

Nonprofit Cost-Sharing Outdoor Activity Groups in China: Research Progress, Critical Examination, and Future Prospects

Maohui Cheng, Xin Zhang

Physical Education Academy, Southwest University, Chongqing 400000, China

*Corresponding author email: 905733039@qq.com

Abstract

Against the backdrop of the popularization, social networking, and digitalization of outdoor sport, nonprofit “AA” groups—an indigenous Chinese form of self-organized outdoor participation in which members share activity-related costs—have increasingly become an organizational form situated between individualized sport participation and formal sport organizations. This review synthesizes scholarship on nonprofit sport organizations, self-organized mass sport groups, cost-sharing outdoor activities, outdoor sport participants, and outdoor leaders. It maps the literature across five interconnected domains: organizational operation, legal responsibility and risk governance, member participation, leadership, and regional context. Chinese scholarship is strongly problem-oriented, focusing particularly on organizational legitimacy, duties of care, accident liability, leader competencies, and regional outdoor resources. International scholarship provides complementary perspectives on organizational effectiveness, member identification, collective leadership, volunteer governance, outdoor education, and experiential learning. Nevertheless, the literature remains constrained by ambiguous conceptual boundaries, fragmented research objects, insufficient attention to ordinary participants, limited micro-level regional evidence, and weak theoretical integration. Future research should conceptualize nonprofit cost-sharing outdoor groups as social action systems sustained by resources, collective goals, member integration, and shared values, while paying greater attention to the nonprofit-commercial boundary, digital-platform governance, leader-participant responsibility, shared risk governance, and place-specific conditions. Such an agenda may shift the field from isolated explanations of risk toward a more integrated understanding of organizational functioning.

Keywords

Outdoor sport; nonprofit sport organization; cost sharing; self-organized sport; outdoor leadership; risk governance; China.

1. Introduction

Outdoor sport in China has increasingly shifted from a relatively niche leisure pursuit toward a popular, socially networked, and lifestyle-oriented form of physical activity. Alongside commercial outdoor clubs, a growing number of enthusiasts organize activities through social media, online communities, and interpersonal networks. Participants voluntarily form temporary groups around shared interests, arrange their own equipment, and divide common expenses among members. These groups typically operate without a formal commercial intermediary and are characterized by flexibility, low entry barriers, strong social interaction, and a limited degree of formalization.

These advantages are accompanied by persistent governance challenges, including loose organizational structures, unclear boundaries of responsibility, limited financial transparency,

uneven leadership competence, and insufficient safety arrangements. Existing scholarship rarely treats the “nonprofit AA outdoor activity group” as a unified research object. Instead, relevant knowledge is dispersed across studies of nonprofit sport organizations, self-organized mass sport groups, cost-sharing self-guided travel, outdoor leadership, sport tourism, and participant behavior. A synthesis of these strands is therefore necessary to clarify the intellectual foundations of the field and identify directions for theoretical development.

This review does not simply enumerate previous findings. It organizes the literature around research objects, core problems, explanatory perspectives, and unresolved issues. Particular attention is paid to the intersection of organizational governance and risk governance, because the distinctive nature of cost-sharing outdoor groups lies precisely in the coexistence of voluntary association, informal organization, shared expenditure, and potentially consequential outdoor risk.

2. Conceptual Foundations and Scope

2.1. Nonprofit sport organizations and cost-sharing outdoor groups

Chinese studies generally conceptualize nonprofit organizations as organizations located outside the state and the for-profit market, whose primary purpose is not the distribution of profits but the pursuit of public, mutual, or member-oriented interests [1–3]. In the sport domain, nonprofit organizations provide opportunities for participation, support public sport services, and contribute to health promotion and community life.

The Chinese expression “AA” denotes the equal or agreed sharing of expenses among participants [4]. In outdoor settings, it has come to describe temporary groups of individuals who voluntarily participate in a shared activity, usually without a commercial intermediary, while independently preparing personal equipment and sharing common costs [5]. For the purposes of this review, a nonprofit cost-sharing outdoor activity group is defined as a voluntary, interest-based group that does not primarily seek organizer profit, uses shared expenses as its basic economic arrangement, and displays temporary, informal, and self-governing organizational characteristics. Importantly, cost sharing alone does not establish nonprofit status; the distribution of benefits, transparency of expenses, decision-making procedures, and organizer incentives must also be considered.

2.2. Outdoor sport

Definitions of outdoor sport vary across national and disciplinary traditions. Chinese scholarship commonly emphasizes physical activity conducted in natural or non-specialized environments and involving experiential, exploratory, or challenging elements [6–9]. Typical activities include hiking, mountaineering, camping, climbing, mountain traversing, canyoning, rafting, mountain biking, and related nature-based pursuits. Previous research also identifies psychological, social, and environmental benefits, including emotional restoration, health promotion, contact with nature, and interpersonal interaction [10–12]. For international publication, this review uses “outdoor sport” as the umbrella term while recognizing its overlap with outdoor recreation, adventure tourism, and recreational sport tourism.

3. Research Progress in China

3.1. Participation characteristics and behavioral regulation

Chinese research has gradually expanded from industry development and activity promotion to participant characteristics, preferences, risk perception, and behavioral regulation. Studies suggest that outdoor participants are often relatively young, educated, experience-oriented, and socially motivated, while also expressing substantial demand for route planning, safety

support, and equipment-related services. Research on behavioral regulation has focused on safety awareness, environmental responsibility, rule compliance, and self-protection. Studies in mountainous urban settings such as Chongqing further indicate that age and other participant characteristics may shape thermal comfort, safety expectations, and environmental sensitivity [13–15]. These findings imply that participant heterogeneity should be incorporated into group formation, route selection, and risk communication.

3.2. Organizational mechanisms of self-organized sport groups

Cost-sharing outdoor groups share important features with self-organized mass sport groups: both emerge from common interests and fitness needs and rely heavily on voluntary participation and self-management [16]. Chinese case studies indicate that organizational continuity often depends on key actors who mobilize information, people, venues, and other resources through interpersonal networks [17]. Thus, apparently decentralized groups may nevertheless develop differentiated roles among core leaders, experienced members, and ordinary participants. Core members frequently coordinate routes, recruit participants, integrate resources, and respond to unexpected events. At the same time, dependence on informal leadership can produce weak institutionalization, blurred organizational boundaries, and vulnerability when key organizers withdraw.

3.3. Legal responsibility and risk governance

Legal responsibility and safety constitute one of the most developed strands of Chinese research on cost-sharing outdoor activities. Studies have examined the relationship between organizers and participants, duties of care, assumption of risk, and the allocation of liability after accidents. Although organizer–participant relationships may initially resemble social or friendship-based relationships, liability questions arise when organizational conduct becomes connected to personal injury. Relevant duties may include pre-activity risk disclosure, communication of route and weather information, safety guidance during the activity, emergency response, and reasonable post-incident assistance [18–19].

The doctrine of voluntary assumption of risk does not automatically exempt organizers from responsibility. Participants' knowledge of the risk, voluntariness, and organizer fault remain important considerations. Moreover, many self-organized groups possess a degree of social legitimacy without formal legal status [20]. A central governance question is therefore how to establish minimum safety standards, responsibility boundaries, and emergency procedures without eliminating the flexibility and voluntary character that make these groups attractive.

3.4. Organizational management and governance

Chinese studies consistently show that informality and temporariness create both flexibility and governance deficits. Common concerns include inconsistent activity standards, weak emergency arrangements, limited financial transparency, and low enforceability of internal rules. Proposed responses include standardized activity procedures, transparent accounting, trust-building mechanisms, risk-warning systems, and clearer member responsibilities [21–23]. From a broader sport-governance perspective, these groups also face limited public recognition and weak institutional support. Consequently, sustainable development cannot depend solely on individual leaders; it requires interaction among self-governance, platform rules, social oversight, and appropriate public governance.

3.5. Outdoor leadership and competency development

Outdoor leaders occupy a pivotal position between organizational goals, member interaction, and risk governance. Chinese studies have identified professional outdoor skills, organizational coordination, communication, responsibility, occupational competence, and psychological resilience as core dimensions of outdoor leadership [24–26]. Some studies have developed

competency models that provide quantitative foundations for leader selection and training. Other research interprets unpaid leadership in self-organized sport groups as a form of prosocial or altruistic behavior reinforced by achievement and social recognition [27]. However, most existing competency studies focus on professional outdoor or sport-tourism leaders. The distinctive challenges of volunteer leaders in nonprofit cost-sharing groups—particularly unclear authority, limited material incentives, and ambiguous responsibility—remain underexplored.

3.6. Regional research: the case of Chongqing

Chongqing provides a particularly relevant context because of its mountainous terrain, river systems, climatic variability, and extensive outdoor resources. Existing studies have examined the spatial distribution of campsites, sport-tourism development, and the improvement of public outdoor leisure functions. Campsites in Chongqing show spatial clustering shaped by transport accessibility, tourism development, economic conditions, population density, and the natural environment [28]. Other studies identify limitations in planning, infrastructure, human resources, safety provision, and resource integration [29–30]. Although these findings provide an important regional foundation, little research has examined the micro-processes through which informal outdoor groups recruit members, negotiate decisions, manage risk, and maintain social relationships in this distinctive mountainous setting.

4. International Research Relevant to Cost-Sharing Outdoor Groups

4.1. Nonprofit sport organizations and organizational effectiveness

International research on nonprofit sport organizations has a longer history and addresses civic participation, public-service supplementation, organizational effectiveness, and member engagement. Studies of sport organizations and nongovernmental actors suggest that voluntary and nonprofit organizations can contribute to sport participation, community services, and social development [31–33]. Organizational-effectiveness research has highlighted resource acquisition, internal climate, activity levels, and goal attainment. Although these studies do not directly examine the Chinese AA phenomenon, they provide useful concepts for analyzing how informal outdoor groups adapt to their environments, mobilize resources, pursue collective goals, and sustain participation.

4.2. Outdoor participants, motivation, and risk

International sport-tourism and adventure research emphasizes interactions among sport participation, spatial mobility, time, skills, and risk [34–38]. Outdoor and adventure participants are commonly distinguished from conventional tourists by their stronger orientation toward physical participation, challenge, skill development, and active engagement with uncertainty. Health, social connection, nature experience, self-development, and challenge repeatedly emerge as important motivations. This literature is useful for understanding why members join cost-sharing groups, how they interpret risk, and why some participants develop sustained involvement.

4.3. Member engagement, identification, and collective leadership

Research on nonprofit sport organizations increasingly examines team processes, organizational identification, and member engagement. Recent work indicates that reflective team processes and team identification can strengthen organizational engagement, although effects may differ according to members' organizational tenure [39]. Research on collective leadership further shows that leadership in nonprofit sport boards can range from shared voice and distributed decision-making to stronger individual direction [40]. This continuum closely resembles the organizational reality of cost-sharing outdoor groups, in which a leader may

function as a dominant decision maker, a coordinator, or one participant among several core members. Leadership form is therefore likely to influence efficiency, responsibility allocation, trust, and participant experience.

4.4. Outdoor leadership, experiential learning, and training

International outdoor-leadership research pays considerable attention to professional experience, environmental education, experiential learning, and practice-based competence. Outdoor leaders may be required to combine safety management, technical guidance, emotional labor, and individualized service, creating the potential for responsibility overload [41]. Experiential-learning research identifies environmental awareness, interpersonal communication, facilitation, and emergency competence as important leadership outcomes [42]. Established traditions of outdoor education further emphasize the integration of theoretical knowledge, field practice, safety, first aid, and environmental ethics [43–45]. These approaches provide useful reference points for China, although professional certification systems cannot be transferred directly to informal, volunteer-led cost-sharing groups without considering institutional and cultural differences.

5. Synthesis: Three Research Trajectories

The literature can be reorganized into three related but insufficiently integrated trajectories. The first is an organizational-governance trajectory grounded in research on self-organized and nonprofit sport organizations. It examines resource acquisition, legitimacy, organizational effectiveness, leadership, and member relations. The second is a risk-governance trajectory centered on outdoor accidents, duties of care, voluntary assumption of risk, and liability allocation. The third is an actor-centered trajectory focusing on outdoor leaders and participants, including competence, motivation, identity, trust, and leadership processes. Together these trajectories explain important parts of the phenomenon, but they have not yet produced an integrated framework connecting organizational structure, member interaction, and risk processes.

6. Research Gaps and Future Directions

First, conceptual boundaries remain unstable. “AA” describes a method of dividing expenses; it does not by itself demonstrate that an activity is nonprofit. Commercial organizers may also describe activities as cost sharing. Future research should therefore operationalize the nonprofit–commercial boundary through indicators such as organizer profit, financial disclosure, decision-making rights, recurring fees, and the distribution of organizational benefits.

Second, the literature remains fragmented across legal studies, organization studies, outdoor leadership, and sport tourism. This fragmentation makes it difficult to explain how resources, authority, responsibility, interaction, and shared values operate simultaneously within a single activity process. Research should therefore examine the full organizational cycle—from online recruitment and participant screening to route decisions, expense sharing, on-site coordination, emergency response, post-activity evaluation, and relationship continuation.

Third, ordinary participants remain comparatively underrepresented. More attention should be paid to how newcomers develop trust, understand rules, accept responsibility, learn from experienced members, withdraw from groups, or become core members. Longitudinal and process-oriented designs would be particularly valuable.

Fourth, digital platforms and place-specific conditions should be incorporated into theoretical models. In mountainous cities such as Chongqing, terrain, weather, transport accessibility, and destination infrastructure interact with online recruitment and social-network communication

to shape organizational boundaries and risk. Comparative research across regions could identify which mechanisms are generalizable and which are context dependent.

Finally, future studies may benefit from structural functionalism and the AGIL heuristic. Cost-sharing outdoor groups can be treated as social action systems that must address four recurring functional problems: adaptation to environmental and resource conditions (A), goal attainment through collective decision-making (G), integration of members and responsibilities (I), and latency/pattern maintenance through shared norms, identity, and organizational culture (L). This perspective can integrate apparently separate issues—such as safety resources, route objectives, financial transparency, member trust, leadership competence, and participation continuity—within a single organizational framework. The value of AGIL in this context lies not in imposing a rigid taxonomy, but in generating testable questions about how informal groups maintain functional balance under conditions of uncertainty.

7. Conclusion

Nonprofit cost-sharing outdoor activity groups occupy an intermediate position between formal sport organizations and individualized participation. They are a distinctive product of the intersection among digital sociality, mass sport participation, outdoor lifestyles, and informal self-organization in contemporary China. Existing scholarship provides substantial knowledge about organizational foundations, risk structures, participant motivation, and leadership, but research directly addressing the integrated operation of these groups remains limited.

Future research should preserve analytical sensitivity to the voluntary, egalitarian, low-cost, and flexible characteristics of cost-sharing groups while examining their recurring challenges of safety, responsibility, transparency, trust, and organizational continuity. Greater theoretical integration, stronger participant-centered evidence, and comparative regional research are necessary if scholarship is to move beyond isolated descriptions of accidents or management problems toward a systematic explanation of how these groups function and persist.

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