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# Risk in Active Sport Tourism Projects: Narratives from Managers in the Chinese Event Industry

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify risk issues in managing active sport tourism event projects in China from the perspective of event managers. A qualitative method was utilized, with 12 semi-structured interviews being conducted in China in order to achieve the research objectives. A key finding is that ten risk issue categories were identified: safety, financial, environmental, technical equipment, operations, human resources, political, legal, tourist behavioral, and relationships. Among these categories, the issues can be further divided into two groups focused around, firstly, 'contributing risk' which directly leads to the occurrence of the second 'primary risk' category. The second finding uncovers the impacts of these risk issues as well as the interaction between them. Furthermore, another finding reveals distinctions of risk issues in different types of sport tourism event projects in China. This research contributes to the development of systematic understanding of categories and management of risk in active sport tourism from the perspective of managers, and will be useful in developing consensus in both the Chinese and international sport tourism industries.

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## KEYWORDS

Active sport tourism; event projects; event managers; risk

## 关键词

主动性运动观光; 赛事项目; 项目管理; 风险

## 主动性运动观光的风险: 来自中国活动产业管理者的叙述

### 摘要

本研究目的是从活动管理者的角度, 识别中国主动性运动观光项目管理中的风险问题。本文采用定性方法, 于中国进行了 12 次半结构访谈, 并发现了十种风险类别, 其分别是: 安全, 财务, 环境, 技术设备, 运营, 人力资源, 政治, 法律, 旅游行为和关系。在上述类别中, 可进一步细分为两大类, 第一类是「促成风险」, 并直接导致第二类「主要风险」的发生。第二个发现则揭示了这些风险问题的影响及彼此之间的相互作用。此外, 本文亦揭示了不同地区的体育旅游项目风险的差别。本研究有助于从管理者角度, 有系统地区分及管理主动性运动观光的风险, 并有利于中国和国际体育旅游行业达成共识。

## 1. Introduction

With continuous economic growth, Chinese citizens' living standard has improved and the forms of recreation have also changed from basic physiological activities to outdoor leisure activities (Xian & Chen, 2016). Generally, sport tourism means some organized

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tourism events with the purpose of participating in or watching sporting activities (Hall, 1992). Active sport tourism has become the most popular form of commercial projects in China. Based on different purposes and forms of participation for tourists, these projects can be divided into four types: leisure, team development, competition and adventure sport tourism (Xian & Chen, 2016). Increasingly diverse, rich and advanced products are involved in each kind of project, such as hiking, horseback riding, mountaineering, golf, skiing, camping, rafting, and rock climbing, etc., attracting 10 million plus enthusiasts to participate every year (Zhou et al., 2019). This audience is comprised of both local participants and travelers from other parts of China incorporating such activities into their vacations. In terms of tourists, these they vary from day-trippers through to those staying for a week or more.

As a high growth and high value market segment, active sports tourism is also an industry with high risk coefficient. Risks are always present and can seriously influence outcomes of the sport tourism event projects, and they are usually regarded as an uncertainty. Hence there is no effective way to fully eliminate risks from any project (Chapman & Cooper, 1983). Sport tourism event projects are no exception and indeed carry greater levels of risk than more routine forms of tourism. As such, risk management is important and it should be a main consideration for tourism companies when conducting sport tourism event projects, as Tarlow (2002) highlights that project management itself is the risk management.

Nevertheless, work on risk management in the Chinese sport tourism industry is unsatisfactory as this industry in China is still in an initial stage and its development, is relatively backward with many remaining problems. For example, in 2017, four teachers in Shanghai were lost because of mudslides during their trip to Sichuan; in 2018, two participants in a rock-climbing event fell and died in Henan due to the problem of technical equipment (GASC, 2019). It should be noted that the victims of these accidents did not participate independently but with the guidance and support of tourism companies. These tragedies completely reflect the tourism companies' poor preparedness in relation to risk management when leading these activities. As Zhou et al. (2019) indicate, sport tourism events in China still lacks significant numbers of talents who are familiar with the field of sports, tourism and management and there are few standardized or high-quality sets of guidance regarding risk management provided to sport tourism event project manager.

Event managers, as core figures in the sport tourism event project, lead the whole team to identify, analyze, and control different risks that might occur in the project. However, few to date have explored risk issues in sport tourism event projects from the perspective of event managers. According to Bentley et al. (2008), managers in the sport tourism industry need to hold a business-wide view in order to identify as many risk factors as possible thereby making the event project more successful. In this sense, a satisfactory sport tourism event is supposed to be achieved from multiple aspects including the goal of cost, time, quality within the project. Nevertheless, most research in China has discussed risk issues on the safety and security of sport tourism with no discussion on the risk issues for sport tourism event projects from a project management perspective. Besides, due to the variety of sport tourism event projects, whether risk issues are different or same in each type of project remains unknown.

This paper aims to identify critical risk issues in managing sport tourism event projects from the perspective of event managers in the Chinese sport tourism industry. Furthermore, the associated effect of each risk issue category and some differences of risk

issues between each type of projects also need to be highlighted, which not only contributes to the literature of risk management in the sport tourism industry, but also helps managers to better understand specific risk issues while planning and hosting different sport tourism event projects.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Sport tourism as an event project**

Sport tourism is an important part of the tourism industry, and it includes many activities allowing participants to enjoy comprehensive sports and tourism services based on sports resources and facilities (Deery et al., 2004). Generally, a sport tourism event project needs to meet the following three elements: (1) there is a certain mutual connection with nature, (2) being associated with regional culture, (3) involving some physical activities (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). In a seminal study Millington et al. (2001), defined adventure travel as a sought-after leisure activity carried out in remote and unfamiliar outdoor regions, having potential risks and considerable sensory stimulation due to the potential mystery of the place and the unpredictability in how the activity unfolds. Adventure travel is a closely-related category to some forms of sport tourism in that it is inherently about the immersive and participatory nature of the high-octane and hedonistic tourist encounter. Adventure travel and sport tourism are not, however, perfect cognates and each has its distinct literature.

Turning to sport tourism academic literature, sport tourism is divided into three categories: active sport tourism, event sport tourism, and nostalgia sport tourism (Gibson, 1998). Event sport tourism usually refers to sporting events, like Olympic Game, usually involving many spectators and participants, and the research of such hallmark sports events have been paid much attention than that of small-scale sporting events among scholars. Although the positive impact of mega event sport tourism to communities has been proved, some other researchers (Ginson et al., 2012; Xian & Chen, 2016) opine that small-scale event sport tourism and active sport tourism play a more effective role in promoting the sustainable development of the tourism industry. Active sport tourism contains a variety of leisure sports activities, where the scale is relatively small and the number of participants may exceed that of spectators. Small-scale event sport tourism and active sport tourism are identical in activity (Gibson, 1998). Nostalgia sport tourism is generally linked with activities such as aiming to meet sports celebrities, visiting famous sporting venues, or joining in with activities associated with exploiting cultural connotation, and is becoming more and more popular in recent years. The primary contribution of this research paper is to the category of active sport tourism with event sport tourism relevant only where overlap in form and content exists. Nostalgia sport tourism is not part of the conceptual framework here though it is anticipated that some active sport tourism may ultimately develop a strand of nostalgia tourism relating to earlier event projects either with regard to famous participants, renowned experiences or the personal nostalgia of long-term participants.

Historically, many studies have been done with regard to large event sport tourism with the research scope varying from the benefits to risk issues (Connell et al., 2015; Hiller, 2006; Leopkey & Parent, 2009), whereas, few focused on the other two kinds of

sport tourism. Nowadays, active sport tourism has become a popular way in Chinese commercial sport tourism industry, and it also involves four kinds of projects linked with different purposes and forms of activities (Figure 1): leisure, team development, competition and adventure sport tourism event projects (Xian & Chen, 2016).

This standard of classification on sport tourism event project is commonly used either in the academic circles or in practical business in China. Thus, the active sport tourism and its four kinds of projects in China are the main focus of this study.

## 2.2 Project risk management

How to avoid or manage risk issues has always been an important research subject but no of project is risk-free and eliminating risk within a project is impossible (Maylor, 2010). Sport tourism event projects are no exception. Whilst it is difficult to avoid all risk factors during the project process, even a moderate risk management still can effectively mitigate the adverse impacts of risks on a project (Thamhain, 2013). The objective of risk management is to identify risks and then find strategies to mitigate the negative impact of risks (Maylor, 2010). Therefore, instead of the content, the process of project risk management has become a research focus for many scholars.

Risk management process (RMP) means applying an approach to reveal defects of the method used in a project's development, so as to timely take measures to avoid risks, transfer risks, decrease risk probability and mitigate risk impact (Risk Management Standard AS/NZS 4360, 1999). Notably, managing risks is not an effort simply in a particular one or two phases but a work enduring throughout the duration of the project (Raz & Michael, 2001). Other researchers have also divided the process into different stages or aspects. Wideman (1992) splits it into four stages: identify risks, assess risks, response to risks and documenting risks, while the Project Management Institute (Project Management Institute (PMI), 2008) similarly points out that risk management is a process including identifying, listing potential risk factors, proposing relevant strategies

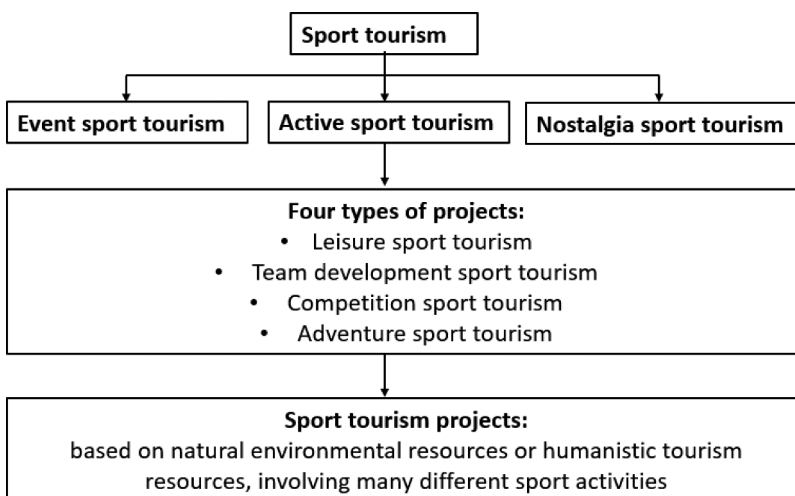


Figure 1. The classification of sport tourism project in China.

to effectively reduce negative risk impact on projects, and controlling risks. Maylor (2010) simplifies RMP to three key aspects: identification, quantification, and mitigation. Generally, academics determine the RMP similarly with identification and analysis, controlling and monitoring, and responses as common key points in the process.

If a smooth risk management process needs to be ensured, several approaches should be adopted. Generally, most approaches trail the logic of RMP throughout projects and can differently affect the performance of risk management. For example, qualitative and quantitative risk management techniques play fundamental roles in risk analysis, particularly consisting of sensitivity analysis, risk probability, fuzzy set theory, impact assessment, and so on (Buertey et al., 2012). PMBOK (Project Management Institute (PMI), 2013) also puts forward 27 project tools associated with six risk management processes (risk planning, risk identifying, risk analysis, risk monitoring, controlling and risk response).

However, project managers are sometimes suggested as not giving too much credit to such 'hard approaches' while managing risks (Thamhain, 2013). Instead, some recent research has raised the argument that 'soft approaches' in managing risk issues cannot be neglected, since the soft side of risk management is verified as an effective way in managing unforeseeable uncertainties, though hard skills are powerful in dealing with foreseeable risks (Carvalho & Rabechini, 2015). The concept of soft skills advocates to carry out the work of risk management through the intra-enterprise layer, e.g., communication, work process, organizational structure, organizational culture. Scholars (Sharma & Gupta, 2012; Thamhain, 2013) assume that smooth communication within a company, simplified work flow, reasonable organizational structure configuration, and the spread of organizational culture are all conducive to promoting risk management process and minimizing the risk coefficient of a project as a result; otherwise, poor organization and chaotic operation can hinder the effectiveness of risk management.

In addition, there are other elements in the soft skills notion, e.g., intention, judgment, conflicts, interaction, and learning (Gladwell, 2006). Leopkey and Parent (2009) verified the risk of human resources toward sporting event projects. Thamhain (2013, p. 32) states, 'people are one of the greatest sources of uncertainty and risk in any project undertaking, but also one of the most important resources for reducing risk', so human resource management as a sort of soft skills might also need to be considered when managers cope with project risk issues. Therefore, backed by the concept of 'soft skills', it is reasonable to assume that organizing, operations, and human resources also relate to the effectiveness of risk management in the active sport tourism event project. They are, in other words, risk issues embedded in the risk management itself.

### **2.3 Risk issues in the sport tourism industry**

There is considerable research on risk issues in the sport tourism industry but no overarching classification of risk that applies to the whole sector. Table 1 shows some potential risks highlighted by several researchers. It can be seen that they do not reach an agreement as to the standard of grouping risk in sport tourism industry. This can be explained with two reasons. Firstly, some focus on the field of event sport tourism, such as Chang and Singh (1990) or Leopkey and Parent (2009), whereas others, like Bentley et al. (2008), Xu and Ni (2008), focus on the area of active sport tourism. As mentioned before, these two kinds of sport tourism are not the same, especially in their scales and major groups, so risks noticed by

**Table 1.** Potential risks highlighted in the literature of sport tourism.

Author	Risk categories/issues/factors	The kind of sport tourism/activities
Chang and Singh (1990)	People (e.g., staffs, spectators, participants, volunteers) Financial risk (e.g., ticketing) legal risk (e.g., laws and regulations) Safety and security (e.g., physical hazards) Property (e.g., equipment, facilities) Television revenue risk (i.e., loss of revenue) Political (e.g., terrorism, threats, conflicts between countries, demonstrations)	Event sport tourism: Mega sporting events
Hartmann (2006); Rickard et al. (2011)	Environment (e.g., geographical attributes) Behaviors (e.g., tourist perception)	Active sport tourism: swimming, national park recreation
Bentley et al. (2008)	Individuals (e.g., client issues: lack of knowledge, unfamiliar with activities, perception, language differences) Environment (e.g., weather changes, the threat of wild animals) Organization (e.g., employees, communications, equipment preparation/usage)	Active sport tourism: adventure sport tourism
Xu and Ni (2008)	Natural factor (e.g., weather, animals, plants, geographical attributes) Human factor (e.g., tourists, tour leader/guide, driver/team) Technical equipment factor (e.g., professional skills, equipment)	Active sport tourism in general (China)
Leopkey and Parent (2009)	Environment (e.g., pollution) Financial (e.g., tickets selling, sponsorship) Human resources (e.g., volunteers, paid, training) Organizing (e.g., leadership) Media (e.g., negative/positive news) Infrastructure (e.g., damaged) Interdependence (e.g., hierarchy) Legacy (e.g., new facilities) Operations (e.g., logistics, safety, security, crowd control) Political (e.g., government) Regal (e.g., regulation) Relationships (e.g., satisfying stakeholders' needs) Visibility (e.g., marketing, image, brand)	Event sport tourism Hallmark sporting events

managers are different. For example, Leopkey and Parent (2009) considered risk from the perspective of stakeholders and organizing committees of sport tourism events, and this fact requires careful consideration of the potential degree of overlap in risks between that kind of activity and active sport tourism. Secondly, even in the same category of sport tourism, some concentrate specifically on smaller segments, but some do not. For example, Bentley et al. (2008) look at the adventure sport tourism and Rickard et al. (2011) simply conduct the research on single one sport activity in active sport tourism, while Xu and Ni (2008) do the study from the view of entire active sport tourism section in China. Moreover, it is worth noting that there is no risk study on the nostalgia sport tourism when a certain amount of research on event sport tourism and active sport tourism have been conducted.

Thus, the main reason for different risk classifications is the inconsistency of the research domains within which key writings have appeared. Notably, researchers who focus on the event sport tourism consider a wider range of risk factors than those focusing on the active sport tourism. Economic performance, political influence, legal problems, are common concerns for event managers in the event sport tourism project. In contrast, these issues are not shown in the study concentrating on the active sport tourism project (Bentley et al., 2008;

Hartmann, 2006; Rickard et al., 2011; Xu & Ni, 2008). Physical injury is the most important point in these studies so the risk factors they identified are merely related to the personal safety of tourists without much attention on risk issues for operators or tourism companies. As a result, financial, legal and political risks, are almost ignored in studies relating to active sport tourism. This also explains the lack of research in exploring risk issues in active sport tourism from the project level. Thus, another assumption in this paper is presented: financial, legal, political, may be three important risk categories for the active sport tourism event project.

Although the research scope is different, there are still some similarities among different kinds of sport tourism project. Firstly, almost every scholar has identified the environmental risk category, except Chang and Singh (1990). Environmental risk mainly refers to the possibility of injury or loss to participants caused by the specific natural environment such as rubble, weather, topography, plants or animals (Rickard et al., 2011; Xu & Ni, 2008). Second, most of them point out the necessity of technical equipment. The specialty of sport tourism event projects determines that it is necessary to have good equipment and certain technological skills in the delivery of sports tourism activities (Bentley et al., 2008). Finally, human behavior, such as the tourist perception, and the guidance of employees in sport tourism projects, is also a usual risk issue category mentioned by all research. Notably, the tourism risk perception from tourists is particularly popular and they believe that tourists' cognitive ability toward tourism risks and the emotions experienced during tours can significantly affect the process and progress of a sport tourism project (Bentley et al., 2008; Hartmann, 2006; Xu & Ni, 2008).

In general, there are 11 risk issues anticipated for the active sport tourism project based on the literature review: safety, environment, equipment, tourist behaviors, financial, legal, political, organizing, operation, human resources, and relationships with partners and locals.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Data collection

This study uses a qualitative method with semi-structured interviews to address the research questions (see appendix). The core research questions for this project were:

- (1) How risk is conceptualized and managed by practitioners in active sport tourism event projects?
- (2) What is the comparative significance of internal and external categories of risk associated with active sport tourism event projects?
- (3) What are the interrelationships between different categories of risk in active sport tourism event projects?

The semi-structured interview allows interviewees to flexibly show their attitudes, perceptions and experiences upon the questions, which is cannot be achieved by formal questionnaires (Silverman, 2008). 12 event project managers who all have rich experience on specific sport tourism projects from 5 private tourism companies based in Shanghai, China, are chosen as interviewees (Table 2). These managers are in different positions in their companies, some of them are the founders of the start-up sport tourism companies, but some are managers of



sport tourism projects in large integrated travel companies. Despite of this difference, they are still the most knowledgeable representatives in managing event risks because they are all experts in the sport tourism domain. The selection of participants took place through a process of identifying key active sport tourism products and services in the local Shanghai market and approaching representatives of the organizations responsible for their promotion and management. Additional contacts were obtained through a process of snowballing and purposeful sampling. The only selection criterion was experience in project managing active sport tourism activities including risk-related issues in that context.

### 3.2 Interview

Interviews were conducted via face-to-face and telephone methods, and more than half respondents were interviewed in person. It is necessary to note that telephone interviews may have some disadvantages compared to face-to-face interviews, such as the difficulty in building trust and developing a deeper connection with interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Therefore, 70% of interviews were done through meetings in order to build trust with managers, but unfortunately, some had to be completed by telephone due to managers' busy schedules. All of the interviews were recorded with the permission of managers and lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes. Questions for interviews were designed to concentrate on risk issues and challenges that managers come across when they conduct sport tourism projects, the impact of risks, methods they implemented to cope with the risk issues in the risk management execution, and the different risk issues in each type of project. These questions were used as a guide to get respondents to expand into their related topics in a continuous flow and to discuss risk issues in managing event projects in sport tourism contexts.

The qualitative method design was also used to establish a comparative analysis of four different types of sport tourism projects. During the interviews, identifying the types of active sport tourism event projects that managers had experienced and staged was the

**Table 2.** Manager interviews and interview method.

Company	Interviewee position	Gender	Event project (the kind of sport tourism project)	Interview method
A (a large integrated travel company)	Event manager	Male	Leisure, team development	In person
	Branch manager	Male	Competition, adventure	In person
Shanghai Fanjue Enterprise management Co., Ltd	Event manager	Male	Adventure, competition	In person
	Co-founder	Male	Leisure, team development,	In person
	Co-founder	Male	Leisure, team development	TelePhone
B (a large integrated travel company)	Event manager	Female	Leisure, team development	In person
	Event manager	Male	Leisure, team development	Telephone
	Department manager	Male	Adventure	Telephone
Shanghai Siqiang sports culture communication Co., Ltd	Founder	Male	Competition	In person
	Event manager	Female	Leisure, competition	In person
Shanghai Qipake travel consulting Co., Ltd	Co-founder	Female	Competition, adventure	Telephone
	Event manager	Male	Adventure	In person

first step, as such a step determines the group of interviewees and later comparative analysis of risk issues in different kinds of projects. This questionnaire design is guided by the study of Gibson (1998) as well as related archive materials. The researchers intentionally selected interviewees based on the types of projects they stage (Table 3 shows the number of managers who have experience in managing each kind of sport tourism event project). This ensures all classes of sport tourism projects are involved in the research, and eventually contributes to the analysis of comparison between different projects. However, there is no way to clearly group all interviewees based on types of the project they hold, because most of them have experience of more than one kind of event project. In this situation, the question ‘is there any difference concerning risk issues between your different types of projects?’ was additionally put forward to those interviewees so as to identify risks in each kind firstly and then put them together to compare at the analytical stage.

### 3.3 Data analysis

After collecting the data, we did an inductive analysis with the guideline established by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the taxonomy suggested in the study of Parent (2008). These methods help to clarify topics discussed by interviewees and provide guidance to categorize risk issues. Considering all of the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the software of ATLAS.ti 8.0 Chinese version was used to code all data collected in interviews which helps to improve the accuracy of the data analysis. Additionally, as interviews were done in Chinese, so the content analysis was manually transcribed and precisely translated into English. All parts of interview data were translated but the initial recording has been stored with the permission of interviewees. In order to improve the trustworthiness of the emerging findings, a draft and final paper were sent to managers so that they can verify their discussion and provide any necessary amendments on the content.

## 4. Results and discussion

You are always exposed to different risk factors and there is no ‘zero risk management’ in projects. Risk management is really an important part in planning my projects, and it’s a part of business. You have to assess your risks in advance – if not, you will face disasters. (the co-founder at Shanghai Fanjue Enterprise management Co., Ltd)

This quote illustrates the significance of risk management in sport tourism event projects and the fact that doing risk management at the planning stage is conducive to a successful project. This reveals and helps to elaborate upon the emerging findings in

**Table 3.** The number of event managers involved in each type of sport tourism project.

The type of sport tourism project	The number of managers
Leisure sport tourism	6
Team development sport tourism	5
Competition sport tourism	5
Adventure sport tourism	5

association with three aspects: (a) the proposed risk issue categories that event managers face, (b) the primary risk and the contributing risk: the impact of each risk category on projects and the relationship between each other, and (c) the difference and comparison of risk issues in different types of sport tourism event project.

#### **4.1 Risk issue categories in sport tourism projects**

The general risk issues found in this study were identified and categorized as follows: safety, financial, environmental, technical equipment, tourist behavioral, political, legal, operations, organizing, human resources, and relationships. Almost all the series of risk issues that emerged from the literature review are confirmed in this finding, but the organizing risk category does not show up. Notably, such categories in sport tourism event projects are partly covered by previous research, including Chang and Singh (1990), Bentley et al. (2008), and Xu and Ni (2008), but none of these authors have uniformly identified all issues shown in the present research. In addition, by comparison, the results of this study are very similar to the findings in the research of Leopkey and Parent's (2009) in the context of event sport tourism organization, but it should again be noticed that their research was set up on the base of large-scale sporting events. Thus, it is found that the type of risk issues in different sport tourism events are relatively close when the study is conducted at the project level. Despite the similarities, risk categories are found in this research are clearly fewer than that of Leopkey and Parent's (2009), and there are also differences in the detailed description of the same risk issue categories. Table 4 provides a detailed description of each identified risk category.

#### **4.2 Primary risks and contributing risks: Impacts and relationships**

When these risk issue categories were revealed by interviewees, their impacts were also demonstrated following the research development. The data analysis shows that some risk categories not only have negative impacts on the project, but that they also have some

**Table 4.** Description of risk issues faced by event managers.

Risk issue category	Specific issues	Number of mentions
Financial	Business turnover, repurchase rate, compensation	12
Safety	Threats to the life or health of tourists	12
Environment	Weather conditions, topography and landforms, natural hazard, the threat of wild animals and plants	12
Technical equipment	The number of prepared equipment, equipment trouble, professional skills	12
Operations	Logistics (preparation for travel, catering, accommodations, transportation, venue management, communication)	11
Human resources	Staff (tour leader/guide), training	8
Political	Government sectors	6
Legal	Policies and regulations	6
Tourist behaviors	lack of knowledge, unfamiliar with activities, tourist perception (self-assertiveness)	5
Relationships	Relationship with cooperative partners/ suppliers (hotels, restaurants, events venue), relationship with governments	7

interactions among themselves. This provides a deeper understanding in finding the conceptual model for the link between primary risks and contributing risks in the sport tourism event project.

### **4.3. Primary risks: Safety and finance**

An in-depth analysis of these risk categories shows that safety and financial risks are the primary risks in sport tourism projects, and this is because they are directly linked to project success. In interviews, return of tourists safely and the event project benefits in the end are two common measures on the project success by most event managers:

I think . . . safety for tourists and profits for ourselves are two things determining the project success. However, these two things are easily influenced by other changes, disorganizing our projects (Branch Manager at company A).

Each manager affirmed the importance of ensuring the health and safety of travelers in sport tourism event projects. Managers believe that the ability to prevent travelers from being physically injured during activities is a fundamental guarantee for the quality of sport tourism event projects as this safety risk issue is closely associated with customer satisfaction as well as business turnover. Next, financial risk is also a frequent concern cited by managers because the emergence of it is affected by safety issues according to the data from interviews. This means safety risk is somewhat a potential factor influencing the benefits to tourism companies. According to interviews, common financial concerns revolve around the buyback rate and the costs of compensation for injury and accidents. Safety and financial risk issues are reflected in the following quote:

The safety of clients is very important. If any serious injury accident happens in the activity, it will be devastating to our business, as nobody is willing to trust us and buy our products. It can be said, most of the risk prevention work we do is to minimize the possibility of such kinds of accidents (event manager at company A).

### **4.4. Contributing risks: Environment and technical equipment**

Environment and equipment risks were mentioned by all respondents. These two types of risks were considered as the most important contributing factors for injury or loss to sports tourism event participants. In such activities, insufficient preparation, bad weather conditions and equipment shortages occur from time to time, putting tourists at safety risks:

Fallen stones, once, hit our guest and the guest thus had a fracture; when hiking activities are held during the summer vacation, guests often suffer from heat stroke (Department Manager at Shanghai Qipake Travel Consulting Co., Ltd).

The weather really has a huge impact on our activities . . . during a recent mountaineering activity, again, we were forced to postpone all projects due to the strong typhoon weather, without any income in that period (founder at Shanghai Siqiang Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd).

When we go hiking for a long distance, in addition to the basic food, we usually provide tents, stoves, basic first-aid medicine for participants because you never know what will happen (Branch Manager at Company A).

From these quotes, some respondents believe that the environmental risk is not only a factor threatening the health of tourists, but also an element which is able to directly hinder the smooth progress of projects to a large extent, and tourism companies, therefore, lose opportunities to increase the business turnover. In this sense, the environment risk is another contributing factor to the financial risk for tourism companies.

Furthermore, most of the event managers said that weather changes are still hard to control in spite of detailed weather forecasting. As many activities are held in mountainous areas or remote places, the changeable weather conditions have a great impact on their projects. On the contrary, in terms of equipment risks, managers can easily prevent and control such risks, thereby reducing the probability of safety risks on tourists.

#### **4.5. Contributing risks: Operations and supplier relationship**

Operational risk is also a frequent concern among 11 respondents. This is logical because some potential or unexpected risks might occur during the operational stage. The worries regarding operational risks mainly refer to the logistics issues which include preparation work for travel, catering, accommodation, transportation, venue management, equipment utilization, as well as communication. The problem is reflected in the cooperation and communication with various suppliers, such as hotels, restaurants, event venue suppliers, car rental companies, etc. For example, food poisoning, accommodation and meals not provided in time, and the venue suppliers refusing to provide important props and necessary stage construction, are common problems for event managers according to the interviews.

On this basis, for sport tourism event operators, in order to promote the deep and effective cooperation with each supplier, a long-term relationship with them is necessary. While there are some occasional lapses in suppliers' work, building a good relationship with these vendors is useful for a successful project. However, it is not possible to maintain such a good relationship forever, because both sides cooperate on the basis of self interest. As quoted by the co-founder at Shanghai Fanjue Enterprise management Co., Ltd:

We once had a case with a supply partner. In the cooperation of a stage construction project, they broke the contract due to interest issues, but the project was about to start. Finally, we can only offer the customer only a smaller stage. The customer is very disappointed . . . and we did not get the final payment.

Hence, the generation of the supplier-relationship risks results that connect to logistical issues; in turn, it also influences the operational efficiency so the relationship between them is interactive and they eventually work together to generate the safety risk for tourists as well as financial risk for tourism companies.

#### **4.6. Contributing risk: Human resources**

Human resource is also another very commonly cited risk issue presented in this study, and it was mentioned by 8 managers. Although this risk category is not recognized by all managers, it can be found from the interview data that this kind of risk is the most worrying issue for event managers. The lack of professional personnel and technical training for tour leaders are two concerns among respondents:

In fact, most of our staff, the people who lead the tour group . . . their abilities in dealing with some emergency episodes are poor. 90% of them are in a part-time position . . . We did have an accident because of the incorrect direction from the staff (Event Manager at Shanghai Qipake travel consulting Co., Ltd).

More often, our tour guides may not know how to avoid risks, theoretically, they need training. But our training doesn't always measure up . . . Because there is no systematic training programme for this field in the industry. I think what we lack is a professional organizational training system. Now, our training is basically spontaneous, depending on company priorities and mood . . . (Event Manager at company B)

According to Zhou et al. (2019), the quantity and quality of sport tourism professionals in China are not as good as they could be and they cannot satisfy the requirements of the industry and of society. This problem is again reflected in this research. Event managers in the interviews clearly have varying degrees of concerns about professionalism and the quality of talents in this industry. More than that, training is also another concern for some managers. In this situation, training as a kind of solution in dealing with the problem of human resources in the Chinese sport tourism industry has not been taken control of and systematically implemented which makes the problem like being stuck in a swamp with practitioners being bogged down deeper and deeper. The human resource risk issue is one of the main obstacles for the development of the whole sport tourism sector in China and represents more than just a great threat to the health and wellbeing of tourists.

#### **4.7. Contributing risk: Tourist behaviors**

The risk of tourist behaviors contains three aspects: the lack of knowledge or skills in participating activities, unfamiliarity with the natural environment, and their assertiveness and perception of their abilities. The occurrence of these may increase the possibility of safety risks for tourism participants. Sometimes, tourist behaviors toward the natural environment are thought to be improper (Fletcher, 2010). The following quote could verify this point:

You know what? In a sea fishing activity, our clients nearly killed a nationally-protected animal, but they did not realise what they were doing until our guides stopped their behaviour (the Founder at Shanghai Siqiang Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd).

In some activities, tourists may accidentally touch poisonous plants, or get attacked by wild animals. It is very dangerous (the Manager in an adventure sport tourism project at Company A).

In addition, despite tourists' inexperience and incapacity in sport tourism activities, they usually have a feeling of invincibility and they think 'that things would never happen to me', which is a psychological bias:

At times, it is very difficult to let clients follow your guide, since some of them are so confident in their ability that they choose to ignore you . . . but they are the group who are most likely to suffer from injuries (Event Manager at Siqiang Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd).

Furthermore, from the quotes above, the tourists' risk behavior is associated with human resource risk within the background context of the tourism environment. If the tour guide can give tourists certain tour guidance it may reduce the probability of safety risk.

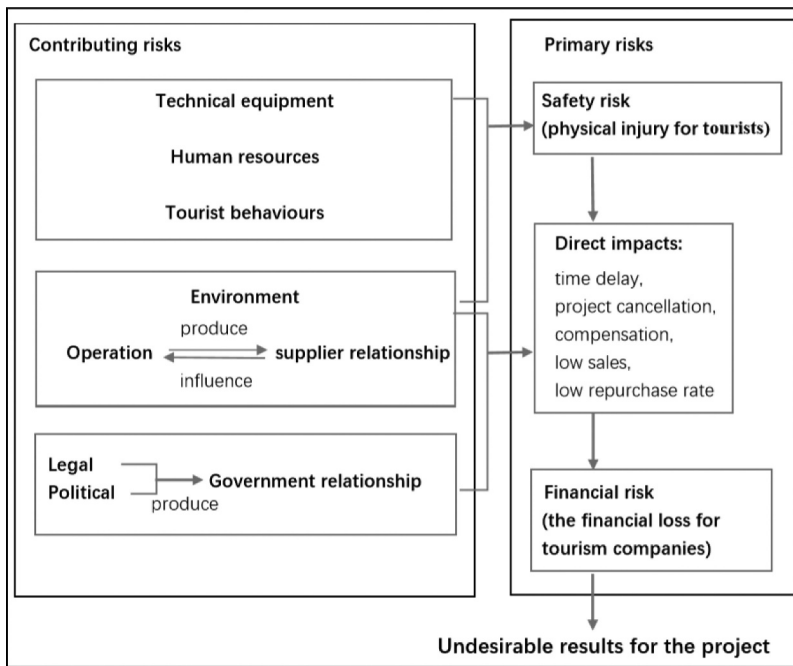
#### **4.8. Contributing risks: Political, legal, and government relationship**

Political risks refer to government departments and legal risks refer to policies and regulations. These two risk categories are high associative, as government has a core role in determining these two problems. Some specific projects, especially like competitive sport tourism projects where the site is a rigid requirement for the project often require sites that are controlled by the government and some policies stipulate that such activities can only be carried out with the approval of local government departments or officials. One event manager at Shanghai Siqiang Sports Culture Communication Co., Ltd stated:

The government department often interferes with the use of sites, affecting our progress. At such times, you have to run the channels in advance, money is the best way to solve . . . But, you know, our costs go up a lot, so sometimes it's not profitable to do a project like this . . . even in some cases, we have to give up projects in some districts, because it is unable to get access to the permission of all district governments.

Therefore, handling the relationship with the government tends to become another task for event managers, and in this case, the government relationship risk within the project is created. However, in the face of such risk, the industry seems helpless. It seems that in this kind of special relationship in China, the existence of political and legal risks is a great threat to the business and profits of activity companies.

Based on [Table 3](#), each risk category has been analyzed in terms of their impacts and interrelationships, which is presented in the conceptual model ([Figure 2](#)). All risk categories identified through interviews can be divided into two groups for a sport tourism event project: contributing risk factors and primary risks. The finding shows that when event managers point out the safety issue for their projects some other risk factors, such as environment, equipment, operations, human resources, supplier relationship, and tourist behaviors, would be linked to illustrate the cause of tourists' injury or unsafe conditions. Similarly, the financial risk issue can be directly influenced by environment, political, legal, and government relationships. Moreover, it is interesting to find that there is also a link between two primary risks. The safety risk for tourists is able to influence the project in respect of the time delay, compensation, sales, and repurchase rate, increasing the possibility of the financial risk occurring in projects.



**Figure 2.** A conceptual model for contributing risks and primary risks in the sport tourism project.

#### **4.9. The comparison of risk categories by different types of sport tourism project**

Gibson (1998) suggested that different types of sport tourism project have specific characteristics, involving differentiation in participant groups as well as operations. Backed by this perspective, the study tried to seek and explore the difference of risk issues among four kinds of sport tourism project. This study has shown 9 risk categories in the general sport tourism event projects, but not all of them exist in each type of sport tourism event project. The Table 5 summarizes the specific risk categories in each type of sport tourism event project.

Table 5 shows a phenomenon that the four sport tourism projects seem to be divided into two camps according to their risk categories. The types of leisure and team development make up one camp, while the competition and adventure types fall into the other one. Statistically, the competition and adventure projects contain the same amount of risk categories. Notably, risk groups mentioned in the leisure and team development projects are extremely similar. However, these two types of projects greatly differ from the other two types, especially in terms of political, government relationship issues. Besides, human resource is a risk issue of concern for managers who specialize in the leisure, team development, and competition projects, whereas not shown in the adventure projects. Supplier relationships are not a concern for the competitive project. Risk categories of financial, environment, equipment, operations, tourist behaviors, and legal appear in all kinds of projects.



**Table 5.** Risk categories by each type of sport tourism project.

Type of sport tourism project		leisure	Team development	Competition	Adventure
Risk issue category	Safety	×	×	×	×
	Financial	×	×	×	×
	Environment	×	×	×	×
	Equipment	×	×	×	×
	Operations	×	×	×	×
	Human resources	×	×	×	×
	Tourist behaviors	×	×	×	×
	Political			×	×
	Legal	×	×	×	×
	Government relationship			×	×
	Supplier relationship	×	×		×

#### **4.10. Government is a risk as well as an opportunity**

While the government is a significant risk for competition-based and adventure sport tourism event projects, sometimes it also plays a positive role in the sport tourism project. In the interview process, the researcher found that this type of risk does not occur either in the leisure events or in the team development events, but when it was raised by managers specializing in the competition and adventure projects the researcher posed an additional question to those respondents who are in charge of leisure and team development projects: are there any political risk issues existing in your projects? The following quote represents the managers' ideas toward this issue in the team development and leisure event projects:

I had been to an unexplored Island, and it was so beautiful that I thought if it could be used as a destination for my projects. Then, I contacted the local government and asked for their help. After their investigation, they helped me contact the Island administrator, and finally they issued relevant policies to facilitate the development of the Island. Now it is a wonderful destination for leisure sport tourism. (Event Manager who is responsible for leisure projects at Company B)

The above quote reflects the positive role of policy support on sport tourism business. In contrast, the 'government' issue is a considerable concern for managers in the competition as well as adventure sport tourism projects. This would be due to the special requirement of venues, like a public stadium or a national park for such types of events. As mentioned before, the use of these sites needs permission of the local government sector or projects cannot go ahead. In addition, the host of some adventure sport tourism events is also limited because some policies stipulate that carrying out sports activities with high level risk should be reported to relevant national government departments for permission (General Administration of Sport of China, GASC, 2019). This issue was confirmed by a manager who dedicates himself to the business of adventure sport tourism

Basically, 80% of our activities need to be reported to the local government section, and some planning programmes may not be approved (Branch Manager at Company A).

Therefore, this kind of factor on the government area has a distinct impact on different categories of sport tourism projects. In either competition or adventure projects, event managers obviously need to spend more time and energy on solving the policies and government departments' problems on projects, so dealing with government relations is a serious challenge for them. Particularly in comprehensive sports tourism companies,

event managers may be responsible for several different projects at the same time. It is also possible that a situation could arise in which managers who are mainly responsible for leisure projects are required to consider competition projects, but the lack of risk management ability in controlling political and government relationship would hinder their project management effectiveness. This needs to be paid much attention by the practitioners engaging in different types of projects in Chinese sport tourism industry.

#### ***4.11. Human resource is not a risk for the adventure sport tourism project***

Although human resource risk issue is shown in most kinds of projects, it is not a concern for event managers in the adventure projects. From the data collected in interviews, managers mainly in charge of the adventure projects are confident in the area of human resource management. This would be due to the reason that the high-risk nature of adventure sports tourism projects forces workers in this field to have higher quality and more professional skills than staff in other types of projects. More importantly, the training quality for employees in the adventure events is better. As one manager stated:

My focus is on adventure activities, my experience told me we have very few safety incidents due to staff mistakes . . . This is because such activities require employees who are equipped with high skills in relation to our operations. Even a small mistake by them is likely to cause a catastrophe, so we always pay great attention to the selection and training of talents (Event Manager at Company A).

It seems that the adventure event is an exception in dealing with the human resource problem in the Chinese sport tourism industry. This is likely because of the highly specialized nature of the sector and the relative gravity of risk it carries. This feature of the adventure project should be learned and applied in other project categories, especially for leisure and team development events, in which managers' perception toward employee issues tends to be 'misleading':

Executives don't want highly skilled people to do things, as they think leisure and team-building events are the easiest to operate (the Department Manager at Company B)

After all, benefits are at the heart of high-level considerations, and what they usually do is to lower the recruitment barrier to accommodate high-demand leisure activities (Branch Manager at Company A)

Thus, social demand, the nature of activity itself and industrial concept determine the performance of human resource risk in different projects. According to this finding, it seems that improving such risk problem in a short period of time is not an easy task. Obviously, it is impossible to address this issue merely through the efforts from tourism companies themselves as they are being driven by profits. Under this circumstance, government intervention in the future such as issuing related policies and regulations may help solve the human resource problem. After all, this kind of risk can threaten tourists' safety which will have negative implication for destinations more generally.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify risk issues in managing sport tourism event projects from the view of event managers in China. A qualitative method with semi-structured interviews was used to achieve this research purpose and to answer the research questions set out earlier concerning the content, significance and interrelatedness of risk issues. A breakdown of risk issues which event managers face in the active sport tourism event projects is shown in this study (Table 4). The general risk issues found in this study were identified and divided into 10 categories: safety, financial, environment, technical equipment, human resources, tourist behaviors, political, legal, operations, and relationships with stakeholders. The variety of risk issue categories, therefore, proves the idea that risk is not a discrete problem or issue but one with broad implications for the planning and conducting of a sport tourism project.

Following the main research purpose, it further reveals certain relevant relationships between primary risks and contributing risks within active sport tourism event projects. A conceptual model for contributing risks and primary risks in the sport tourism project is put forward (Figure 2). Additionally, the difference of some risk issues (political and human resource) in different kinds of project is also demonstrated.

This study has contributed toward filling a gap in the field of risk management issues for sport tourism event project literatures in China and has international relevance too. As noted in the previous section, there is little research on the risk issues for sport tourism events from a project management perspective, so limited risk issues had been systematically identified and explored especially for the domain of active sport tourism. This research has gained an insight into the risk issues in managing sport tourism projects from the project management view and demonstrates exactly the risk issues are for Chinese sport tourism projects. Besides, the research also gives a better understanding of the impacts and the relationships between risk issues in such sport tourism event projects. This, to some extent, enables the staff in this industry to focus on the primary issues, namely, the main contributing risk factors when dealing with risk problems.

It is important to note that this research is conducted based on the actual situation of Chinese active sport tourism. Formerly, more than half of managers used to cope with risks rather than anticipate risk issues in the sport tourism industry (Bentley et al., 2008); and this is reflected through the interviews conducted for this research: Chinese event managers' conceptualization of risk issues in this industry tend to be 'inconsistent'. This means that the situation of risk management for Chinese sport tourism section is not positive or well-organized and remains at the initial stage of identifying risk factors. This research combined different event managers' experiences and perspectives concluding with an analysis of the specific risk issues in the sport tourism event projects they have been responsible for. Therefore, the findings in this paper all have their own practical significance, especially providing inspiration for new entrant managers as well as aiding reflection for previous managers in identifying risk issues for sport tourism event projects in China.

Future research could examine a larger number of participants to deepen the analysis and improve the universality of the conclusions, as the first limitation in this paper is the small number of the research sample. It means the theoretical saturation (Corley & Gioia, 2004) is not reached in this study and the possibility of new risk issues may not be ruled

out. Particularly, a small sample greatly limits an in-depth analysis of risk issues on each type of projects (leisure, team development, competition, adventure), so future studies could also separately examine risk issues for each category of sport tourism project in greater depth with more samples.

Besides, examining corresponding strategies used by managers to manage risk issues and evaluating their overall risk management capability are also suggested as future research directions. This paper only focuses on investigating the general risk issues faced by managers, without further exploring their comprehensive abilities in relation to risk management for the sport tourism event project. Finally, because of the extensiveness of the operational risk category identified in this study (including many sub-components, like venue management, communication, logistical work for transportation, catering, and accommodations), if possible, further research could also revolve around these sub-components in order to develop a more sustained analysis.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix. The guide of interview questions

- (1) In four types of sport tourism projects, leisure, team development, competition, adventure, what kinds of projects are you processing or did you experience?
- (2) In your opinion, what is the criteria for a successful sport tourism project?
- (3) What do you think of the project risk management?
- (4) What risks did you usually face when you manage your projects?
- (5) What are challenges for you in the risk management process?
- (6) Is there any difference about risk issues in your different type of projects? According to your experience (this question is asked when interviewees experienced more than one type of projects)
- (7) How would these risks affect your projects?
- (8) What efforts have your company made to improve the ability of risk management? What else needs to be improved?