' outreach 'lies in identifying the trinity of' public engagement points, economic growth drivers, and developmental breakthroughs.' Genuine public participation serves as the foundation, sustainable economic returns provide the guarantee, while regional coordination and industrial integration represent the long-term direction.

Finally, the key to transitioning from 'traffic' to 'retention' lies in integrating sporting events into the systemic framework of urban development. The Taizhou experience demonstrates that only by deeply aligning event IPs with urban branding, distinctive industries, and cultural-tourism resources can we achieve the leap from 'temporary buzz' to 'lasting memory.'

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in transcending the traditional dichotomy of "competitive sports/mass sports" and constructing a three-dimensional analytical framework of "cultural identity-media empowerment-industrial integration," which provides a localized theoretical discourse for explaining how mass sports events simultaneously achieve maximization of social and economic benefits.

The "Super League" phenomenon provides significant insights into sports sociology: the social value of mass sports events lies not only in physical fitness enhancement but also in their role as "social emotional infrastructure," which carries local identity, emotional resonance, and cultural confidence. As scholars have noted, the popularity of mass sports events reflects the public's expression of happiness in pursuing a better life.

6.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has the following limitations: First, it primarily relies on publicly available data and literature, lacking in-depth interviews with event participants; Second, there are temporal constraints, as the event is still evolving and requires longitudinal tracking; Third, causal identification poses challenges, with confounding effects from other factors in event outcomes requiring further dissection.

Future research can be deepened in the following directions: first, conducting regional comparative studies to explore the impact of different regional cultures on competition models; second, carrying out diachronic tracking to observe the evolution of competitions from "phenomenal popularity" to "normalized operation"; third, delving into micro-level fieldwork to reveal the social micro-mechanisms behind the "out-of-the-circle" phenomenon of competitions; fourth, based on the "urban super league" phenomenon, further refining a mass sports development theory with China characteristics.

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