

Comparative Analysis of Campground Development in China and the United States: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract: In a global context where camping is increasingly recognized as a key leisure activity, this study examines the development discrepancies of campgrounds between countries, focusing on China and the United States. Employing Grounded Theory, it analyzes a natural resort in Beijing's Miyun district, identifying and categorizing 48 dimensions such as infrastructure, economic factors, management, environment, culture, and policy. These dimensions are then refined into three primary themes: development process, gap analysis, and optimization strategies. The study provides a detailed comparative analysis of these campgrounds across six key aspects, ultimately offering strategic recommendations for enhancing Chinese campground development. These recommendations focus on industrial growth, spatial planning, and operational improvements, contributing academic insights to the field of global leisure and campground development.

Keywords: Campground; Camping tourism; Grounded Theory; Comparative analysis.

1. Introduction

Camping, which originated in the United States in the 1860s, has now positioned the country as the preeminent market for this activity, becoming a ubiquitous lifestyle there. The U.S. campground industry has reached a level of maturity, evidenced by its substantial achievements in policy development, campsite management, and operational channels. Conversely, the development of campgrounds in China began in the late 20th century. During the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, 'Glamping' — a fusion of glamorous amenities with natural camping experiences — rapidly expanded in popularity. This trend contributed to a significant acceleration in China's camping economy over the subsequent three years. However, the development of Chinese campgrounds remains in an exploratory phase, lacking in comprehensive theoretical knowledge and practical experience, and not yet fully addressing the increasing consumer demand for camping leisure. Consequently, in view of the significant potential for development in China's campground sector, this paper conducts a comparative study between Chinese and U.S. campgrounds. It aims to distill advanced practices from the U.S. experience, analyze the current state of campground development in China, and propose development strategies tailored to practical realities. Given the dearth of Chinese literature making lateral comparisons with international campgrounds, this study seeks to augment the theoretical framework in this field and offer insights for further research into campground development.

2. Research Background

To compare the development models of campgrounds in China and the United States, researchers conducted field interviews at the "Endless Summer Sunlight Valley", a luxury natural resort campground in Miyun, Beijing, in the spring of 2023. Interviews were carried out with one RV campground operator, one tent campground operator, two campground staff, and two campers with experience in American campgrounds. These interviews focused on their perspectives

on campground development, management, and services, as well as their perceptions of the differences between Chinese and American campgrounds. Interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to an hour, were recorded, yielding over 100,000 characters of textual material.

This study employed Grounded Theory for qualitative analysis of the interview data, encompassing three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Grounded Theory, a qualitative research methodology aimed at identifying fundamental concepts and patterns behind phenomena, was originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and further developed by Charmaz and others [1]. Its core principle is "the discovery of theory from data", primarily building substantive theories from the ground up, based on existing experience and data. It is often applied in new fields where the theoretical framework is still evolving [2].

To ensure research validity, a theoretical saturation test was conducted. The interview content was independently coded twice, following a 1:2 ratio. Researchers independently analyzed the transcribed interviews without influencing each other, selecting sentences closely related to the research for conceptualization and categorization. The results of the two independent coding sessions were then compared: identical codes were adopted, while differing codes underwent further consideration and comparative reading. After extensive comparison with existing literature, concepts appearing less than twice and not amenable to categorization were excluded.

3. Methodology

3.1. Open Coding

Open coding is the initial stage of research where collected data is deconstructed, compared, conceptualized, and categorized. This process, as defined by Chen Xiangming (2000), involves breaking down extensive material, assigning concepts, and recombining it in new ways [3]. It aims to identify similar or identical types in the raw data and name their concepts and dimensions. Specifically, open coding

includes three steps: Firstly, the conceptualization stage involves extracting content from the raw data into independent sentences and coding these sentences to form preliminary concepts. Secondly, during the concept categorization stage, these concepts are optimized, analyzed, and filtered, grouping similar concepts to form clusters belonging to the same category. Lastly, in the categorization stage, these clusters are abstracted and named.

Utilizing the free coding feature of Nvivo11.0, this study methodically coded and labeled the interview data sentence by sentence without any preconceptions or biases of the researcher, resulting in the generation of initial concepts and concept categories.

Through the first step of open coding, researchers identified 48 categories, including industry scale, experience reservoir, diversity of types, facility conditions, market

positioning, pricing, consumer capacity, development models, investment models, profitability, operational conditions, geographical location, climate temperature, natural resources, tourism concepts, ethnic characteristics, aesthetic differences, leisure culture, encouragement and support, environmental protection, construction regulations, land limitations, activity organization, tourism forms, brand building, fashion trends, widespread dissemination, physical fitness, closeness to nature, love of life, leisure and entertainment, product innovation, industry connotations, industry integration, public services, management services, advertising investment, educational advancement, distinctive development, strategic planning, convenience facilities, diversified development, leisure projects, station construction, market resources, project configuration, guidance and cultivation, and asset investment.

Table 1. Main Categories and Concepts Formed Through Axial Coding

Main Category	Corresponding Subcategories
Construction Situation	Industry Scale Experience Reservoir Type Diversity Facility Conditions Market Positioning
Economic Conditions	Pricing Strategy Consumer Capacity
Business Model	Development Mode Investment Mode Profitability Operational Status
External Environment	Geographical Location Climate Temperature Natural Resources
Cultural Background	Tourism Concepts Ethnic Characteristics Aesthetic Differences Leisure Culture
Policy Background	Encouragement and Support Environmental Protection Construction Regulations Land Restrictions
Development History	Activity Organization Forms of Tourism Brand Building Fashion Trends
Development Characteristics	Widespread Dissemination Physical Fitness Closeness to Nature Love for Life Leisure and Entertainment
Industry Optimization	Product Innovation Industry Essence Industry Integration Public Services Management Services Advertising Investment Educational Promotion Distinctive Development Strategic Planning
Space Optimization	Convenience Facilities Diversified Development Leisure Projects Station Construction
Operation Optimization	Market Resources Project Configuration Guidance and Cultivation Asset Investment

3.2. Axial Coding

Axial coding follows the open coding phase, offering a more focused and in-depth exploration of the data by relating categories to their subcategories, identifying the phenomena represented by the data, and linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions. This phase is crucial for developing and refining theories based on the data collected.

In this study, axial coding was employed to further analyze the 231 original statements and concepts that were identified during the open coding process. Researchers rigorously examined these concepts, reassembling the data in new ways to uncover the relationships between them. This process involved categorizing similar events and situations, thereby forming a structured network of categories and subcategories.

The outcome of this axial coding process in our study was the refinement of the initial 48 concepts into 11 distinct categories. The identified main categories include construction situation, economic conditions, business model, external environment, cultural background, policy background, development history, development characteristics, industry optimization, space optimization, and operation optimization.

background, development history, development characteristics, industry optimization, space optimization, and operation optimization (Table 1). These categories represent a more structured and interrelated understanding of the data, laying the foundation for the subsequent selective coding phase and the development of a grounded theory.

3.3. Selective Coding

Selective coding is a process of identifying a core category in Grounded Theory methodology, conducted at a more abstract level than axial coding. The aim is to integrate and consolidate the categories developed during axial coding around this core category, thereby forming a coherent and comprehensive narrative, or "storyline", of the research findings. This step synthesizes the various elements of the data into a unified theory, presenting the central phenomenon of the study in a structured and concise manner. In this study, the core categories identified include Gap Analysis, Development Process, and Optimization Strategies (Table 2).

Table 2. Core Categories, Main Categories, and Corresponding Frequencies Formed Through Selective Coding

Core Category	Main Category	Frequency
Gap Analysis	Construction Situation	19
	Economic Conditions	11
	Business Model	24
	External Environment	15
	Cultural Background	18
	Policy Background	16
Development Process	Development History	19
	Development Characteristics	28
Optimization Strategies	Industry Optimization	43
	Space Optimization	21
	Operation Optimization	17

4. Research Findings

Based on the selected case study materials and interview data, coupled with the integration of existing academic literature, this study has constructed a theoretical model (Figure 1). The model underscores the importance of comparing the development processes of campgrounds in China and the United States, analyzing the gaps between them, and ultimately proposing paths for optimization. This

approach has enabled a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing campground development in both countries and has facilitated the identification of key areas where Chinese campgrounds can improve and evolve. The model serves as a conceptual framework for understanding the intricate factors at play in the campground industry and provides a structured basis for developing strategies aimed at enhancing the efficacy and appeal of camping sites in China.

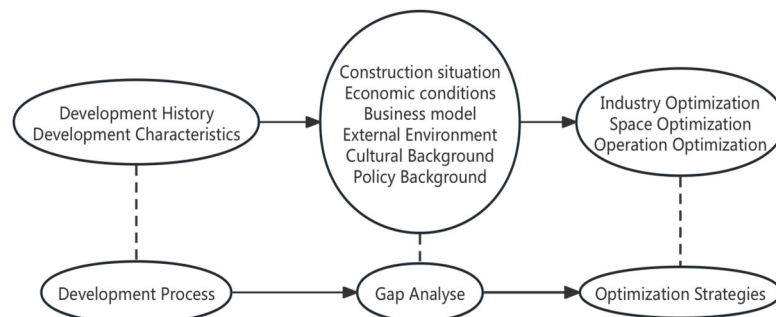


Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Campground Development in China and the United States Based on Grounded Theory

4.1. Development Process

The development of campgrounds in both the United States and China has undergone significant evolution, each

influenced by their unique economic, social, and policy landscapes.

In the United States, the campground industry has seen over a century of development, characterized by the

establishment of a complete value chain. This progression has been supported by various factors, including government policy support in the early stages and the implementation of industry standards and market-oriented operations in later stages. The U.S. is known for its diverse camping options, including RV and tent camping, which cater to different preferences for comfort and nature immersion.

On the other hand, China's camping industry, particularly car camping, is relatively nascent but rapidly growing. Economic development and improved living standards have driven increased interest in automobile travel and camping. The Chinese government has played a crucial role in promoting this growth, with policies encouraging the development of camping and leisure tourism. This includes the integration of campsites with scenic spots and the development of public campsites. The market for camping in China has seen substantial growth, with a notable increase in demand for camping equipment and related services. However, compared to developed countries, the Chinese camping industry still faces challenges, including industry standards, consumer market development, and the need for more comprehensive infrastructure and services.

In summary, while the U.S. camping industry benefits from a long history and established market, China's camping industry, though in its earlier stages, is rapidly evolving with significant government support and growing consumer interest. This presents both opportunities and challenges for the development of the camping industry in China.

4.2. Gap Analysis

4.2.1. Construction

In the United States, the abundance of campgrounds features a comprehensive range of facilities and services encompassing basic amenities, public utilities, recreational facilities, and luxury provisions. For instance, select upscale campgrounds offer sophisticated dining and spa services. Concurrently, U.S. campgrounds demonstrate a leading edge in aspects such as barrier-free design, smart development, and sustainability. This includes the provision of concrete pads at wheelchair-accessible heights and hooks, assistive technologies like hearing loops, text-to-speech, and audio descriptions for videos to aid campers with disabilities. Automated reservation systems enhance managerial efficiency, while the utilization of clean energy sources like solar power is also evident. In contrast, China's campgrounds, both in terms of quantity and quality, particularly in service facilities and management, have considerable room for improvement and development.

4.2.2. Economic conditions

Camping activities typically necessitate the purchase of equipment such as tents, sleeping bags, and stoves, along with the payment of campground fees, thereby presenting a certain consumption threshold. Drawing from the developmental trajectory of the outdoor industry abroad, it is generally believed in the industry that the preliminary phase of outdoor industry development is reached when per capita GDP surpasses \$10,000 [4]. As a developed nation, the United States boasts a higher average income with relatively equitable household income distribution, making camping activities financially accessible to many families. Official data indicates that the U.S. first achieved a per capita GDP exceeding \$10,000 in 1978, while in 2023, the country's per capita GDP has surpassed \$80,000. In contrast, China's per capita GDP first exceeded \$10,000 in 2019. This suggests that

China's economic foundation lags behind that of the U.S. by at least approximately 40 years in reaching the initial developmental threshold of the outdoor industry.

Moreover, compared to the U.S., the number of campgrounds in China is relatively limited, with a significant supply-demand imbalance, constraining the expansion of the camping market. Currently, the U.S. boasts over 18,000 RV parks and campgrounds, as well as more than 260,000 tent campgrounds managed by federal and state parks, contributing to a vast camping market. In contrast, as of August 30, 2023, China has 6,527 campgrounds, amounting to only about 2%-3% of the number in the U.S [5]. Statistics show that as of 2022, 92 million American households had experienced camping, with 58 million households camping at least once that year, generating over \$52 billion in annual expenditure [6]. In the same year, China's core camping market was valued at 113.47 billion yuan (approximately \$15.8 billion), with the camping economy amounting to only about 30% of that in the U.S.

4.2.3. Business Mode

Campgrounds in the U.S. usually focus on self-help camping, where visitors can choose to bring their own tents or rent a camper, freely choose the camping location and time, and enjoy the beauty of the natural environment. In China, most campgrounds adopt the group self-help camping mode, organized by professional camping clubs or travel agencies, where tourists only need to bring their personal belongings, and professionals provide equipment and management. This mode helps to improve the quality of tourism services and the safety and security of tourists, but there are certain management costs and profit margins.

4.2.4. External Environment

The United States is recognized as a country with relatively developed natural resources and a strong consciousness of conservation. Both the government and society place significant emphasis on environmental protection and the preservation of natural ecosystems. Campsites in the U.S. are typically situated in areas of natural beauty, such as mountains, forests, and riversides. Notably, campgrounds in national parks and national forests constitute approximately 35% of all sites, with regulations and management measures implemented to protect local natural resources and ecosystems [7]. In contrast, the number of campgrounds in China is comparatively lower, and in some areas, natural resources have been impacted by the intensification of urbanization, resulting in suboptimal camping environments. Additionally, there is a need for heightened environmental awareness among tourists in China, as some campers exhibit a lack of conservation consciousness, posing potential risks to the environment.

4.2.5. Cultural Background

In academia, "space" is typically perceived as a material environment for production and practice. Building on this, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced the concept of the production of space, dividing it into spatial representations, representational spaces, and spatial practices [8]. Camping, as an emerging leisure activity, is not only a material production activity in a natural setting but also a creative spatial representation.

In the United States, camping is a popular outdoor activity seen as a way to enjoy nature. Utilizing Lefebvre's spatial theory, we can analyze the profound characteristics of American camping culture from a new perspective. Firstly,

from the aspect of spatial representations, the design and planning of campgrounds transcend mere material utilization of natural environments, reflecting societal conceptions of outdoor activities and closeness to nature. This includes various camping activities such as hiking, cycling, and fishing, illustrating camping as a lifestyle choice. Secondly, at the level of representational spaces, camping has become an integral part of American culture, deepening familial and friendly communications and serving as a conduit for emotional connections and cultural inheritance. Lastly, from the standpoint of spatial practices, camping activities mirror direct interactions and perceptions of natural environments by Americans, transcending physical experiences to signify human-nature relationships. Therefore, camping's entrenched role in American culture is not just as a nationwide outdoor activity, but also a holistic manifestation in cultural, emotional, and social practices.

Contrastingly, in China, the awareness and acceptance of camping culture are relatively lower. In traditional Chinese culture, indoor activities and the home as a social space are preferred. However, as people start to perceive campgrounds as symbolic 'homes' and forge new social relationships, the use of tents and other mobile spatial systems in natural environments reflects characteristics of spatial practice. Additionally, due to high population density and urbanization, Chinese perspectives on nature differ, leading to distinct views on campgrounds. Consequently, compared to the U.S., Chinese campgrounds are more themed around ecology and vacation, offering escapes from urban hustle and stress. Nevertheless, with the rise of outdoor tourism culture and the increasing demands for freedom, individuality, and exploration among youth, camping culture in China is gradually growing. Furthermore, camping in China also encompasses the traditional concept of 'unity of man and nature', linking everyday life with camping activities, forming unique representational spaces, and providing new venues for campers to reshape social relations.

4.2.6. Policy Background

The United States boasts a comprehensive and mature legal and regulatory framework that ensures the standardized construction of campgrounds. In terms of management entities, campgrounds operate under localized administration: federal campsites, comprising approximately 42% (overseeing those within national and forest parks), state campsites accounting for about 12% (managing those within state parks and beaches), and private campsites constituting around 46%. In terms of management approach, U.S. campground construction and management criteria, such as scale and facility requirements, are integrated into the 'National Park Service Organic Act', state legislations, and local ordinances. Particularly for campgrounds located within national parks, laws and regulations stringently restrict camping activities, including campground planning and facility provisions [7]. In contrast, China's policies related to the camping industry were introduced later and lack specific standards for campground construction and management. This necessitates further governmental support and enhancement in the administration and regulation of the camping industry.

4.3. Optimization Strategies

From an industrial optimization standpoint, the development and enhancement of China's campgrounds can be approached as follows: the formulation of comprehensive

laws, regulations, and industry standards is paramount. Drawing insights from the regulatory frameworks and standards of U.S. campgrounds, it's essential to adapt and establish pertinent laws, regulations, and industry standards tailored to China's unique national conditions and practical realities. This approach aims to standardize industry development, elevate service quality, and safeguard tourist rights and interests. Furthermore, fortifying campground management and service levels is crucial. Emulating the management and service paradigms of American campgrounds can substantially uplift the management and service quality of Chinese campgrounds. This includes enhancing the caliber of staff and management and offering an array of enriched service content and facilities to fulfill tourist requirements. The cultivation of a diversified camping industry is also vital. By observing the varied business models of U.S. campgrounds, China can innovate and introduce a range of camping products and services, such as family, luxury, and themed camping. This diversification serves to meet the demands of assorted consumer segments, thereby augmenting the economic viability and competitiveness of the campgrounds.

In terms of spatial optimization, the development of Chinese campgrounds can be strategized as follows: First and foremost, optimizing the spatial layout of campgrounds is essential. Campsites should be planned judiciously, considering different business models and functionalities, to achieve rationalization, efficiency, and optimal space utilization. Secondly, there is a need to strengthen landscape planning and green construction. Through meticulous planning and design, the creation of unique landscapes and environments can significantly enhance visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation. Thirdly, expanding leisure and recreational facilities is key. Aligning with various business models and functionalities, the inclusion of diverse amenities like swimming pools, gyms, and open-air cinemas can elevate the visitor experience and entertainment value. Fourthly, incorporating design flexibility and scalability is critical. Campground planning and design should be future-proof, accommodating sustainable development and allowing ample space for potential expansion or functional adjustments. Lastly, enhancing environmental sustainability is imperative. Echoing the stringent environmental standards of U.S. campgrounds, considerations like energy efficiency, water resource management, waste segregation, and utilization of renewable energy should be integral to the design ethos.

Operationally, the optimization of Chinese campgrounds can be approached as follows: In customer service, the introduction of advanced concepts and technologies is necessary to provide superior customer service. Leveraging a customer relationship management system can facilitate improved service and communication, thereby boosting customer satisfaction and loyalty [9]. In terms of facility management, a focus on the maintenance and upkeep of campground facilities is crucial to enhance the overall quality and safety. Establishing a comprehensive facility maintenance system and regular inspection protocols ensures the integrity and safety of the facilities. Moreover, establishing a scientifically grounded management system and operational processes is vital to improve operational efficiency and management standards. In marketing and promotion, leveraging various marketing strategies and exploiting emerging channels such as the Internet and social media can significantly broaden campground visibility and

influence. Lastly, in terms of innovative service offerings, it is essential to continually evolve service products in response to customer needs and market dynamics. This includes providing a spectrum of outdoor activities, organizing social events, and offering amenities such as charging stations, Wi-Fi, and personalized services, all of which contribute to enhancing the competitive edge and allure of the campgrounds.

5. Conclusions

This study, contextualized within the growing global interest in camping as a leisure pursuit, offers an in-depth comparative analysis of campground development in China and the United States. Utilizing Grounded Theory to explore a natural resort in Beijing's Miyun district, the research categorizes 48 dimensions into key themes of development process, gap analysis, and optimization strategies. This approach not only highlights the distinct developmental trajectories of campgrounds in these two nations but also provides a critical lens through which the broader nuances of campground development can be understood.

The research reveals stark differences and notable similarities in aspects such as infrastructure, economic dynamics, management approaches, environmental considerations, cultural influences, and policy frameworks between the two countries. These insights are instrumental in understanding the complex interplay of factors that shape campground development globally.

Strategically, the study's recommendations for China, emphasizing industrial growth, spatial planning, and operational enhancements, are not only pertinent to enhancing its campground sector but also offer universal insights. These insights are valuable for the global leisure and campground industry, suggesting ways to harmonize development practices across diverse geographic and cultural landscapes.

In essence, this research extends beyond a mere comparative study; it provides a comprehensive framework that can inform and influence campground development globally. It contributes to the broader discourse on leisure and

tourism, presenting adaptable strategies that respect the unique socio-economic and environmental contexts of different regions. The study's findings and recommendations serve as a guide for future research and practice in the field, highlighting the potential for integrated, sustainable development in the global campground sector.

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