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Sport Tourism Competitiveness: A Systematic Review of Relevant Literature From 2012 to 2022

Abstract

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Sport tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry worldwide and has received increasing attention from scholars in the last decades. In this context, literature reviews have been written analysing various aspects, including factors influencing sport tourism competitiveness. However, sport tourism competitiveness in general has not been reviewed to date. This paper applies a systematic literature review to research sport tourism competitiveness articles published in the Scopus database from 2012 to 2022. It was found that quantitative studies are prevalent with the survey as the main method. Additionally, the multidisciplinary character of sport tourism studies has been confirmed, with developing economies, especially China, being the most researched territories. Winter sports as an activity and its impacts continues to be the most researched among scholars, nevertheless, our research revealed that water sports are also of interest, and active sports practised in natural environments in general had more attention than sport events. Finally, we observed that the use of the concept of sport tourism is still problematic and requires further clarity.

Keywords: Sport tourism, systematic literature review, competitiveness, research methods, research methodologies

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Introduction

This systematic review is focused on sport tourism competitiveness (STC) which is justified for the following reasons. Firstly, sport tourism has experienced significant growth in the last decades (Daniels & Tichaawa, 2021; Happ, 2021; Jiménez-García et al., 2020, UNWTO, 2024b). Secondly, it has developed as a field of knowledge (Pigeassou et al., 2003), and has attracted a growing interest within the academic realm for more than 20 years reflected in the high number of works in reliable scientific databases (Gibson, 2017: 153), as noted by Cronjé & du Plessis (2020: 256), it 'becomes very important to continuously research tourism destination competitiveness as well as to have an understanding of the current research thereof', especially due to the changing nature of competitiveness and why it happens. Although there are several literature reviews, not only about sport tourism in general (Arici et al., 2023; Cheng et al., 2023; Weed, 2006, 2009), but also about analysing the role of sport events (Bazzanella et al., 2023), or researching the literature of sport tourism and sustainability (Jiménez-García et al., 2020) as well as researching sport tourism collaboration literature (Mollah et al., 2021), and even a literature review about sport tourism and the factors to measure competitiveness (Happ, 2021). However, to date, no one has focused on STC in general. The main aim of this article is to investigate the trends (methods, journals, territories involved, authors, type of tourism activities, and conceptual/ theoretical approaches) and gaps regarding STC to date, as well as to shed some light on possible future research. To achieve these objectives, we have deployed a systematic literature review, with a clear set of objectives, transparent and reproducible approach to minimise bias (Booth et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2022) focused on one of the most reliable scientific databases (Scopus). To reach the goals, we have researched what methods and methodologies are prevalent in the field. In addition, we have analysed what journals are involved in publishing STC and the scope of these. Also, we have reviewed the territories under analysis, the authorship characteristics, the typologies of sport tourism activities, and whether the researcher has made use of one of the main conceptualisations in the field (sport tourism versus sports tourism) or not. The article starts with the conceptual background, investigating tourism competitiveness and sport tourism literature to date. After that, we present the employed method, including the inclusion-exclusion criteria. Then, the results are displayed, followed by the discussion. Finally, we close the article with the conclusions and limitations.

Conceptual background

Tourism competitiveness

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines tourism as 'a social, cultural economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes' (UNWTO, 2024a). According to the UNWTO barometer, in 2023 1.286 million of international tourists were estimated, and the tourism direct gross domestic product (GDP) estimation was of USD 3.3 trillion in 2023 (3% of global GDP), and further projected the pre-pandemic levels of international tourist flows will be reached in 2024. On the other hand, considering the different world areas, there was an important re-bounce of the demand in general, although with differences. While the Middle East surpassed its pre-pandemic levels, Europe, Africa, and America recovered between 96% and 90% of their pre-pandemic levels, whereas Asia and Pacific reached only 65% of their pre-pandemic figures (UNWTO, 2024c). Following the Cambridge Dictionary (2024a), competitiveness is described as 'the ability of a business, a country, or a person to compete', while 'compete' is 'to try to be more successful than someone or something else'. The term competitiveness, in the context of industrial firms, was first employed by Porter (1980) but started to be implemented in tourism with Poon (1993)

as noted by Cronjé & du Plessis (2020). In this context, destination competitiveness can be defined as ‘the ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important by tourists’ (Dwyer & Kim, 2003: 369). It is significant for a tourism destination because it allows the territory to position itself in the world tourism market and maintain a competitive advantage (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020). Many studies about tourism competitiveness have focused on measuring it, developing models and identifying factors (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020). However, very often the methodology applied has been quantitative because it has been perceived as more accurate and precise by academics, whereas tourist opinions and perceptions as well as key stakeholders’ surveys employed qualitative methods (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020). More specifically, Happ (2021) analysed the literature about factors influencing STC and found that intangible or ‘soft’ factors (e.g. image) are important to differentiate from other destinations, while ‘hard’ factors (e.g. price and infrastructure) are key to attracting groups of sport tourists. Moreover, there are multiple, - distinct factors in every destination that are key for competitiveness, suggesting that ‘destinations more strongly reflect on factors affecting their competitiveness while considering their given unique selling proposition’ Happ (2021: 77). Additionally, she noted that the majority of the models to measure competitiveness were based on the book of Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and most of the literature reviewed was related to winter destinations.

Sport tourism

According to the UNWTO (2024b) ‘sport tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors in tourism’ with an increasing number of tourists ‘interested in sport activities during their trips whether sports are the main objective of travel or not’. The UNWTO also affirms that it ‘has an estimated growth rate of 17.5% between 2023-2030 moving masses intra and intercontinentally’ and adds that sport tourism generates ‘around 10% of the world’s expenditure on tourism’. Although it is a relatively new tourism market, it is widely accepted amongst academics that the roots and origin of sport tourism in Western countries can be found in the earliest Greek Olympic Games (Weed & Bull, 2009). On the other hand, mass participation in sport has different cultural and political roots and influences depending on the territory, as noted by Houlihan (2010). Nonetheless, the beginning of the past century can be considered a point of inflection, due to the technological, cultural and political changes worldwide that promoted mass sports by different organisations among the population, with different objectives (Murray, 2003), increasing the profile of participants (e.g. people with disabilities, elderly). At the same time, leisure behaviours have changed over time, with participation in sport activities during the holidays an increasing trend worldwide (Higham, 2021) since the end of the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Weed, 2020). Regarding the conceptualisation of sport tourism, there is some consensus about its origin in the United Kingdom during the 1960s (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017). However, due to the complexity of the concept, different academics have articulated a range of definitions (Van Rheenen et al., 2017; Weed, 2009, 2015), resulting in deep discussions amongst academics concerning the limits, categories, and terminology (Weed, 2009).

First conceptualisations attempted to define sport tourism linking sports and holidays, but excluding commercial reasons (Hall, 1992, cited in Hinch & Higham (2001)). These reasons were included afterward by Standeven & De Knop (1999), adding the dimensions of active and passive involvement in sport. On the other hand, Gibson’s (1998) conceptualisation included nostalgia (or heritage as Ramshaw & Gammon, (2005) noted later) as a motive, including, event, active and nostalgia sport tourism categories, being one of the most employed definitions by academics (Hinch et al., 2014). While Weed & Bull (2009) pointed out that sport tourism was more a behaviour than a motivation or purpose, which can be experienced vicariously, it was also questioned whether the concept should be ‘sports’ (plural) tourism instead of ‘sport’ tourism (Gibson, 2017). Consequently, one of the most important issues in sport tourism has been the debate about its definition and the conceptualisation, being two main concepts: ‘sport tourism’ or ‘sports tourism’, the main matter of discussion (Gibson, 1998; Weed, 2009). As observed by Weed (2009: 618) ‘for some time it appeared that there was no conceptual reasoning underpinning the use of terminology (...) This interchangeable use of terminology continued for some time, with many authors indiscriminately using a range of terms in single papers’. Apart from what Weed (2009) called the ‘core concepts’ in sport tourism, nowadays the field accumulates a high number of scientific documents and citations that reflect the efforts made by the scholars in the area as noted by Gibson (2017), integrating concepts from different areas of knowledge such as sociology, geography, anthropology, marketing, social psychology, feminist theory, etc. Thus, there has been a surge in literature reviews about specific dimensions of sport tourism. Arici et al. (2023: 1) published a recent bibliometric analysis identifying four clusters ‘(1) sport tourist behaviours, (2) sustainable and economic development, (3) sport events and destination image, and (4) active-sport-event travel career progression.’, and called for more research about climate change, especially related to winter destinations, the role of sport events regarding climate change and sustainability. On the other hand, Cheng et al. (2023) observed, amongst others, that there is a ‘multidisciplinary integration’ in the field, confirming Gibson’s (2017) statement. Also, they noted that discussions about the core concepts are ongoing. Additionally, they found that nostalgia/ heritage sport tourism research and risk perceptions research are in the research agenda. Also, sport events’ development as well as the sustainable development of sport tourism in general are topics of interest. Bazzanella et al. (2023) focused their literature review on the role of sport events, while Jiménez-García et al. (2020) wrote a review of sport tourism and sustainability, and Mollah et al. (2021) analysed sport tourism collaboration literature.

Method

A systematic review of the literature is deployed in this research paper. The systematic review of the literature is a method that attempts to collect and contrast pieces of literature using pre-established criteria, in an explicit and systematic process to minimise bias (Booth et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2022). Following Higgins et al (2022), a systematic review should have the following key characteristics: 1) a clearly stated set of objectives with pre-defined eligibility criteria for studies; 2) an explicit,

reproducible methodology; 3) a systematic search that attempts to identify all studies that would meet the eligibility criteria; 4) an assessment of the validity of the findings of the included studies; 5) a systematic presentation, and synthesis, of the characteristics and findings of the included studies. Regarding the first point, the main objective of this review is to collate high quality research related to STC from 2012 to date (01/12/22), with the aim of finding trends and gaps in the field of study. Secondary objectives include various aspects such as: (1) an investigation about methodologies employed (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), (2) research about the typology of sport tourism used on each paper (e.g. active, events, etc.), (3) the geographical focus of the research, (4) the authorship characteristics, (5) type of sport tourism activities researched and (6) investigate the conceptualisation of sport tourism. Concerning the second and third key characteristics, we have searched articles in the Scopus database, using the following keywords: ‘sport OR outdoor’ AND ‘tourism* OR leisure’ AND ‘competitiveness’. Regarding the validity of the findings of the selected studies, we have carefully read each paper to ensure the quality of the research and the findings. Finally, we present the findings systematically, synthesizing the main characteristics in both, tables, and figures, to simplify the task of reading and to provide clarity.

Inclusion-exclusion criteria

The motives to include or exclude studies in a systematic review are important as noted by Pickering and Byrne (2014). The first stage was to search the Scopus database using the keywords mentioned in the previous section, obtaining 83 articles (see Figure 1 below).

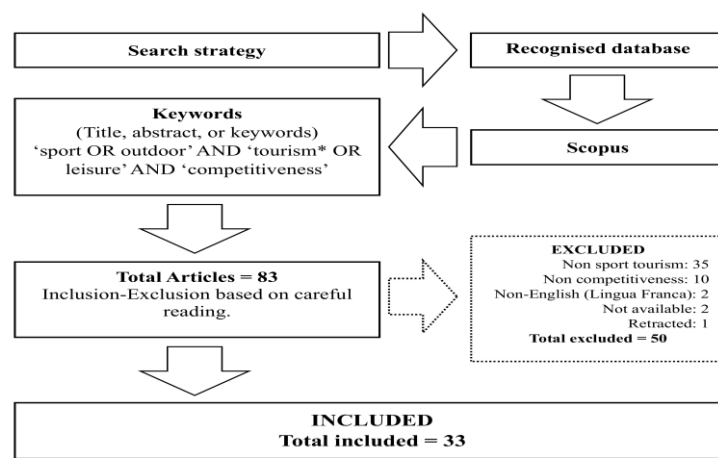


Figure 1: Inclusion-exclusion criteria

Then, an individual reading of the abstracts was done, rejecting non-English articles (2). Additionally, those ones that were not specifically related to sport tourism and destination competitiveness were also eliminated (45). From these 45 rejected articles, 35 were ‘non sport tourism related’ while 10 were found ‘non competitiveness related’. Also, 2 articles were rejected because they were not available at the time of the collection. The last one, to complete the sum of 50 not included articles, was a retracted article with issues and concerns about the research. On the other hand, the article about the construction of a health destination index model (Lee & Li, 2019) was kept because the results showed the importance of STC in such destinations. In total, 33 articles (39,8%) have been selected to be reviewed. The chosen articles started from 2012 to 2022, giving us a sample of 11 years of research, as shown in Figure 2.

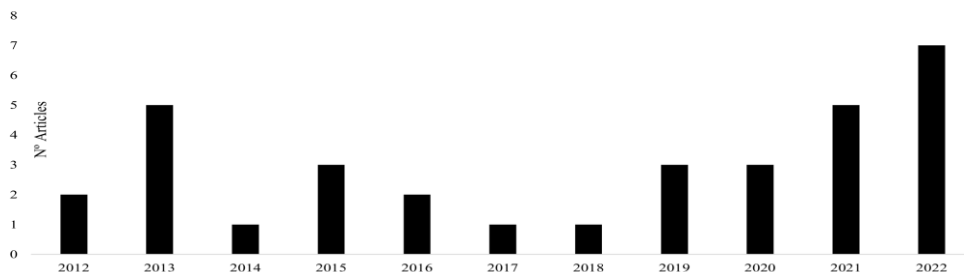


Figure 2: Included articles related to STC

Results

This section is structured into six subsections. Firstly, we have analysed what type of method, and the methodology employed in each article, either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, to try to capture their epistemic nature. Secondly, we have detailed the specific journals in which these papers have been published to determine if there is any publication dedicated to STC, and what is the predominant field of knowledge. Thirdly, the geographical focus of every article was examined to ascertain which territories were of interest to the researchers. Fourthly, the authorship characteristics, including author quantity, author productivity and the impact of the papers have been evaluated to search for experts and the most important works in STC.

Fifthly, the type of sport tourism has been explored, distinguishing between a variety of typologies ranging from event, winter, active, etc. To conclude, the use of the concept sport tourism or sports tourism has been analysed, since these two paradigms coexist and seem important to explore if there is one or another prevalent in the specific area of STC.

Methods and methodologies

Research methods are a group of tools and techniques for doing research (Chakraborty, 2020; Walliman, 2011) that are ‘informed by an approach which is applied in a research inquiry’ (Chakraborty, 2020: 12) while methodology ‘is concerned with the framework within which particular methods are appraised’. Thus both, method, and methodology, are closely related since the researcher positions itself within a particular methodology and framework when choosing one method or another. In fact, the methodology ‘deals with the broader question of ‘how we know what we know’ and is somewhat close in meaning to what we understand as epistemology’ Chakraborty (2020: 12). Therefore, it is possible to obtain valuable information about the epistemological position of the researcher and, in a broader sense, in the context of a particular field of study. Considering the current literature review, we have found a wide variety of tools applied (see Table 1), with the survey instrument being the most popular, followed by the case study and the exploratory analysis. The construction of a competitiveness index model was also a prevalent technique among the researchers.

Table 1: Methods employed

Method	Total	%
Survey instrument	7	21,21%
Case study	6	18,18%
Exploratory analysis	6	18,18%
Index model construction	5	15,15%
Delphi	2	6,06%
Principal component analysis	2	6,06%
Factor analysis	1	3,03%
Fuzzy analysis	1	3,03%
Invisible statistical logic computer independent judgement	1	3,03%
Literature review	1	3,03%
Theoretical framework	1	3,03%
Total	33	100%

As mentioned in the section ‘results’, distinctions were made between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies, which are also intrinsically related to the method utilized and mentioned by the authors in each article. More than half of the articles applied a quantitative methodology, while one-third of them employed a qualitative methodology, and the rest, less than a fifth, were articles that applied a mixed methodology (see Table 2).

Table 2: Methodologies applied

Methodology	Total	%
Quantitative	17	54,52%
Qualitative	10	30,30%
Mixed	6	18,18%

Journals

Regarding the journal, there is a wide range of publications that publish STC papers (see Table 3), remarkably, the Information Technology Journal, and Wireless Communication and Mobile Computing (which have no clear or direct connection with sport or tourism areas) have published two articles both, which can provide us with an idea about the importance of new technologies in sport tourism. On the other hand, the Journal of Coastal Research distributed another two articles, that show that journals focused on environmental issues are interested in the topic.

Table 3: Journals involved in STC research

Journal	Articles
Information Technology Journal	2
Journal of Coastal Research	2
Journal of Sport & Tourism	2
Tourism Analysis	2
Wireless Communications and Mobile Computing	2
African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	1
City, Culture and Society	1
Current Issues in Tourism	1
Economy of Region	1
European Urban and Regional Studies	1
Frontiers in Sports and Active Living	1
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	1
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	1
International Journal of Simulation: Systems, Science and Technology	1
International Journal of Tourism Research	1
Investigaciones Turísticas	1
Journal of Applied Sciences	1
Journal of Chemical and Pharmaceutical Research	1
Journal of Destination Marketing and Management	1
Journal of Global Sport Management	1
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	1
Mathematical Problems in Engineering	1
Ponte	1
Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	1
Sustainability (Switzerland)	1
Tourism Planning and Development	1
Tourism Review	1

Water (Switzerland)	1
Total	33

Moreover, considering the academic area of interest and the scope of each journal (see Table 4), journals devoted to tourism studies dominate with more than a third of the total. Interestingly, information technologies (IT) journals are positioned after them. This fact could be a consequence of the importance of these technologies in everyday life not only in tourism (Buhalis et al., 2023) but also in sport with new typologies of sports highly dependent on them, and growing in importance (Kim et al., 2020).

Table 4. Academic areas and scope of interest of journals involved in STC publications

Academic areas and scope	Articles	%
Tourism	12	36,36%
IT	5	15,15%
Environmental	4	12,12%
Multidisciplinary	3	9,09%
Health	2	6,06%
Sport	2	6,06%
Sport & Tourism	2	6,06%
Economics	1	3,03%
Geography	1	3,03%
Mathematics	1	3,03%
Total	33	100%

Geographical focus

Another important question that needs to be answered, is where the focus of the research is situated, as these territories can indicate where there is more interest and concern about the competitiveness of sport tourism. On the other hand, some articles studied more than one country, therefore, we have created a weighted index to obtain a more balanced picture. For those ones that have only one country under scrutiny we have assigned one point, while for the articles where a few countries were studied, that point was divided by the number of countries under study. For instance, the work of Ruiz et al. (2019) researched the World Cups of Germany, South Africa, Brazil, Russia and Qatar, therefore, each of these countries obtained 0,20 points.

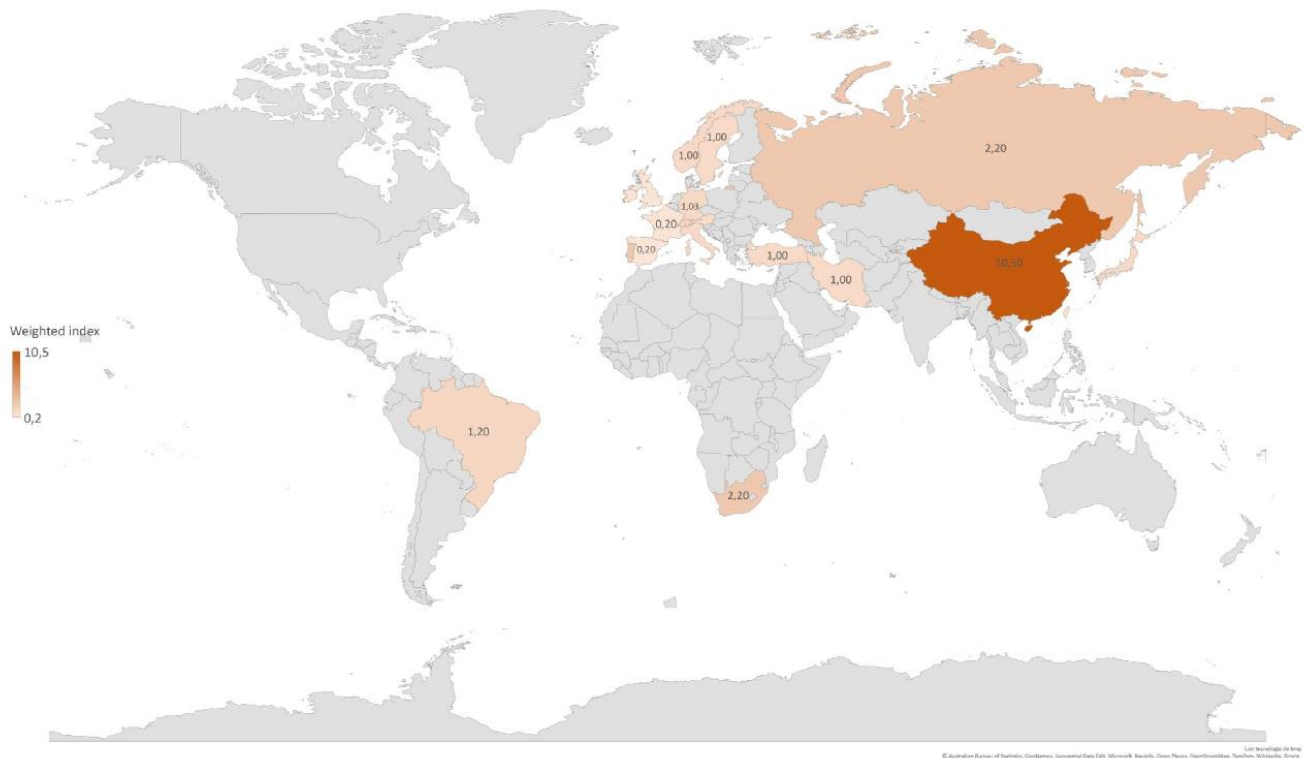


Figure 3. Geographical focus of STC articles.

As shown in Figure 3, most of the research, almost a third, is concentrated in China (11 articles, one of them shared with Taiwan). Then, in second position are Portugal with 3 articles (one article shared with 4 countries, including Spain, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom) together with Russia, also with another 3 articles (one of the articles shared with 4 other countries: Germany, South Africa, Brazil and Qatar) and South Africa also with 3 articles (one shared, already mentioned). The only continent (excluding Antarctica) not included is Oceania, although the vast majority is concentrated in Asia and Europe.

Authorship characteristics

Analysing the author quantity of our sample, in total 74 unique authors were identified as contributing to the improvement of STC. Only eleven authors published more than one article: Two German authors signed three articles together (Hallmann, K. and Müller S.) two of them with Feiler, S. also German. Apart from them, Moradi E.; Ehsani M.; Saffari M.; Norouzi Seyed Hosseini R., from Iran, wrote two articles, as well as Martín-González R.; Swart K.; Luque-Gil A.M., (Spanish and South African authors) who did the same number of articles focused on surf tourism in South Africa. On average, the sample brings a figure of more than 2 authors (2,2) per article. More than half of the articles (17) exceed this number, with nine papers counting three authors, six articles with four authors, and another two articles counting five and six respectively, as shown in Figure 4.

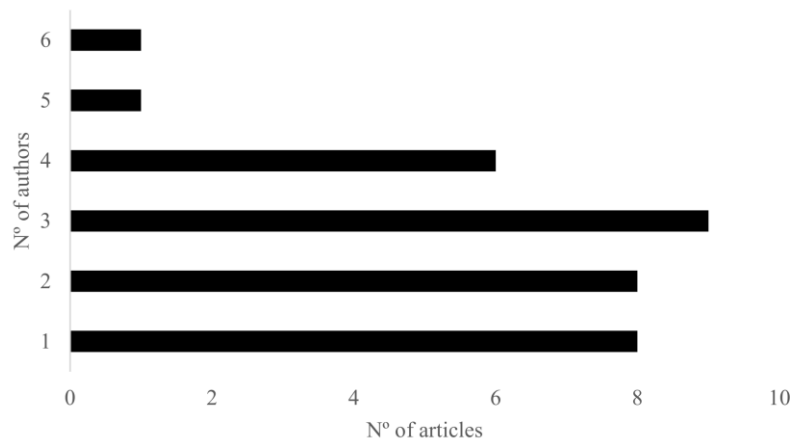


Figure 4. Number of authors per article

Another important figure is the number of citations. We found that the articles were cited 319 times in total. The average was 9,7 times per article, although seven articles had no citations (five articles were published and analysed after its publication in 2022, so it seems that it was too early for them to be cited). The most cited article was written by Alberti & Giusti (2012), on the topic, nostalgia motor sport tourism in Modena (Italy), which had 82 citations by the date of the analysis (early 2023). Then, Hallmann et al. (2014) obtained 32 citations analysing the perception of winter sport tourists and destination competitiveness by comparing three destinations in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The third most cited article (28 citations) was published by Dickson et al. (2017) who explored the connection between destination competitiveness and event legacies in the context of parasports. Thereafter, four articles devoted to winter sports occupied the fourth (Sato et al., 2018), fifth (Hallmann et al., 2012), sixth (Miragaia & Martins, 2015) and seventh (Hauge & Power, 2013) positions with 25, 24, 20 and 17 citations respectively. To close the top ten most cited articles, the eighth position (16 citations) is occupied by the article written by Lee & Li (2019), researching health tourism, highlighting the role of sport as a key element for health tourism competitiveness. Then, another two articles researching winter sports are positioned in ninth (Erbas, 2016) and tenth (Hallmann et al., 2015) positions with 16, 14 and 10 citations respectively. After these papers, the rest have a citation count below 10.

Type of sport tourism activities

The type of activity researched is also a key matter of concern in sport tourism studies as it shows the importance of the different sport tourism activities within the academy. For counting the type of sport tourism activities, we have constructed a weighted index, as we have done in the Geographical focus section, since some articles were devoted to a single activity, while others focused the research on a variety. Most of the studies were focused on winter sports (e.g. ski and more broadly on snow-based tourism) or on water sports (e.g. boating, fishing or surfing), concentrating almost half of the total of the sample (see Table 5). These two were followed closely by the studies focused on sport events, which has been a common and very popular topic from the beginning of the field of the sport tourism studies. It is also worth noting that many of the studies did not specify any type of activity, with the majority focused on the construction of STC index models, apart from a literature review.

Table 5: Type of sport tourism activities researched

Sport tourism activities	Nº	%
Not indicated	9	27%
Water sports	8	24%
Winter sports	8	24%
Sport events	7	21%
Active	0,5	2%
Adventure	0,5	2%

Winter sports have been very popular amongst sport tourism academics (Happ, 2021) as noted in the previous section, with the highest number of citations too, which indicates the importance of this sport tourism activity. The sport events studied were football (2) with the FIFA World Cup as the focus of these research items. In this vein, Kochetkov et al. (2021: 1138) conducted research related to the 'significance of the World Cup for the city' which through place branding should 'encourage people around the world' and 'foreign investors' to both, spend a vacation and invest in Ekaterinburg businesses, since it was a host

city in the 2018 FIFA World Cup. They deployed a case study using a SWOT analysis to enhance the competitiveness of the city, after the mega-event. On the other hand, Ruiz et al. (2019) analysed the impact and legacies of the FIFA World Cup hosted in five different countries (Germany, South Africa, Brazil, Russia and Qatar) and how these impacts and legacies could have modified the economic and destination image competitiveness. Andersson & Getz (2020) analysed the portfolio of a variety of sport events (cross-country run, Nordic ski, half marathon run, open-water swim, and road cycling) to research the contribution of those participants who are (highly) involved in these sport events to the competitiveness of Sweden as a sport tourism destination. In addition to the aforementioned studies about sport events, it is important to highlight the article of Dickson et al. (2017) who evaluated the competitiveness of disability sport events, as well as the work of Alberti & Giusti (2012) that researched the role of motor sport companies and the cluster around them, in the competitiveness of Modena as a host for the Formula One championships using the heritage/ nostalgia sport tourism typology as a framework for its study.

Sport tourism or sports tourism?

In our sample, we found that most of the studies have employed ‘sports tourism’ (see Table 6), which seems to be interesting, not only from an epistemological point of view, but also for checking if one or another is prevalent, since it has been argued that ‘sport tourism’ has been hegemonic in the sport tourism field of study (Hinch et al., 2014).

Table 6: Sport tourism versus sports tourism

Conceptualisation	Total	%
Sport tourism	8	24,24%
Sports tourism	17	51,52%
Not indicated	8	24,24%

Thus, these results shows that Weed’s conceptualisation is more popular amongst academics, although there is no significant difference in terms of epistemological positions as there is no explanation about its use within the articles studied when looking at the existence of a definition of the term. Only 39,4% (13 articles) included a detailed definition, while the rest (60,6%; 20 articles) did not include any. Moreover, the article by Happ (2021) is an example of the confusion of both terms. Happ includes the term ‘sport tourism’ in the keywords, although employs ‘sports tourism’ in the body of the paper. Also, sometimes she uses the formula ‘sport/sports tourism’, without any clarification about why she has been using them in that way. In another vein, in some of those articles where there was a lack of sport tourism conceptualisation, it was possible to find different conceptualisations depending on the activity under study, in line with the assertion of Hinch et al. (2014) about using a definition according to the context of the study. As an example, Shi (2022: 2) proposes the following definition:

Sports tourism is a new cross-industry phenomenon characterized by dual characteristics that have emerged as a result of the merging of the tourist and sports industries. In this way, visitors can take part in sports tournaments, visit sporting sites, and participate in a wide range of fitness and sports activities, as well as entertainment and adventure activities, while on the road.

Similarly, Andersson & Getz (2020) use the concept of ‘serious sport tourism’ (although not giving an exact definition), while Wang (2020) defines ‘marine sports tourism’.

Discussion

One of the main questions that a literature review answers is whether the researched field of knowledge has reached maturity. Maturity is reached when it has progressed from a ‘stage where most of the research is exploratory, to a more advanced stage where quantitative studies are conducted, best practices are identified, and prescriptive information is disseminated’ (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016: 930). In this sense, we found that the methods employed showed a certain degree of maturity in the field of knowledge, with a literature review analysing the construction of index models. The survey instrument (quantitative studies) was the most employed method with just one work proposing a theoretical framework, which is a sign of certain progress in a field of knowledge. On the other hand, there are still a considerable number of exploratory analyses, which seems to be an indication of the lack of development in the field. Moreover, the majority of the works proposed different ways of constructing index models due to the lack of a uniform method. Regarding the journals where STC has been published, we found that there was not a single journal devoted to the topic, and the maximum number of articles published in a single journal was only 2, comprising five journals. Nonetheless, considering the scope and the academic areas of interest of the journals, tourism was the most important academic area of interest, followed by IT journals, which is consistent with the trend that the focus was primarily on tourism research. On the other hand, although the area of tourism was the most involved in STC publications, only one journal (Tourism Analysis) scored 2 articles, while two IT journals repeated the topic during the eleven-year lapse. The focus on STC shown by IT journals can be a sign of the importance of the field for one of the most important aspects of contemporary tourism, which has been impacted and disrupted by these technologies (Buhalis et al., 2023). After IT journals, environmental journals scored 4 articles, headed by the Journal of Coastal Research with 2 articles. This interest from environmental journals is consistent with the results obtained in the type of sport tourism activities since those activities performed in natural environments (coasts and mountains) are the most researched. Furthermore, these results are consistent not only with the data obtained by Happ (2021) about winter destinations, but also with Cheng et al. (2023) and Gibson (2017) about the multidisciplinary character of sport tourism.

The majority of the research outputs have been focused on China, moreover, when looking at the whole picture, it is possible to see that the members of the BRICS+ (see BBC News, 2024) represented in the sample (Brazil, Russia, China, South Africa and Iran) concentrate more than the half of the research outputs. The interest shown in STC in BRICS countries by academics could be attributed to the political aspect of sport, since 'governments in regimes of every type have shown a new willingness to invest and intervene in sport directly, steer and develop sport policy' (Grix, 2012: 4). On the other hand, members of the European Union (EU) are also well represented with almost a quarter of the total, moreover, if we sum up the rest of European countries, they agglutinate more than the 25% of the sample. These results are consistent with the previous assertion about the link of sport and politics, as the EU sport policies with the European Sport Charter are well known (Hartmann-Tews, 2006). We have evaluated the author quantity, author productivity and the impact of the papers. The relatively high number of unique authors compared to the publications analysed indicates that there are no experts in the field. Additionally, the findings showed that the authorship is relatively dispersed as the 15% (11 authors) of them published more than one article, and only three authors (4%) published three. These results seem to indicate that the area is not developed enough, since it does not have a stable set of experts (Keathley-Herring et al., 2016). Regarding the impact of the papers, it seems important to highlight, the work of Albertini & Giusti (2012), and also the significance of having an expert on events in the list like Donald Getz. The results depicted a majority of studies focused on sport activities practised in natural environments, with almost 50% of the articles, showing the importance of such sport tourism activities over the sport events. This interest seems to be a trend, that could be caused by the increasing importance amongst the population of travelling to practice sport in natural environments (Melo et al., 2020). Additionally, it is important to remark on the balance between the number of winter and water sports articles within the group of sport activities practised in natural environments. These results could indicate a shift in sport tourism studies where most studies used to be about sport events (see Weed, 2006). The shift in consumer behaviour (Higham, 2021), together with the post COVID-19 trend (Weed, 2020), can have some influence on this increasing interest in studying active sport tourism activities. Sport events were under study in seven articles; it is interesting to highlight the focus on the FIFA World Cup by two of them with Russia in both studies. Additionally, parasports are present and motor sport events with a high impact. Within the sample under study we found a considerable number (almost 25%) of articles without the conceptualisation of sport tourism or sports tourism, although the majority included one or another concept. Most of the articles used the term 'sports tourism' although without clarifying why, including the literature review of Happ (2021) that makes use of both in the same article, reinforcing the statement of Weed (2009) who criticised the confusion about its use. On the other hand, amongst those that included the terms, only half added a detailed definition to clarify it, which was most of the times constructed by the authors, so they constructed a definition that could suit the aim of the research, as suggested by Hinch et al. (2014).

Conclusions and limitations

This literature review has attempted to answer some questions; first, we wanted to clarify the extent to which STC was important in the context of sport tourism studies. In this vein, we found a considerable number of studies to review in the Scopus database, which was selected due to its importance. Our search retrieved 83 research outputs, and after a refinement, we selected 33 articles from 2012 until 2022. Close to half of the articles (15) were published in the three last years of the sample (2020, 2021, and 2022), with a growing trend (3, 5 and 7 articles respectively), which could be a sign of the increasing interest among the academic realms. Second, we wished to know what methodologies and methods have been used, and which of them are prevalent to understand if the field has reached a level of maturity or not. In this regard, we found that the quantitative methodology was the most used one, with the survey as the favourite method. Nevertheless, almost a quarter of the papers made use of exploratory analysis, which is a sign of a lack of maturity of the field, so we cannot affirm that STC is mature enough yet. Future research should be focused on qualitative or mixed methods, which should enrich the field. Regarding the journals, there is a wide variety of journals interested in the topic, although not one has been revealed as a specialist in the area. However, when looking at the scope and area of knowledge, tourism and IT stand out. Also, the multidisciplinary character of STC has been revealed, which is consistent with previous studies in sport tourism reviews (Cheng et al., 2023) and with the statement of Gibson (2017). Therefore, future research is expected to continue in the same line. The geographical focus has discovered that countries belonging to the BRICS+ group are more interested than others in STC; furthermore, it seems to be closely interrelated to the mega-events organised there previously. Although it is unclear if this interest could be a matter of destination image, economic development, or if they are interested in boosting sport participation. Thus, further investigation about these topics within these countries is expected, and highly recommended.

Authorship characteristics analysis retrieved a considerable number of unique authors, which gives the impression that there is not a stable set of experts in STC. Nonetheless, some authors (especially those who are experts on winter destinations) are highly cited, so further research about this aspect is strongly recommended too. When talking about the type of sport tourism activities, it seems interesting to highlight that half of the articles studied active sport tourism activities practised in natural environments, not only in winter destinations (in line with the results obtained by Happ (2021)) but also about water sports. Thus, researchers may explore these activities with more emphasis in future studies. Moreover, it would be valuable if more research is done about water sports since winter destinations have already been studied in detail. The conceptualisation of sport tourism was also a matter of research, here we found that the use of the concept is still problematic we noted that 'sports tourism' was used more often, although many times was not justified or conceptualised, and some articles mixed both sport tourism and sports tourism. Maybe, the adoption of the sports tourism concept by the UNWTO is behind this use, but we cannot assure this assertion. Finally, we want to close the article with the limitations of the study, which are several. First, we analysed only the Scopus database. Future research should include other databases (e.g. Web of Science). Second, non-English articles were excluded, so there is a window for analysing them. Third, books, book chapters and grey literature were not included too,

therefore there is another opportunity for future research. Fourth, we followed a systematic literature review, although we did not use any software or artificial intelligence tool to analyse the large amount of data. Fifth, we have overlooked theories and frameworks, so there is a field to explore. Sixth, the geographical origin of the authors and their affiliation (universities, departments, etc.) is of interest (Tribe & Liburd, 2016) and should be reviewed in-depth for future research.

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