

CHARTING STRATEGIC FRONTIERS IN SPORT MANAGEMENT: A BIBLIOMETRIC INQUIRY INTO SHIFTING RESEARCH PARADIGMS

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Abstract. *This study explores the development of sport management academics through brief global published, peer-reviewed articles. Eligible works were drawn from Web of Science database that reflects wide geographic diversity, institutional settings, and disciplinary perspectives. Five main themes found by mapping co-occurring keywords include leadership and team performance; digital marketing and fan engagement; sustainability and corporate social responsibility; human resource strategies; governance and policy innovation. The traditional temporal trend analysis for this field shows a clear shift from early emphasis on more traditional management practices to the currently accepted stronger emphasis on digital strategies and ethical governance. The findings point to emerging interests in technology-based marketing methods and sustainability issues as further evidence of a paradigmatic change in research priorities. Limitations include coverage confined to one citation source and possible underrepresentation of regionally indexed literature. Implications for theory and practice include encouraging interdisciplinary research that integrates digital analytics, organizational behavior, and ethics; and using it as a basis to guide policymakers in creating novel governance frameworks. Future work should expand the evidence base by incorporating more databases, complementing bibliometric results with qualitative methods, and deepening understanding of underlying drivers and contextual nuances.*

Keywords: *sport management; research trends; knowledge; mapping; bibliometric analysis.*

Introduction

The economic and social impacts of organized sport activities have led to the development of academic sport management as a separate field. As sports can be related to economic development, public health and community cohesion, it is necessary to have management practices in this particular field. Due to its multiple aspects- competition, entertainment, and social interaction-sport requires administrators who are not only well equipped with regular management skills but those who understand the basic dynamics of sports (Ratten, 2011; Zeigler, 2007). During the 1990s, the focus of academic research in the field of sport management was mainly on athlete training and other performance-related issues that dominated this young discipline with an influence on outcomes directly on the field. On raising mothed professionalized commercialized researcher applied marketing and organizational theories to sport setting where they eventually laid the foundation for sport management becoming a distinct area of study (Ciomaga, 2013).

Sport management research was decisively moved to the business-oriented themes by the early 2000s. Marketing, finance, and organizational strategy are the central topics of investigation (Shilbury, 2011). Ratten (2011) argued that in view of the entrepreneurial potential of sport, new theories should be developed to include innovation, social responsibility, and philanthropy within sport organizations. At the same time, critics were already warning that a commercial focus would take precedence over sport's cultural and ethical dimensions. Gammelsæter (2021) goes even further by arguing that viewing sport only

as an industry leaves unplayed its functions as a social institution. He posits an increased reattention on the communal and societal functions of sport rather than treatment within a business paradigm.

Over the last decade, the diversification of academic issues in the field of sport management is apparent, social responsibility, diversity, and technological innovation being some of them. Pellegrini et al. (2020) showed through bibliometric analysis that sport entrepreneurship and innovation are two leading research areas. Gholampour et al., (2019) noted that digital engagement and sponsorship subjects are at the forefront of leading journals. Other studies have addressed quality management in sport, artificial intelligence injection in team management (Gao, 2025), and the effect of a global crisis on sport governance—post COVID-19 (Byon et al., 2022). These indicate how further changes in the conduct of sport management research reflect change both technologically and socially.

The integration of basic management theories with the specific characteristics of sport organizations has continuously refined the identity of sport management as a distinct academic field. Earlier investigations in this area primarily drew upon general management constructs, such as those related to organizational behavior and marketing, which do not fit well within the specific context of sport. According to Doherty (2013) direct transplantation of frameworks from other domains was gradually acknowledged by scholars of sport management whereby they can ask for adaptation and context-sensitive theory development. This analysis also indicates that researchers were on their way in the 2010s to better develop conceptual models specific to sports that include important features-fan culture, regulatory oversight, volunteerism-that are somewhat peripheral in non-sport sectors. Simultaneously, sport marketing came into play as a major subfield, highlighting the commercial aspects of both professional and amateur sports. Studies on sponsorship, branding, and consumer behavior sprouted in the 2000s- setting more advanced fan engagement loyalty assessments (Shekhar & Shah, 2023). Using bibliometrics to analyze fusion trends to 2014 between sport marketing research with digital media metrics and social media analytics indicates movement toward data-driven strategies. The findings reveal an increasing use by sport organizations of networked platforms to co-create value with fans; it gives an indication for later studies on digital transformation and e-sports.

Sport management research has seen a significant rise in the past decade with governance and corporate social responsibility, mirroring transparency and ethical leadership concerns in a larger context. Shilbury et al. (2016) noted that sport entities, particularly international federations and major league franchises, are indeed under intense scrutiny related to their governance structures, accountability, and engagement of stakeholders. More fundamentally, they found that during 2010–2017 literature on sport governance models expanding works emphasizing collaborative multi-stakeholder frameworks rather than top-down hierarchies.

Another point of growing academic attention is the interface between sport and social inclusion, particularly gender equity, disability accessibility, and community development. Davenport et al. (2025) had systematically reviewed the literature in sport management which addressed gender-based disparities to note that research on female participation in leadership roles within sport has greatly expanded since 2010. Their analysis underscored existing gaps such as the underrepresentation of minority groups in managerial positions but also highlighted a few good case studies involving diversity programs that improved organizational culture.

An emerging pathway involves athlete health, safety, and performance, which links sport management with sports medicine, psychology, and biomechanics. Rice et al. (2018) consider research on athlete welfare and note that studies increasingly address mental health issues, protocols for concussions and long-term wellness—previously peripheral to central management concerns. Their review indicates that by the late 2010s sport managers would have to work with medical and psychological experts in creating policies and environments conducive to all-round athlete development. This trend reflects a broader emphasis on human resource sustainability within sports organizations as also highlighted by Taylor et al. (2015), who contend that long-term success rests on the balance between performance outcomes and well-being initiatives.

Sustainability and sport tourism have eventually merged into a purported research cluster due to the environmental impact of sports and their economic effects in the hosting communities. Cayolla & Escades (2024) argue that organizers of sports events are now more responsible for implementing sustainable practices, which involve waste reduction, energy efficiency, and fair economic benefits to local residents. According to them, between 2015 and 2020—a period described as a legacy planning and stakeholder collaboration mega event publications surged during that time period. More recently Morfoulaki et al. (2023) claim that even smaller scale sporting tourism plans affect regional development where sustainable models must balance tourist influx with environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. These reviews fine-tune convergent interest toward how sport management can deal directly with global sustainability challenges while maximizing tourism for economic development.

Based on these observations, this study theorizes that the sport management knowledge domain can empirically be characterized by several interrelated thematic foci—such as marketing and sponsorship of sports, governance of sports organizations, athlete performance, and social dimensions of sport in an emergent context of digital transformation and crisis management. It attempts to show how the field has evolved from being structured around classic references toward a broader, more technology-influenced, and more ethically aware research environment through mapping co-occurrence relations of keywords as well as their temporal dynamics.

Research Question

What are the principal thematic clusters within sport management research from 2005 to 2025, and how have the prominence and interrelationships of these clusters evolved over time?

Research purpose:

The study aims to outline and describe the leading key groups, such as customer actions and advertising, player well-being and results, group control, community participation, and eco-friendliness, using measurable word-link checking, to help future learning and direct sports business workers to plans that mirror the field's changing focus.

Methodology

This study used a bibliometric approach to explain the knowledge structure of sport management research within the timeline 2005–2025. The information was taken solely from the Web of Science Core Collection which resulted in a set of 12,230 articles and reviews that are peer-reviewed. Wide-ranging bibliographic metadata—such as year of publication, author-assigned keywords, and algorithmically created Keywords Plus—were extracted to support later network modeling. With the help of citation-index data, this study guarantees that both established works and new academic discussions in the field of sport management are reflected in the analysis. Compilation of keyword metadata made it possible to develop a fine co-occurrence map employing VOSviewer (version 1.6.x). In the map, certain themes are indicated by the nodes, with the size of a node being related to how often a term is used and the connection between two terms showing how frequently they occur together. When association-strength normalization is applied, it highlights meaningful connections between ideas and allows for clear description of coherent thematic groupings. The default settings in generating groupings based on clustering methods correspond well to identifiable research subareas and also give sharply defined groupings.

An overlay visualization scheme was laid on top of the co-occurrence network to show temporal progression. Nodes were given a color that represented their average publication year, so that there is a continuous spectrum: cooler colors represent core topics; warmer colors represent emergent research areas. The time-gradient method allows for a view of how specific threads of investigation have changed—in which chronological turning points and changes in thematic emphasis over twenty years can be detected.

Five main areas of focus came from the word-link map: Customer Actions & Promotion; Wellness & Exercise Results; Rules & Sport Groups; Community Involvement & Welcome; and Green Practices & Sport Travel. In each group, we checked if words came together closely both in space and with connections making sense internally. These groups together show the many sides of sport care study, mirroring old ways of thinking—like how groups are run—and new fields—like online fan participation and health issues after a pandemic. Clusters of configurations and their temporal coloration were interpreted to provide substantive insights into the evolving trajectories of research. The classical management constructs were foregrounded less and less over the years, eventually giving way to digitalization, well-being, and ethical stewardship. Provenance of data, analytical parameters, and settings for visualization are explicitly documented to emphasize methodological rigor for reproducibility and comparative analyses. As such, this bibliometric study lays a base reference for further probes into the dynamics of sport management research.

Results

Based on the patterns observed in the co-occurrence network, each thematic cluster was assigned a descriptive label that best reflects its constituent keywords and underlying research focus; the complete list of cluster names along with their representative terms and thematic summaries is provided in table 1.

Table 1. *Summary of thematic clusters in the sport management co-occurrence network*

Cluster Color	Cluster Name	Representative Keywords	Primary Themes
Red	Consumer Behavior & Marketing	satisfaction; model; loyalty; identification; service quality; social media; sponsorship.	- Fan engagement and loyalty models - Branding, sponsorship, and service-quality in sport - Consumer decision-making and purchasing intentions - Digital marketing and social media analytics
Green	Health, Exercise & Performance	exercise; performance; health; obesity; strength; physical activity; COVID-19.	- Athlete well-being and performance optimization (e.g., biomechanics, recovery) - Public health concerns (e.g., obesity, mental health) - Sport science integration (e.g., nutrition) - Crisis impacts on athlete welfare (e.g., COVID-19)
Blue	Governance, Organizations & Leadership	management; organizations; governance; leadership; innovation; community; ethics.	- Organizational structures and strategic decision-making - Policy formation and regulatory oversight - Innovation in sport organizations - Ethical governance and stakeholder engagement
Yellow	Social Participation & Inclusion	gender; diversity; inclusion; women; experiences; power; barriers; students.	- Equity, access, and representation in sport (e.g., gender equity, disability) - Community sport for social integration - Cultural and experiential aspects - Lived experiences of underrepresented groups
Purple	Sustainability & Sport Tourism	sustainability; tourism; legacy; mega-events; economic impact; CSR.	- Environmental impact and legacy planning for sport events - Economic and social consequences of sport tourism - Corporate social responsibility (CSR) - Stakeholder collaboration for long-term community development

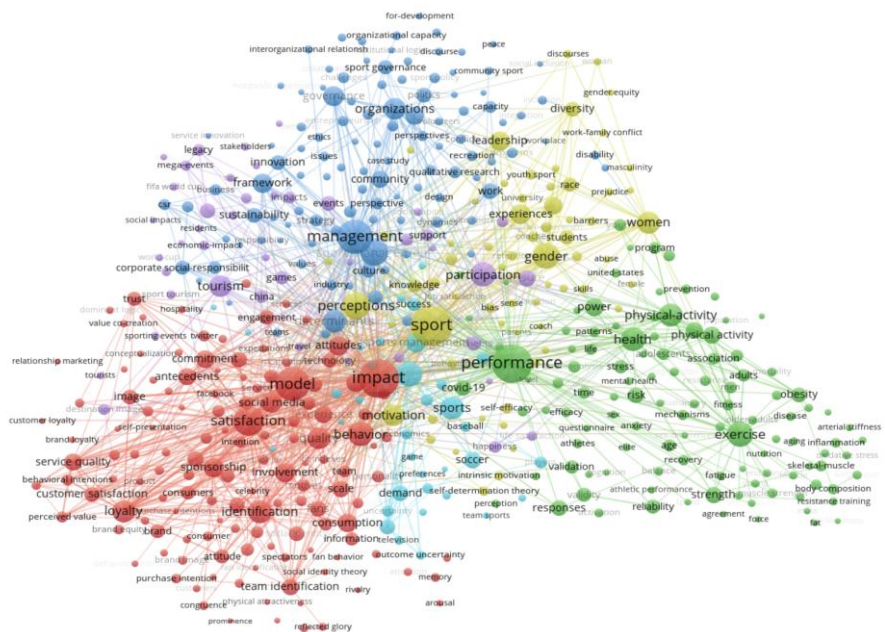


Figure 1. Mapping the multifaceted landscape of sport management: insights from a bibliometric co-occurrence network

The co-occurrence mapping (Figure 1) shows the thematic division into different colors. In the lower-left quadrant, the red one covers consumer behavior and marketing in sport with such main nodes as “satisfaction,” “model,” “identification,” “loyalty,” and “service quality.” Since

these keywords are very tightly linked, it indicates that for a long time, the majority of the sport management literature has focused on describing how fans and spectators relate to teams and brands. The terms that come next, like “social media,” “sponsorship” and “consumer” add to this analytical, partnership-forming approach in this area. Thus, the density of red nodes implies that consumer-centric marketing studies remain somewhat foundational as a hub from which other thematic strands radiate.

At the right-hand side of the map, a green cluster shows articles mostly on health, exercise, and performance. Prominent terms like “exercise,” “performance,” “health,” “physical activity,” “obesity,” and “strength” indicate an interface between sport management concerns and sports science/public health aspects. A node labeled as “COVID-19” acts as a bridge connecting this green cluster with the blue and yellow clusters. It means that pandemic-related studies lead to further inquiries about athlete wellness, mental wellness, and organizational strength. The somewhat tight-knit green nodes present topics ranging from “biomechanics” to “recovery” to “nutrition” to “mental health”, reflecting the recent emphasis on athlete welfare as well as holistic management of sports programs.

Toward the top and more central sampling diversity of the field. Anchoring this blue cluster is scholarship on organizational structures, policies, and strategic decision-making in sport organizations with “management,” “organizations,” “governance,” “leadership,” and “innovation.” Above and slightly to the right is social equity, access, and lived experience research captured by keywords such as “gender,” “diversity,” “inclusion,” “experiences,” and “women” in the yellow cluster. The purple cluster on the left reflects interest in environmental, economic, and social impacts of large sporting event footprints—around nodes like sustainability mega-events tourism legacy economic-impact. Increased attention to long-term planning and ethical responsibility is indicated by the inclusion of nodes such as ‘framework’ and ‘corporate social responsibility (CSR)’. These clusters together demonstrate that sport management research no longer sits in silos; it spans consumer behavior, health sciences, organizational governance, social justice issues, sustainability—in fact several key nodes like impact perceptions are acting as bridges between these domains.

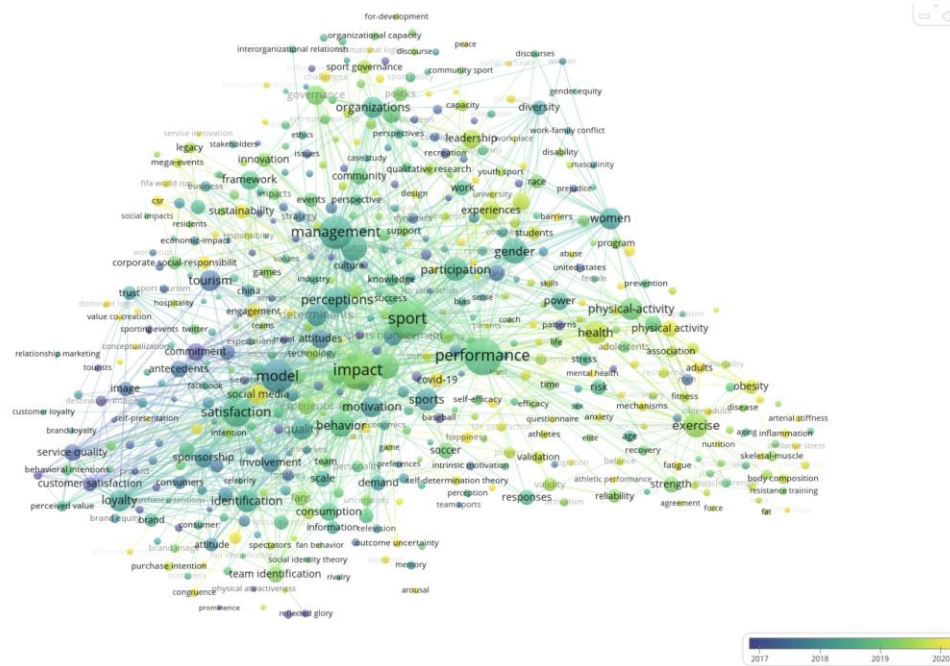


Figure 2. Evolving priorities in sport management research: temporal shifts from marketing to health, governance, and sustainability

The overlay visualization (Figure 2) shows that marketing-oriented themes — “model,” “satisfaction,” and “loyalty” in the lower-left quadrant — are represented by cool colors (2017–2018), saying they were more important in earlier years. On the right, keywords related to athlete wellness and performance — “exercise,” “health,” “obesity,” and “strength” — move toward middle-range colors (2018–2019), indicating increasing research interest in physical activity and sports science beginning around 2018. At the same time, a separate node for “COVID-19” appears with a bright yellow color (2020) highlighting the very quick scholarly attention to impacts of the pandemic on sports and also signaling it as a trigger for new research on recovery by organizations plus support for athletes.

The thematic cluster of organizational governance and social dimensions—encompassing such nodes as “governance,” “leadership,” “diversity,” and “gender”—presents hues ranging from mid-tones to warmer hues (2018–2020). It signals that further explorations into the structures of governance as well as aspects related to equity and inclusion have heightened in recent periods. The other one is sustainability and tourism-related terms (“sustainability,” “tourism,” “mega-events,” “CSR”), which also show very warm colors (2019–2020) reflecting more recent interest in environmental impacts and legacy planning as important topics in sport management. In general, the overlay map presents a very neat temporal progression: established marketing frameworks gave way to health and performance research, which more recently has been joined by governance issues, social dimensions, and sustainability concerns—increasingly highlighted through COVID-19.

Discussion and conclusions

The temporal dynamic and thematic evolution captured in our co-occurrence analysis highlight the very dynamism of sport management scholarship. The early prominence of terms

in marketing such as “model,” “satisfaction,” and “loyalty” confirm that the foundational research was inclined toward consumer behavior and sponsorship frameworks. A further shift to athlete welfare and performance, signaled by words such as “exercise,” “health,” and “obesity” speaks to how responsive the discipline is to public health concerns with respect to holistic development for athletes. Governance, inclusion, and sustainability have taken hold most recently as demonstrated by keywords like governance, diversity, gender, sustainability. This indicates how sport management has broadened its focus to more normative aspects related to ethical, social, and environmental dimensions of organizational practices. Finally, this same network shows a clear node on COVID-19 illustrating how global crises can impel rapid scholarly attention on issues of resilience and adaptive management strategies.

These findings are of great importance because they show that the study of sport management adapts itself continuously to the changing needs of society and the changes taking place in the industry. This adaptation is initially based on mainstream management theories; however, the developing literature tends more toward providing conceptual frameworks specific to sport that include fan culture, community impacts, and stakeholder collaboration. Mapping these shifts provides empirical evidence for the claim that sport management must integrate consumer behavior, sports science, organizational governance, and social justice perspectives to address the complexity of modern sport organizations. Such empirical evidence illustrates how the field has matured from narrowly focused marketing inquiries to an interdisciplinary, ethically oriented agenda.

From a conceptual view, spotting different but connected groups shows the need for joint frameworks that bring together ideas from marketing, athlete care, rules, and sustainability. Such frameworks can guide more complete models of how well organizations perform and their social effects in sports settings. This asks those involved in sports management to use business plans that balance making money with taking care of athletes, welcoming the community, and protecting nature. Since sports businesses function within complex sociocultural and economic landscapes, leaders must adopt holistic approaches to change rather than stick to narrow traditional ways.

Future studies will take a look at the various mechanisms through which these emerging themes interact in actual practice. A good follow-up of qualitative studies would include an exploration of how governance reforms can incorporate diversity and sustainability programs at the organizational level. Comparative analyses, on the other hand, would be helpful in shedding light on regional differences in technological advancements and digital inclusivity practices. Longitudinal case studies will reveal how much theoretical development is actually implemented as continuous organizational change and trickle-down benefits to society—capturing these paths, the field sharpens its conceptual borders while enhancing its role in directing sport organizations toward fairer, more robust, and greener futures.

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