

Experiential Marketing Strategy in International Marathon Running Event: A Qualitative Analysis of Generation Z

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines Generation Z's engagement with experiential marketing strategies in international marathon events, focusing on the dynamic interplay between digital innovation, cultural authenticity, and emotional loyalty. Through a phenomenological analysis of 25 Gen Z participants (aged 18–26) at the Makassar International Marathon (2023–2024), the research identifies three core findings: (1) Gen Z's preference for immersive, augmented reality (AR)-enabled pre-race activations over traditional sponsorships; (2) the pivotal role of social media as a platform for co-creating event narratives and fostering digital collectivism; and (3) the emergence of experience-driven loyalty, where cultural authenticity and memorable interactions supersede transactional rewards. The study reveals that Gen Z's loyalty is contingent on glocalized strategies that harmonize global event standards with Makassar's maritime heritage and youth-driven digital culture. Event organizers are urged to adopt hybrid experiential frameworks that balance technological advancements with grassroots human connections, shifting from service-dominant to experience-dominant marketing paradigms. These insights offer actionable pathways for enhancing participant engagement and positioning emerging destinations like Makassar as culturally resonant nodes in the global sports tourism landscape.

Keywords: *Experiential marketing, Generation Z engagement, Marathon events, Cultural authenticity, Augmented reality (AR)*

INTRODUCTION

The global surge in marathon participation has transformed endurance sports into a cultural phenomenon, particularly among Generation Z, whose values prioritize immersive experiences over passive consumption (Kim et al., 2022). In cities like Makassar, Indonesia, a burgeoning hub for international sporting events, the intersection of youth culture and athleticism presents unique opportunities for experiential marketing. However, traditional sponsorship models, reliant on static advertisements and transactional engagements, increasingly fail to resonate with Gen Z's demand for authenticity and interactivity (Obilo et al., 2021). This disconnect underscores a critical challenge for event organizers: how to design marketing strategies that align with the dynamic expectations of a generation raised in a hyper-digital, experience-driven economy.

Previous studies highlight Gen Z's preference for brands that foster emotional connections through participatory experiences. For instance, research by Iglesias et al. (2019) emphasizes that memorable interactions, rather than functional benefits, drive long-term loyalty among young consumers. In marathon contexts, scholars like Prayag et al. (2020) note that pre-race activations integrating augmented reality (AR) and gamification significantly enhance participant engagement. Yet, these insights remain largely unexplored in emerging marathon markets such as Southeast Asia, where cultural nuances and technological adoption rates differ markedly from Western contexts. Makassar's unique position as a multicultural city hosting international marathons amplifies the urgency to address this research gap.

Locally, efforts to engage Gen Z in marathon events have been fragmented. A 2022 study by Halim et al. on Indonesian youth participation in sports revealed that 68% of Gen Z respondents prioritize events offering "Instagrammable moments" and opportunities for social advocacy. However, existing community initiatives in Makassar, such as the Makassar Marathon 2023, focused predominantly on logistical execution rather than curating holistic brand experiences. This misalignment reflects a broader trend observed by Pine and Gilmore (2020), who argue that industries slow to adopt "experience economy" principles risk alienating younger demographics.

Internationally, experiential marketing in marathons has evolved into a sophisticated ecosystem. The Tokyo Marathon's use of AR-powered training simulations and the Berlin Marathon's real-time social media storytelling exemplify strategies that merge digital innovation with human-centric design (Schmitt et al., 2021). These cases illustrate the potential of technology to amplify emotional engagement, yet their applicability to Southeast Asian contexts remains under-researched. As noted by Chen and Rahman (2018), cultural factors such as collectivism and digital literacy significantly influence the effectiveness of such strategies, necessitating localized adaptations.

In Makassar, the rise of marathon culture coincides with the city's aspirations to position itself as a global sports tourism destination. However, without evidence-based strategies tailored to Gen Z's preferences, this vision risks stagnation. Preliminary interviews with local runners revealed frustrations over "generic" event experiences lacking personalization or community-building elements. These sentiments echo findings by Magnier et al. (2023), who stress that Gen Z's loyalty hinges on perceived brand authenticity and opportunities for co-creation. Thus, there is a pressing need to reimagine marathon marketing through a lens that balances technological innovation with culturally resonant interactions.

This community service initiative aims to bridge this gap by developing a Gen Z-centric experiential marketing framework for international marathons in Makassar. Grounded in qualitative insights from 25 Gen Z participants across Asia and Europe, the study seeks to empower local organizers with strategies that foster emotional engagement, social connectivity, and enduring loyalty. By integrating global best practices with Makassar's cultural identity, this project aspires to catalyze a paradigm shift from service-dominant to experience-dominant logic in endurance sports marketing.

METHOD

This study employs a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore Generation Z participants' lived experiences of experiential marketing strategies during international marathons in Makassar, Indonesia. Rooted in the interpretive paradigm, this methodology prioritizes understanding the subjective meanings participants attach to brand interactions, emotional engagement, and loyalty formation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on the Makassar International Marathon, a key event in Southeast Asia's sports tourism circuit, the research captures localized insights into how Gen Z negotiates global marketing trends within a culturally specific context. The phenomenological lens aligns with the study's aim to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, emphasizing depth over breadth (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 25 Gen Z runners (aged 18–26) who participated in the 2023–2024 Makassar Marathon, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diverse representation across gender, running experience, and digital literacy levels. Interviews, conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and English, lasted 45–75 minutes and were transcribed verbatim, with bilingual participants' responses translated using a back-translation protocol to preserve semantic integrity (Chen & Boore, 2020). To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was achieved through observational notes during pre-race activations and document analysis of event social media content. Ethical rigor was maintained via informed consent, anonymization of identities (e.g., pseudonyms like "Participant M1"), and member checking, where participants validated preliminary interpretations (Tracy, 2019).

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, iteratively coding transcripts to identify patterns tied to experiential marketing's emotional, sensory, and social dimensions. NVivo 14 software facilitated code organization, while a collaborative coding process with two independent researchers minimized bias. Emerging themes such as "digital-physical experience hybridity" and "cultural authenticity as loyalty driver" were contextualized using Makassar's socio-cultural dynamics, including its maritime heritage and youth-driven digital ecosystem. This approach echoes recommendations by Azungah (2018) for qualitative studies in Global South settings, where local epistemologies must inform analytical frameworks. The methodology ultimately seeks to co-create knowledge with participants, positioning their voices as central to reimagining marathon marketing in Indonesia's experience economy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study uncovered profound insights into Generation Z's engagement with experiential marketing at the Makassar International Marathon, revealing a generation deeply invested in multisensory, digitally integrated experiences. Participants consistently emphasized their preference for immersive pre-race activations over conventional sponsorship displays. For instance, augmented reality (AR) simulations that allowed runners to virtually traverse Makassar's iconic Losari Beach or historic Fort Rotterdam were described as "transformative" (Participant M7), fostering emotional connections to both the event and the host city. This aligns with Kim et al. (2022), who argue that AR bridges physical and digital realms, creating participatory narratives that resonate with Gen Z's tech-native identity. Conversely, static billboards and transactional sponsor booths were dismissed as "background noise" (Participant M12), highlighting a generational shift toward experiential value over passive exposure.

Social media emerged as both a catalyst for emotional engagement and a platform for co-creating event narratives. Over 80% of participants cited real-time content sharing, such as Instagram Stories of training journeys or TikTok collaborations with fellow runners, as central to their marathon experience. "Posting my progress wasn't just about validation; it made me feel part of a global community," noted Participant M19, reflecting Halim et al.'s (2023) findings on digital collectivism among Indonesian youth. Event-organized hashtags like #RunMakassar2024 trended nationally, amplifying emotional resonance while serving as dynamic touchpoints for sponsors. However, participants critiqued overly commercialized integrations, with one stating, "Brands that hijacked our posts without adding value felt invasive" (Participant M5), underscoring Gen Z's demand for authentic, user-driven digital interactions.

The concept of experience-driven loyalty emerged as a pivotal theme, challenging traditional loyalty models based on functional rewards like discounts or membership tiers. Participants repeatedly linked their intent to rejoin future marathons to "unforgettable moments" from personalized shoutouts on race-day jumbotrons to post-run cultural showcases featuring Makassar's traditional pepepe drum performances. "I'll forget my finish time, but I'll remember dancing with locals at the finish line," shared Participant M3, echoing Iglesias et al.'s (2019) assertion that emotional imprinting outweighs transactional benefits. Notably, loyalty was contingent on perceived authenticity; events perceived as "staged" or "touristy" (Participant M9) eroded trust, whereas initiatives celebrating Makassar's maritime heritage fostered enduring emotional bonds.

Cultural authenticity emerged as a non-negotiable pillar of effective experiential marketing. Participants praised activations that intertwined global marathon culture with local identity, such as eco-conscious hydration stations using biodegradable pinisi boat-inspired cups, a nod to Makassar's seafaring legacy. "Seeing our culture reflected in a world-class event made me proud to represent Indonesia," remarked Participant M16. This aligns with Magnier et al.'s (2023) emphasis on glocalization, where global brands succeed by embedding regional narratives. Conversely, imported strategies lacking local adaptation, like a European-style beer garden at the recovery zone, were deemed "out of touch" (Participant M22), revealing the risks of cultural homogenization in experiential design.

Finally, the findings underscored Gen Z's desire for hybrid experiences that harmonize digital innovation with human-centric connections. While apps offering AI-powered training guides were lauded, participants yearned for in-person meetups with professional runners or storytelling sessions with Makassar's elders. "Technology should enhance, not replace, the human spirit of marathons," asserted Participant M10, reflecting Pine and Gilmore's (2020) "experience economy" principles. This duality suggests that the future of marathon marketing lies not in choosing between digital and physical realms but in crafting synergistic journeys where AR-enhanced routes and grassroots cultural exchanges coexist, a paradigm shift toward what one participant termed "experiences that touch both the screen and the soul" (Participant M14).

Discussion

The findings illuminate a fundamental reconfiguration of marketing paradigms in endurance sports, where Generation Z's expectations demand a seamless fusion of digital innovation, cultural authenticity, and human-centric engagement. The participants' strong preference for AR-powered activations over traditional sponsorships corroborates Kim et al.'s (2022) assertion that immersive technologies serve as "emotional bridges" for digitally native generations. However, this study extends existing literature by contextualizing AR's utility within Southeast Asia's unique cultural landscape. For instance, Makassar's AR simulations, which integrated local heritage sites like Fort Rotterdam, transcended mere novelty; they became vehicles for place attachment and identity affirmation. This aligns with Chen and Rahman's (2018) emphasis on culturally embedded experiences as drivers of emotional loyalty, suggesting that technological interventions must be locally anchored to resonate meaningfully.

The centrality of social media in co-creating event narratives underscores Gen Z's redefinition of participation itself. While Halim et al. (2023) identified digital collectivism as a hallmark of Indonesian youth, this study reveals its dual-edged nature: real-time sharing amplifies communal joy but risks alienation when brands prioritize commercialization over authenticity. Participants' critiques of "invasive" sponsor content mirror Magnier et al.'s (2023) warnings about Gen Z's aversion to overt advertising, which they perceive as incongruent with their values of autonomy and peer-driven storytelling. Consequently, event organizers must adopt a supportive rather than directive role in digital spaces, curating platforms for user-generated content while avoiding narrative hijacking.

The emergence of experience-driven loyalty challenges traditional models rooted in transactional rewards, echoing Pine and Gilmore's (2020) argument that memories, not services, are the new economic currency. Participants' vivid recollections of cultural performances and personalized interactions reflect what Iglesias et al. (2019) term "sensory brand equity," where multisensory experiences forge indelible emotional bonds. However, this study complicates this notion by highlighting cultural authenticity as a prerequisite for loyalty. For example, Makassar's pepepe drum showcases were celebrated not merely as entertainment but as acts of cultural preservation, aligning with Gen Z's global-local identity (Magnier et al., 2023). This suggests that loyalty in experiential marketing is inherently intersectional, intertwining personal, cultural, and brand narratives.

The tension between globalized marketing templates and local cultural specificity emerged as a critical consideration. While Schmitt et al. (2021) advocate for standardized experiential strategies in international events, participants' rejection of "imported" activations like European-style beer gardens reveals the pitfalls of cultural homogenization. Instead, initiatives like biodegradable pinisi cups, which honored Makassar's maritime legacy while addressing sustainability, demonstrate the power of glocalized design. This resonates with Chen and Rahman's (2018) framework for cultural tourism, which posits that authenticity arises from contextual synergy rather than replication. For emerging marathon markets like Makassar, this implies that global appeal hinges on celebrating, not suppressing, regional distinctiveness.

Finally, the study advances the discourse on digital-physical hybridity in experiential marketing. Participants' insistence that technology "enhance, not replace" human connections reflects a nuanced understanding of digital tools as enablers of deeper offline engagement. This contrasts with Schmitt et al.'s (2021) tech-centric models, proposing instead a balanced ecosystem where AR-enhanced routes coexist with grassroots interactions. Such a paradigm aligns with Pine and Gilmore's (2020) vision of the experience economy as a "human-first" domain, where digital elements amplify emotional resonance rather than dominate it. For organizers, this necessitates reimagining marathons as holistic journeys, curating moments that captivate both the smartphone-wielding and the soul-seeking dimensions of Gen Z participants.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores a paradigm shift in marathon marketing, where Generation Z's pursuit of meaningful, culturally resonant experiences transcends traditional transactional engagements. The findings reveal that Gen Z participants in Makassar's international marathon events prioritize immersive technologies like AR, social media co-creation, and authentic cultural integration as non-negotiable elements of engagement. These preferences signal a broader transition from service-dominant to experience-dominant logic in endurance sports, aligning with Pine and Gilmore's (2020) assertion that memories and emotional connections now drive consumer loyalty. By leveraging Makassar's rich maritime heritage and digital-savvy youth culture, the study illustrates how localized experiential strategies such as AR-enhanced historical simulations and eco-conscious cultural activations can foster profound emotional bonds between participants, brands, and host cities.

The implications for event organizers are clear: success in engaging Gen Z demands a balanced ecosystem where cutting-edge technology amplifies, rather than overshadows, human connections and cultural authenticity. As evidenced by participants' rejection of homogenized global templates, the future of marathon marketing lies in glocalized design, merging international standards with regional identity. For emerging destinations like Makassar, this approach not only enhances event appeal but also positions the city as a culturally vibrant node in the global sports tourism network. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such strategies on brand loyalty and community empowerment, ensuring experiential marketing evolves as a force for both economic growth and cultural preservation in the Gen Z era.

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