ISSN: 2958-2326

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African Journal of Commercial Studies

Publisher's Home Page: https://ijcsacademia.com/

Research Paper | Peer Reviewed | Open Access

Managing Corporate Reputation: The Influence of Marathons on Commercial Banks' Corporate Reputation in Zambia

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Article Info

Volume 7, Issue 4

***Publication history*:**

Accepted on 30 May 2026;
Published: 28 July 2026

***Key Words*:**

Corporate Reputation, Marathon, Social Responsibility

***Article Doi*:**

10.59413/ajocs/v7.i4.21

Abstract

Poorly executed CSR activities can damage reputation if perceived as opportunistic or insincere. This study explored the influence of the Marathons on the Commercial Bank's Corporate Reputation in Zambia from a Corporate Management perspective. The study utilised a qualitative phenomenological design, collecting data through in-depth interviews with 10 industry experts from various Marketing and Public Relations professions and marathon athlete experts from Lusaka. Atlas.ti version 24 software was used for analysis, and an inductive approach was employed to generate themes from the data. Three key themes were identified, including eleven subthemes: Perspective on Bank's sponsorship marathons as contributing to the bank's corporate image; Identifying and mitigating reputation risks and the marathon aligns with the bank corporate values. The findings reveal that, while marathon sponsorships enhance brand visibility, community goodwill, and social impact, their effectiveness is contingent on strategic alignment with CSR goals, robust reputation management systems, and stakeholder engagement. The study recommends that banks include marathon sponsorships within broader CSR frameworks, enhance internal communication, and implement structured mechanisms for evaluating their reputational influence.

1. Introduction

Corporate reputation is a critical intangible asset in the banking sector, significantly influencing a bank's ability to retain customers, attract investors, and maintain employee loyalty (Gatzert, 2015). It encompasses stakeholder perceptions shaped by an organisation's actions, communication strategies, and level of stakeholder engagement (Kim, 2014). Reputation can be viewed through key dimensions, such as image, credibility, trust, social responsibility, reputational risk, and stakeholder relationships (Kim, 2014). Among these, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a key driver of reputation, especially as stakeholders increasingly value ethical conduct and corporate contributions to societal welfare (Mulenga & Chibomba, 2019).

Recent studies further suggest that corporate reputation has become increasingly important in the banking sector because customers are more likely to support institutions, they perceive as socially responsible, transparent, and trustworthy (Sindhu, et al., 2024). In an era characterised by heightened stakeholder scrutiny and digital communication, reputational assets often differentiate financial institutions that offer largely similar products and services. Consequently, reputation management is increasingly viewed as a strategic communication function that contributes to organisational legitimacy, stakeholder confidence, and long-term competitiveness (Shatila, 2025)

One growing form of CSR engagement is marathon sponsorship. Globally, companies have adopted marathons as platforms for demonstrating social commitment, promoting public health, and strengthening emotional connections with communities (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Morgan, 2020). For commercial banks, marathons present a unique opportunity to align brand identity with values, such as community development, resilience, and inclusivity (ABSA Zambia, 2024). CSR initiatives such as marathon sponsorships are known to enhance public perception, build brand trust, and reinforce stakeholder loyalty—provided they align with the organisation's values and are perceived as authentic (Temel & Sirin, 2017).

DOI Link: https://doi.org/10.59413/ajocs/v7.i4.21

The growing emphasis on CSR communication highlights that stakeholders no longer evaluate organisations solely on the basis of financial performance but also on their social and environmental contributions. According to Jiang and Park (2022), CSR initiatives are most effective when stakeholders perceive them as genuine reflections of organisational values rather than promotional activities designed to improve public image. Similarly, Wan Afandi, Jamal and Mat Saad (2021) argue that transparent and consistent CSR communication strengthens corporate reputation by fostering trust and credibility among key stakeholder groups. These observations suggest that the reputational influence of marathon sponsorships extends beyond the event itself and depends largely on how such initiatives are communicated and integrated into broader organisational strategies.

Marathon sponsorship also facilitates experiential marketing, offering direct engagement to diverse stakeholders (Chebli & Gharbi, 2014). However, such initiatives are not without risk. Misalignment with corporate values, poor event execution, or stakeholder skepticism can undermine reputational gains. Moreover, stakeholders may perceive excessive CSR communication as disingenuous, potentially leading to accusations of greenwashing and reputational damage (Songdi Li et al., 2021).

Recent sponsorship literature demonstrates that sporting events create opportunities for organisations to establish emotional connections with stakeholders because participants and spectators often associate positive event experiences with sponsoring brands (Brusetti, 2024). Marathons are particularly valuable sponsorship platforms because they embody values such as endurance, perseverance, discipline, teamwork, and personal achievement, characteristics that many organisations seek to incorporate into their corporate identities. Nevertheless, scholars caution that sponsorship activities can generate negative reputational outcomes when stakeholders perceive a lack of congruence between the sponsoring organisation and the event being supported, thereby reinforcing the importance of sponsorship fit and authenticity (Jung & Jin, 2024).

In Zambia, commercial banks such as ABSA, FNB, and Zanaco have adopted marathon sponsorships as flagship CSR activities. Events like the ABSA Marathon, FNB Kopala Run, and Zanaco-LAZ Marathon aim to promote wellness, community engagement, and brand equity. While global studies support a positive link between CSR and corporate reputation (Temel & Sirin, 2017; Forcadell & Aracil, 2017), the unique dynamics of Zambia's banking sector—such as low financial literacy, stakeholder skepticism, and heightened demand for transparency—require context-specific investigation (Mulenga & Chibomba, 2019; Musonda, 2022). Zambian stakeholders, including both employees and consumers, actively evaluate the sincerity and impact of CSR efforts. Studies suggest that poorly communicated or overly commercialised CSR activities may lead to CSR fatigue or negative perceptions (Lungu, 2021). The risk of perceived inauthenticity is particularly high when there is no clear reporting on the long-term social impact of these initiatives.

Although Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and corporate reputation have been widely examined in previous studies, the mechanisms through which specific CSR initiatives shape stakeholder perceptions remain insufficiently understood, particularly within the banking sector. Existing research has largely focused on the general relationship between CSR and organisational reputation (Forcadell & Aracil, 2017; Ruiz & Gracia, 2021), while comparatively little attention has been paid to how individual CSR activities, such as marathon sponsorships, are interpreted by stakeholders and translated into reputational outcomes. Sports sponsorship literature has predominantly examined brand awareness, sponsorship effectiveness, and consumer behaviour (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Tinaz, 2024), with limited emphasis on its role as a strategic CSR initiative that contributes to corporate reputation. It appears that this gap is particularly evident in developing economies such as Zambia, where stakeholder expectations, socio-economic conditions, and perceptions of CSR authenticity may differ considerably from those reported in developed contexts (Mulenga & Chibomba, 2019; Musonda, 2022). Consequently, there remains a need to explore how marathon sponsorships, when implemented as CSR initiatives, are perceived and whether they contribute to strengthening the corporate reputation of commercial banks.

Given these dynamics, it becomes critical to explore how marathon sponsorships influence the reputation of commercial banks within Zambia's CSR landscape. While marathons may present opportunities for reputation building, they also entail strategic and reputational risks if not thoughtfully implemented and communicated. As Songdi Li et al. (2021) emphasis, the effectiveness of CSR initiatives is highly context-dependent, shaped by stakeholder perceptions, authenticity, and alignment with organisational values. This study therefore seeks to investigate the influence of the Marathons on the Commercial Bank's Corporate Reputation in Zambia from a Corporate Management perspective. It explores how these initiatives are perceived both internally by employees and externally by consumers, offering a comprehensive understanding of their impact on corporate reputation in the Zambian banking context.

2 Methods

2.1 Research design

A qualitative phenomenological design is employed to investigate the influence of marathons on the corporate reputations of Zambian commercial banks, as perceived by corporate management. Phenomenology centres on participants lived experiences, aiming to understand their perspectives and the psychological significance of these experiences, making it useful for understanding the influence of marathons based on participants' experiences (Grossoehme, 2014; Tenny et al., 2022).

2.2 Study Setting and Population

This study examines the influence of bank sponsorships on corporate reputation, focusing on Zanaco, Absa, and FNB in Lusaka, Zambia, because of the city's concentration of banks and its role in major marathons. The study involves ten industry experts, eight senior managerial marketing and public relations professionals, and Marathon athletes' experts. Involving professionals from various fields, including banking, marketing, public relations, and athletics, who provide insights into sponsorship, branding, and sports events. Their practical experience and expertise helps understand the challenges and opportunities in the marathon sponsorship and marketing industry, contributing to the understanding of the influence of marathons on Commercial Bank's corporate reputation in Zambia. The study utilises a purposive sampling technique to select participants, a widely recognized non-probability sampling method that enables researchers to select participants based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research objectives (Campbell, et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is used in this study to target marketing communication experts, employees, and marathon experts directly involved in the bank's sponsorship initiatives.

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2.4 Data Collection

The data is collected over a period of three weeks. During this time, interviews with experts are conducted. This study employs in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method to gather in-depth insights from participants focusing on the influence of marathon sponsorship on the corporate reputation of commercial banks. In-depth interviews provide the flexibility to explore specific topics while allowing participants to elaborate on their unique experiences and perspectives (Campbell, et al., 2020). The study utilises open-ended interviews to explore industry experts' perspectives on marathon sponsorship and its impact on corporate reputation. The interviews, lasting 30-45 minutes, aimed to understand the alignment between corporate sponsorship, CSR efforts, and stakeholder expectations. The interviews are conducted in person and virtually, and audio-recorded with consent.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Trust worthiness in qualitative research ensures the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings, providing rigor in data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is enhanced through member checking and peer debriefing (Guest, et al., 2020). Transferability is addressed by providing detailed contextual descriptions, allowing findings to be applicable to similar organizational settings (Doyle , et al., 2019). Dependability is maintained through a comprehensive audit trail documenting data collection and analysis decisions (Jean & Petersen, 2020). Confirmability, which addresses objectivity, is upheld by applying reflexivity and peer debriefing to minimize bias and ensure interpretations are grounded in data (Fofana, et al., 2020).

2.6 Data Processing and Analysis

Before analysis, the audio recordings are transcribed verbatim. The transcripts are loaded into the Atlas.ti version 22 software for analysis. Thematic analysis follows Braun and Clarke's six-step process: familiarisation with the data, creation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the research report. One author conducts the data analysis. The first step is to become acquainted with the interview transcripts in order to gain an overall understanding of the data. Each interview transcript is coded to describe the observed content, and the data was organised using these codes. The codes are used to generate initial themes, which were sometimes combined to form a cohesive theme. A thorough review is conducted to ensure that each theme captured the underlying data accurately and effectively. Themes are adjusted, combined, or discarded as needed. Finally, the themes were defined and refined. Another analyst verifies the results.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

Approval is obtained from the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref: HSSREC-2025-JAN-072). The study followed ethical standards, ensuring participant rights, dignity, and confidentiality. Informed consent is provided, and sensitive data is securely stored. Transparency, respect, and honesty are maintained, creating a safe, respectful, and trustworthy research environment.

3 Results

3.1 Demographic information

A total of ten in-depth interviews are conducted with key industry experts. Respondents have approximately 5 to 25 years of experience in their field. The people interviewed include five males and five females. Table 1 shows the final number of interviews conducted.

Table 1: In-depth interviews with Marathon and Marketing Experts

No. of respondent	Profession	Age	Sex	Years of Experience
1	Brand and Communication Bank manager	44	Male	Over 12 years
2	Bank Marketing Specialist	31	Male	5 years of experience
3	Zambia Athlete Association President and Athlete expert	64	Male	Over 25 years of experience in the athlete's field
4	Bank Marketing Expert	42	Female	15 years of experience
5	Zambia Institute of Public Relations and Corporate Affairs and marketing head manager	43	Female	12 years of experience
6	Brand and Communication Bank manager	41	Female	16 years of experience
7	Marathon Expert	38	Male	10 years in an athlete field
8	Bank Marketing Specialist	30	Female	6 years of experience
9	Bank PR Senior Manager	43	Female	12 years of experience
10	Marketing Sales and Operations	43	Male	10 years of experience

3.2 Theme 1: The marathon aligns with the Bank corporate values

Promoting Health and Well-being

The marathon aligns with corporate values by prioritising health and well-being, enhancing both individual and banks productivity. The marathon is consistently seen as an embodiment of the banks' commitment to health, well-being, and community development. Participant 2 revealed that a marathon demonstrates a commitment to health and well-being and with marathon banks shows that they value an active and healthy lifestyle. Participants and employees alike benefit from the marathon's focus on promoting physical health, which aligns with the corporate value of maintaining a healthy workforce and society. Participant 1 emphasised the connection between personal well-being and organisational success, suggesting that healthy individuals are more productive and contribute positively to business outcomes.

"*Marathon is a demonstration of the bank's dedication to fostering a healthier, more engaged society*." (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025)

Teamwork and Cooperation

The marathon serves as a catalyst for fostering teamwork and collaboration within the organisation. Participant 2 shared that marathon highlight the importance of collective effort, as the event involves multiple stakeholders such as runners, volunteers, medical teams, and organisers. Participant 1 shared that cooperative environment during marathon directly mirrors the organisational value of teamwork, where diverse individuals work toward a common goal, enhancing both community engagement and internal cohesion.

"*What a marathon does is bring people together with diverse expertise and background towards one goal*." (Participant 1, personal communication, Corporate affairs and marketing, 2025)

Corporate Reputation and Visibility

The marathon also plays a key role in enhancing the organization's corporate reputation and visibility. High-profile attendees, such as government officials and business leaders, are seen as a reflection of the event's importance. By hosting or participating in such events, the banks not only demonstrate its commitment to corporate social responsibility but also raises its profile among influential stakeholders, aligning with its values of corporate stature and societal influence.

"*If the Vice President attended, everybody is going to look at that event and this corporate stature. The corporate visibility of the bank…the CEOs and ministers attending, it adds to corporate stature. Corporate reputation, you get it there, because there are people of high standing…attending the marathon.*" (Participant 4, personal communication, Fitness expert, 2025)

Commitment to Perseverance, Endurance, and Achievement

The marathon reflects the organisation's values of perseverance, endurance, and achieving long-term success. It teaches the importance of persistence and commitment to success, whether in individual performance or organisational growth. Participant 5 expressed that marathon build body endurance, which is key to success, hence teaching people in the corporate world to endure and keep going, even when it gets tough. Participant 2 highlighted that marathon mirrors the challenges faced within both personal and professional contexts, teaching individuals to push through difficulties and reach the finish line.

"*The marathon teaches you the body of not giving up…it builds endurance. Endurance is key to success…the marathon teaches you how to keep going, even when the going gets tough.*" (Participant 5, Personal communication, 2025)

Social Responsibility and Community Impact

The marathon is a concrete expression of the bank's commitment to social responsibility and positive community impact. By supporting such an event, banks contribute to broader societal goals, such as improving health, fostering community involvement, and building relationships. This alignment with social responsibility supports both the banks' corporate values and their long-term vision for positive change in the communities it serves. Choomba (2025) explained that marathon is a tangible demonstration of the bank's dedication to fostering a healthier, more engaged society.

"*It aligns with the values of the bank, because it promotes the community involvement*." (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025)

3.3 Theme 2: Identifying and mitigating reputation risks.

Employee Roles in Reputation Management During Marathons

The role of employees in mitigating and identifying reputation risks associated with marathons is multifaceted. Employees can act as both internal stakeholders and representatives of the organisation. Their roles include proactively managing the brand's image, ensuring the safety and well-being of participants, and managing incidents that may arise during the event. They are expected to engage in reputation management through vigilance, communication, and active participation in organising and executing the event, ensuring that every part of the marathon reflects positively on the bank's values. Participant 7 shared that, "The employees help in terms of making sure that the brand of the bank stands out in the marathon and the other companies that are participating." Employees are also encouraged to identify potential risks early, such as safety hazards or negative public sentiment, and report these promptly. Furthermore, communication departments play a crucial role in maintaining a positive image post-event by leveraging feedback from participants and responding to any incidents efficiently. Participant 2 shared, "As soon as you see an incident, or you see the potential for an incident, please report it… So, we are encouraged to be vigilant and report any suspicious activity within 48 hours." The responsibility of employees to safeguard a company's reputation during a marathon is highlighted across various interviewee perspectives. From event coordination and participant safety to public communication, employees are positioned as the front-line agents who influence how the marathon is perceived. Furthermore, employees help create a narrative that ties the marathon to the organisation's commitment to social responsibility, thereby ensuring alignment with corporate values and community interests.

"*Employees play a key role in ensuring smooth event execution by handling logistics, addressing customer concerns, and monitoring public sentiment. They help mitigate risks by proactively managing negative feedback, ensuring ethical branding practices, and maintaining professionalism throughout the event*." (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025)

Role of Reputation Management Systems in Enhancing Corporate Reputation

Various respondents perceive the importance of reputation management systems (RMS) in managing the reputational influence of marathon sponsorships. The system's role is framed as a vital tool for capturing feedback, managing risks, and ensuring that CSR initiatives like marathons reflect the bank's core values while safeguarding its public image. These systems facilitate the monitoring of public sentiment and customer feedback, which are crucial in assessing the effectiveness of the bank's involvement in such events. Participant 3 stated that, "It helps monitor public sentiment, media coverage, and stakeholder engagement before, during, and after the event. By leveraging real-time data analytics, the system enables banks to assess the effectiveness of their sponsorship, track potential risks, and implement corrective measures where necessary." By capturing data from multiple touchpoints like social media, customer surveys, and direct interactions, RMS allows the bank to gauge the public's perception of the marathon and identify any potential reputation risks or areas for improvement. Through real-time feedback, these systems enable the bank to address any emerging issues swiftly, adjusting strategies to maintain or enhance its reputation. Furthermore, they help align corporate actions with brand values, ensuring that the bank's involvement in CSR initiatives like marathons is seen as consistent with its broader image. However, Participant 2 shared that "So we don't have a specific response for marathons specifically, but we have something specific for crisis management in general."

"*I think these systems… play a crucial role in terms of helping the bank to manage their corporate image… It also gives the customer engagement, because most of their customers will participate in the marathon as well, so it will be an opportunity for them to have customer engagement and then get feedback about what they feel about the bank*." (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025)

Assessing Marathon Success or Failure in Reputation Management

Respondents discussed multiple methods of evaluating the reputational influence of marathons, particularly through social media monitoring, participation metrics, and media sentiment analysis. Participant 3 stated that, "Success can be measured through media mentions, stakeholder engagement, employee participation rates, and post-event sentiment analysis." Reputation management tools are highlighted as essential for monitoring both positive and negative mentions and addressing issues in real-time. Participant 2 stated that, "reputation management systems give you the tools to monitor public sentiment, ensuring you can act swiftly on negative feedback while amplifying the positive." Furthermore, the integration of reputation management systems with business goals, such as product uptake and customer engagement, is emphasised as crucial for determining the return on investment (ROI) for reputation-building activities. Participant 8 shared that, "It's all about ROI in the end. If your marathon doesn't translate into business, then you need to rethink how you're organizing it." Respondents underscore the importance of using both qualitative and quantitative data to measure the reputational success of marathons. Key indicators of success include increasing participant numbers, positive social media feedback, media reports, and public sentiment. By tracking these indicators, organizations can make informed decisions on the future of their marathon events, ensuring that these events align with their broader corporate objectives.

"*We engage private companies, research companies, and media agencies to check how our activities are performing, and if there's a lot of positive engagement and sentiment through social media, then we know the marathon is successful. When you see the marathon growing year on year, that's another metric*." (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025)

3.4 Theme 3: Perspective on Bank's sponsorship of marathons as contributing to the bank's corporate image

Health and Wellness Advocacy through Marathon Sponsorship

Marathons sponsored by banks serve as platforms to advocate for health and wellness, emphasising non-communicable disease prevention and promoting a healthy lifestyle. Participants are encouraged to engage in fitness routines as part of their preparation, fostering a healthy lifestyle. Participant 6 shared "very positive image has been created for us to grow from an initial 500 people to where we had almost 7000 last year." The marathons are framed not only as athletic competitions but also as health initiatives that align with broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals, thereby contributing positively to the bank's reputation. Several interviewees highlighted how the marathon serves as a catalyst for community health by encouraging fitness, promoting non-communicable disease prevention, and fostering well-being among participants. Also, Participant 1 shared that in today's society, elites are embracing healthier lifestyles, such as running marathons. This presents a potential market for banks to tap into, offering services to those who value these lifestyles. Participant 7 further highlighted that marathon sponsorship has built the corporate image of the banks by promoting positive values and demonstrating commitment to community health wellness. Participant 3 indicated that it positions the bank as a forward-thinking, health-conscious institution that cares about its stakeholders beyond financial transactions. The marathon is seen as a key initiative that allows banks to demonstrate their commitment to supporting healthy lifestyles, which aligns with CSR objectives.

"*So, when we are driving or championing something positive, like healthy lifestyle, we are good we are seen so good citizen for all those who are participating.*" (Participant 6, Personal Communication, 2025)

Community Engagement and Social Impact

It was revealed that marathon sponsorships serve as a community engagement tool. The events bring together participants from various walks of life, fostering a sense of community and encouraging interactions among individuals, companies, and families. According to Participant 7 he indicated that the marathon provides an opportunity for employee engagement, as many corporate employees participate in it, demonstrating that banks are taking the lead in promoting employee engagement. Likewise, Participant 9 revealed that people often view it as a marathon, but it involves multiple elements collaborating for success, including the bank itself and other factors. Additionally, Participant 3 mentioned that "This initiative builds strong emotional connections with the public, reinforcing trust and brand loyalty." The bank's involvement in these marathons facilitates socialisation, provides a platform for networking, and fosters local economic development, particularly for SMEs and service providers involved in the event. The marathons were consistently described as events that go beyond the act of running, offering opportunities for networking, socialising, and fostering community engagement. Participant 6 further revealed that, "There are people that have come out of poverty because the prize money is also quite premium." Through these events, banks also contribute to local economies by engaging SMEs and creating a platform for families, employees, and other participants to come together. The sponsorship reflects the bank's alignment with corporate social responsibility values, further reinforcing a positive public image.

"*It's an entire ecosystem that benefits from the marketing... companies come, they use it as a team-building. Families come together so and they will always remember. We did this the Absa marathon months ago. So that's how it builds other materials. We create a platform for good health, interaction, socialising, and also business for many others who are part of this*." (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025).

Media Exposure and Visibility

Respondents revealed that marathon sponsorships help banks build their brand visibility and enhance their corporate image. Through events like marathons, banks can reach a wide audience, significantly improving their visibility. The marathons offer an opportunity for banks to engage with the public, increasing brand awareness by associating themselves with a positive, healthy initiative. The branding of merchandise and participation in the event further reinforces the bank's presence in the public consciousness. An important aspect of the marathon identified in the interviews was its role in increasing brand visibility for the banks. Participant 2 mentioned that "It was basically just for visibility." Several interviewees noted that the large number of participants, along with the exposure to branded materials and media coverage, helped the bank gain a significant amount of recognition and visibility, both locally and internationally.

"*It has also helped in terms of media coverage, like with Absa and also with FNB, you look at the coverage that they get from the media perspective. Every year they do their marathons, you'd see media coverage from the TV, the radio and print media. So, there is a wider audience now that you are reaching out towards the bank*." (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025)

3.5 Discussion

The marathon aligns with the Bank corporate values

The findings of this study reveal that marathons align with banks' corporate values by promoting health and well-being, enhancing productivity, and demonstrating a commitment to fostering a healthier, more engaged society. These results are consistent with the work of Partyka & Waśkiewicz, (2024) who highlight that runners frequently report motives such as mastery, overcoming limits, challenge, and personal growth, underscoring alignment with health, well-being, resilience. This suggests that banks can leverage marathon sponsorships to strengthen brand positioning, demonstrate social commitment, and build stakeholder trust.

Secondly, the study demonstrates that marathons foster teamwork and collaboration by bringing together diverse stakeholders to work toward a common goal, reflecting and reinforcing organisational values of unity and collective effort. This supports the argument by Haaskjold, H., 2024. who demonstrates that shared event objectives like marathons are practical channels for collective effort and unified collaboration. One interpretation of this finding advance scholarly understanding of how sports sponsorships function as social integration mechanisms that reinforce organisational values through collective participation.

Thirdly, the study indicates that marathon sponsorships enhance corporate reputation and visibility by attracting high-profile stakeholders, reinforcing CSR commitments, and elevating the bank's stature and societal influence. Echoing the arguments of Shi, H., et al., 2024. who demonstrates the mechanism by which a visible marathon sponsorship raises brand salience and positive reputation among stakeholders. This suggests that managers should integrate sponsorships into long-term CSR and branding strategies to maximize reputational and stakeholder engagement benefits.

Further to that, the study revealed that the marathon symbolises perseverance, endurance, and resilience, teaching both individuals and organisations to persist through challenges to achieve long-term success. Although the results align with Gameiro, N., 2023., who found that there was a strong association between endurance running, mental toughness and resilience indicators that endurance runners show psychological traits (persistence, coping) that map directly onto perseverance, caution must be taken as Gameiro N et al (2023) suggest that extreme running may reflect unhealthy compulsion or psychological strain rather than inspirational perseverance.

Lasty, the study found that the marathon demonstrates the bank's commitment to social responsibility by promoting health, community involvement, and positive societal change in line with its corporate values. This is line with Fahmida, L., (2025) who argues that marathon sponsorships naturally promote community well-being, suggesting that such initiatives may be more about brand positioning than genuine CSR. The findings imply that banks should carefully balance the use of marathons as CSR tools to ensure they are perceived as authentic commitments to community well-being rather than merely strategic brand positioning.

Identifying and mitigating reputation risks

The findings point that employees play a crucial role in safeguarding the bank's reputation during marathons by managing branding, ensuring participant safety, addressing incidents, and aligning the event with corporate values and social responsibility. These results corroborate the work of Manyala (2015), who suggests that a significant number of employees supported the sponsorship, viewing it as beneficial for the bank's image. This suggests that employee engagement and perception play a role in safeguarding the bank's reputation during such events. This finding can be attributed to the ability of engaged employees to act as brand ambassadors, whose commitment and active involvement in marathon events strengthen external perceptions of credibility, trustworthiness, and alignment between corporate values and community initiatives.

In addition, the evidence presented suggests that reputation management systems are essential for monitoring public sentiment, capturing feedback, and managing risks in marathon sponsorships, ensuring the bank's involvement aligns with its values and strengthens its public image. While this is supported by Shikenso, N. (2024) who further stresses that sentiment tools are not optional they enable swift message adjustments, early crisis detection, and competency in stakeholder communication, it contradicts Mao, Y. (2024) who provides evidence that if sentiment models misread or oversimplify public feeling, a reputation system can give misleading signals or false alarms rather than reliable guidance. This discrepancy may suggest that the effectiveness of reputation management systems in marathon sponsorships depends not only on the sophistication of the sentiment tools used but also on the contextual interpretation, human oversight, and integration of qualitative insights to complement automated analysis.

Along the same lines, the report found that the reputational influence of marathons can be evaluated through social media monitoring, participation and engagement metrics, media sentiment analysis, and ROI assessment, using both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure the events align with corporate goals. This is in line with the findings of Brand Finance, (2025) who suggest marathon sponsorships should be measured via integrated metrics, media exposure, social listening (sentiment & reach), activation engagement, and economic/brand ROI, to assess reputational influence. A practical framework for sponsors. The findings imply that a multidimensional evaluation framework—combining financial returns with media visibility, stakeholder engagement, and sentiment analysis, is essential for accurately assessing the reputational influence of marathon sponsorships and ensuring they contribute meaningfully to the bank's strategic objectives.

Marathon sponsorships contribute to enhancing the banks' corporate image.

The findings demonstrate that bank-sponsored marathons promote health and wellness, support non-communicable disease prevention, and enhance corporate reputation by aligning with CSR goals and positioning the bank as a health-conscious, community-focused institution. On the other hand, Mensah, K. & Boateng, E. (2021) study suggest the excitement of marathons but did not associate them with meaningful health promotion. Banks were perceived as using marathons for publicity rather than genuine health-driven CSR, which weakened reputational benefits. One interpretation of this result is that the reputational value of marathon sponsorships depends on whether stakeholders perceive the initiative as a genuine health-driven CSR effort or as a publicity stunt, meaning banks must demonstrate sustained commitment to health promotion beyond the event itself to avoid skepticism and reputational risk.

Secondly the study indicates that marathon sponsorships act as powerful community engagement tools, fostering networking, social interaction, employee participation, and local economic growth, while reinforcing the bank's CSR values and strengthening brand loyalty. This builds on previous studies by Zhao, X et al (2025) who argue that marathon events significantly promote host-city economic growth, with stronger effects as events accumulate evidence for sustained local economic benefits supporting sponsors' CSR narratives. This suggests that marathon sponsorships not only generate immediate visibility but also create long-term socio-economic value for host communities, reinforcing the bank's CSR narrative as credible and impactful, thereby deepening trust, loyalty, and sustained reputational gains.

And lastly, the report found that marathon sponsorships boost banks' brand visibility and corporate image by reaching wide audiences through public engagement, branded materials, and extensive media coverage, both locally and internationally. Consistent with earlier study by Shi, H., et al., (2024) findings that demonstrates stronger cognitive and emotional brand activation for high-fit sponsorships, boosting brand visibility and favourable brand image, especially for health/community-aligned events like marathons. This is further supported by Aaker's Brand Equity theory that suggests that marathon sponsorships enhance banks' brand visibility and corporate image through increased brand awareness, positive associations, and strong public recognition built via wide audience engagement and media exposure. Despite this, Khaled Hamad Almaiman (2024) argues that brand equity gains vary widely with product fit; visibility only translates to brand equity when sponsorship fit, and visibility is high. In other words, emphasis is that brand–event congruence is vital, without fit and strategic activation, visibility does not necessarily convert to enhanced brand image or loyalty. This finding advance sponsorship literature by showing that visibility alone is insufficient without event–brand congruence, enriching debates on brand equity theory.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate the influence of marathon sponsorships on the corporate reputation of commercial banks in Zambia. The study has demonstrated that marathons, when strategically designed and aligned with a bank's values, can positively influence stakeholder perceptions, enhance brand visibility, and foster trust. These events are widely perceived as credible and meaningful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, reflecting values like health, perseverance, inclusivity, and social responsibility. However, the effectiveness of these CSR initiatives depends on the presence of internal systems, particularly reputation management frameworks, which can monitor and evaluate their reputational outcomes. Without structured mechanisms to manage stakeholder feedback and assess reputational impact, even well-executed CSR activities may fail to translate into long-term reputational capital. Therefore, embedding CSR initiatives within a formal reputation management structure can not only build visibility but also reinforce brand trust, credibility, and stakeholder engagement. The study recommends integrating marathon sponsorship into CSR strategies, developing reputation management protocols, enhancing internal communication, and broadening the scope of CSR to address diverse societal needs, such as financial literacy, environmental sustainability, and youth empowerment.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

Funding

This research did not receive specific grants from any public, commercial, non- profit sector funding bodies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made a contribution to this research

Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

Author Contribution

M.M contributed to the conception, design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of data and drafting of the manuscript. B.H. contributed to the conception, design of the study, interpretation of data and editing and reviewing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscripts.

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