

From Event Expansion to Governance Failure: Generation Mechanisms and Resilient Governance Pathways of Uncivil Behaviors in Urban Marathons

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Abstract: *As urban marathon events continue to expand across multiple social sectors, governance challenges have intensified, accompanied by frequent public opinion crises and governance failures. Using the uncivilized behavior incident at the 2025 Suzhou Marathon as a case study, this study employs literature review and qualitative case study methods to develop a multi-level analytical framework encompassing individual, organizational, and governance dimensions. It investigates the underlying mechanisms driving uncivilized behaviors in marathon events and proposes a three-dimensional, five-measure full-cycle governance framework. The findings indicate that rapid expansion of mass participation events amplifies vulnerabilities within the governance system. Establishing an integrated governance system that combines technical, organizational, and cultural resilience is essential to prevent governance failures and promote sustainable, high-quality development of urban marathons.*

Keywords: Urban Marathon; Uncivil Behavior; Event Governance; Generation Mechanism; Resilient Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, urban marathons and other mass participation road running events have expanded beyond the traditional boundaries of the sports industry, influencing urban economies, cultural dissemination, and city branding. In 2024, China hosted 671 road running events with approximately 6.56 million participants. Road running has evolved from a professional competitive sport into a mass sport with widespread public engagement.

However, as event scale and social attention increase, governance challenges have also escalated. The 2025 Suzhou Marathon attracted widespread online criticism due to uncivilized behaviors by some participants at a school gate, resulting in the event losing its CAA certification in 2026, representing the most severe sanction in CAA event management [1]. This case highlights a key issue: rapid expansion of events tends to expose underlying weaknesses in governance systems.

Here, “event expansion” refers to the influence of an event spreading beyond the sports domain to other social sectors such as economy, culture, and urban image, while “governance failure” denotes a situation in which the organizational system of an event becomes disordered, the city’s image is compromised, and public trust in governance diminishes due to sudden uncivilized behaviors or public opinion crises. Most prior studies focus on categorizing uncivilized behaviors or analyzing single causes, rarely integrating the effects of rapid event expansion and governance failure into a unified framework. Furthermore, resilient governance strategies informed by recent cases are often overlooked [2].

This study examines the 2025 Suzhou Marathon incident to uncover the internal causes of uncivilized behaviors, explore resilient governance strategies, and provide guidance for transforming urban marathons from rapid growth toward high-quality, sustainable development.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study approach using the 2025 Suzhou Marathon incident as a focal case. Data sources include official notices from the Chinese Athletic Association, mainstream media reports, online public opinion data, and relevant local government policy documents.

Complementing the case study, a literature review covering sports event governance, risk management, and

service quality was conducted. Textual analysis and logical induction were applied to identify patterns of uncivilized behaviors, examine their underlying motivations, and develop targeted governance strategies.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Typological Characteristics of Uncivil Behaviors

The study identifies two interrelated types of uncivilized behaviors: explicit immediate behaviors and implicit cumulative behaviors. Explicit behaviors attract high public attention, demonstrate strong social influence, and propagate rapidly, directly affecting event reputation and city image (e.g., the school gate incident). Implicit behaviors are more scattered and hidden, not immediately triggering public scrutiny, but gradually undermining event fairness and depleting resource support systems (e.g., running with fake bibs or collecting excessive supplies). Implicit risks often accumulate and erupt as explicit incidents, forming a comprehensive challenge to urban marathon governance [3].

3.2 Multi-Level Governance Failures

Uncivilized behaviors originate from systemic failures at three levels: individual, organizational, and governance, which interact and intensify under conditions of rapid event expansion, ultimately causing governance failure [4].

Individual Level: A knowledge–behavior gap exists, with participants having incomplete understanding of rules and underestimating consequences. Utilitarian motives, such as prioritizing personal best performance, may lead participants to ignore social norms, resulting in rule violations [5]; Organizational Level: Service provision often fails to match actual runner needs. Although facilities met CAA standards, poor layout and long queues negatively affected runner experience. Quantity met requirements, but distribution and precision were insufficient [6]; Governance Level: Coordination across departments is insufficient, creating a fragmented system. Supervision relies heavily on manual patrols and fixed cameras, with minimal real-time intervention. Responsibilities are clear but not effectively integrated, reducing governance stability [7].

3.3 Whole-Process Prevention and Control Path from the Perspective of Resilient Governance

Based on the above analysis, a three-dimensional, five-measure full-cycle governance framework is proposed (Figure 1). It integrates technical, organizational, and cultural resilience to form a closed-loop management system covering pre-event, in-event, and post-event stages. Pre-event measures focus on participation rules and facilities; in-event measures emphasize intelligent monitoring and collaborative response; post-event measures address public opinion repair and long-term governance mechanisms [8].

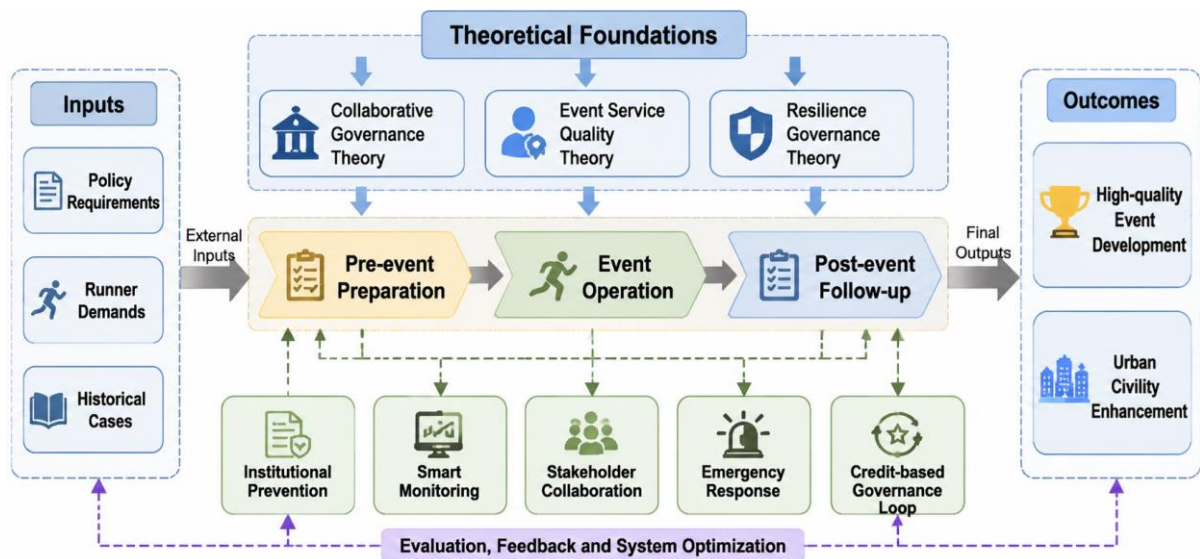


Figure 1: A Three-Dimensional, Five-Measure Full-Cycle Governance Framework for Managing Uncivilized Behaviors in Urban Marathons

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

Taking the uncivil behavior incident at the 2025 Suzhou Marathon as a starting point, this study analyzes the core question of why “breakout” events are prone to “defense breakdown” and draws the following conclusions:

First, the “breakout” effect amplifies the vulnerability of the governance system. While enhancing social influence, “breakout” also places the event under greater public opinion pressure. The fracture of rule cognition at the individual level, the fracture of service supply at the organizational level, and the fracture of collaborative efficiency at the governance level form a risk superposition under the public opinion amplification effect brought by “breakout”, ultimately triggering a “defense breakdown” event.

Second, multi-level fracture is the deep generation mechanism of uncivil behaviors. The uncivil behavior incident in the Suzhou Marathon was not a simple issue of individual quality, but a systematic result of intertwining and mutually reinforcing fractures at the three levels of “individual – organization – governance”. Individual cognitive biases are amplified by organizational service deficiencies, while the failure of governance collaboration renders the event’s prevention and intervention mechanisms ineffective.

Third, resilient governance is the fundamental way to achieve “breakout” without “defense breakdown”. The traditional fragmented governance model that emphasizes punishment over prevention can no longer meet the complex governance needs of mass events under the “breakout” context. The three-dimensional & five-measure whole-process prevention and control path constructed in this study, with resilient governance theory as the core, integrates institutional constraints, technological empowerment, and cultural cultivation, achieving a governance transformation from post-event punishment to full-process resilience. It provides an operable theoretical framework and practical solution for event governance.

4.2 Recommendations

To promote the transformation of urban marathons and other mass events from “scale expansion” to “high-quality development” and effectively address the governance challenges brought by “breakout”, the following recommendations are proposed based on the research conclusions:

First, build technical resilience by equally emphasizing institutional constraints and technological empowerment. Event organizers should establish a three-tier rule threshold of “access – education – commitment”, embedding the requirements for civilized participation into the entire process of event registration, pre-race preparation, and in-race execution, strengthening runners’ rule awareness and civil literacy. At the same time, increase technological investment, using 5G, AI recognition, drone patrols, and other technical means to build a “sky – ground – network” three-dimensional intelligent monitoring network, achieving active identification, real-time warning, and timely disposal of uncivil behaviors, and promoting the transformation of event governance from passive response to active prevention.

Second, build organizational resilience by creating a governance community with multi-actor collaboration. Local governments should play a coordinating role, establishing a normalized cross-departmental linkage mechanism that integrates sports, public security, urban management, culture and tourism, and other relevant departments into a unified event governance framework, clarifying the responsibility boundaries of each entity and breaking governance silos. At the same time, actively guide media, running clubs, volunteers, sponsors, and other social forces to participate in event governance, forming a pattern of government-led, social-coordinated, and public-participatory co-governance, building synergy and enhancing the collaborative efficiency of event organization and governance.

Third, build cultural resilience by cultivating a long-term development ecosystem with civilization as its core. The ultimate goal of event governance is to make civilized participation a voluntary behavior of runners. Local governments and event organizers should carry out long-term publicity and education activities on civilized participation, incorporate the degree of event civilization into the urban civilization construction assessment system, and guide the construction of event civilization through institutional measures. At the same time, guide public opinion through media columns, event promotion platforms, and other channels, and promote the rooting of civilized participation concepts in the running community through activities such as mentoring in running clubs.

and charity runs. Only through the two-way synergy of institutional constraints and cultural cultivation, building the cultural resilience of event governance, can urban marathon events move steadily and far on the journey of “breakout”, truly play their multiple values of stimulating consumption, activating urban vitality, and improving people’s quality of life, and contribute to serving national strategies and meeting the people’s needs for a better life.

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