

Impact and development of sport sponsorship: a three-decade bibliometric analysis (1993–2024)

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to provide a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of sports sponsorship research over the last 3 decades (1993–2024). By mapping the intellectual landscape of this field, the study seeks to identify key trends, prominent themes and the most influential authors and journals. Furthermore, the research addresses the ongoing challenge of evaluating the effectiveness of sponsorship investments, particularly in the digital age. The goal is to highlight emerging research areas.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employs a bibliometric analysis using the SPAR-4-SLR protocol to systematically review the literature on sports sponsorship from 1993 to 2024. Data were sourced from the Web of Science (WoS) database, filtering results for articles written in English and excluding non-academic publications. A combination of bibliometric techniques – co-citation, co-word and co-authorship network analysis – was applied to examine intellectual structures and trends in the field. The Bibliometrix software was used for data analysis, providing a comprehensive evaluation of research productivity, collaboration patterns and emerging themes.

Findings – The bibliometric analysis reveals a significant increase in global sports sponsorship research, with a 12.69% annual growth rate from 1993 to 2024. Key themes such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumer behaviour and government regulation emerged as central topics. The study also highlights growing research interest in digital sponsorships, particularly within the eSports industry. Additionally, co-authorship analysis demonstrates increasing international collaboration, with 30.2% of publications involving multiple countries. The findings provide a clearer understanding of the intellectual landscape of sports sponsorship and suggest emerging research opportunities, particularly in digital marketing and advanced data analytics.

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Research limitations/implications – The analysis relies solely on the WoS database, which may have excluded relevant publications indexed in other databases such as Scopus or Google Scholar. Although WoS provides high-quality data, future research should integrate multiple databases to achieve a more comprehensive coverage of the field. Additionally, this study focuses primarily on articles published in English, potentially overlooking significant contributions from non-English sources.

Originality/value – This study provides a unique contribution by conducting the first comprehensive bibliometric analysis of sports sponsorship research over a 30-year period (1993–2024). By applying the SPAR-4-SLR protocol, it identifies emerging research areas such as the integration of big data and the role of psychophysiological methods in measuring sponsorship effectiveness. The research also highlights the increasing importance of digital sponsorship in industries like eSports. This work offers new insights into global collaboration patterns and reveals underexplored topics like the balance between global and local sponsorship strategies, thus providing valuable directions for future research and practical applications.

Keywords Marketing strategies, Sponsorship, Sport sponsorship, Bibliometric analysis, Bibliometrix

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Sports sponsorship is a multidimensional concept that has gained relevance in the field of marketing and corporate communication. It refers to the financial, material and human support and collaboration between a company and a sports entity, such as an event, athlete or sports association (Meenaghan, 1991). Sports sponsorship is an activity investment, in cash or in kind, in exchange for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity (Meenaghan, 1991). In the context of sport, sponsorship is more than just a commercial transaction. It is an indirect marketing strategy that focuses on specific target groups, enabling effective communication and increasing the visibility of the message (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Koronios *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of sponsorship goes beyond simple promotion, seeking to establish an intimate connection with consumers, enhance brand image (Chavanat *et al.*, 2009; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), increase loyalty (Bee and Havitz, 2010) and ultimately sales (Ko *et al.*, 2008; Madrigal, 2000).

In the context of sport sponsorship, Gammelsæter's (2021) reflection on the need to reorient sport management towards a more sport-focused approach, rather than merely treating it as an industry, is crucial. This is particularly relevant for sport sponsorship, where the balance between commercial objectives and the true spirit of sport must be carefully managed to promote the benefits of sport in a sustainable and defensible manner. In the sports industry, sponsorships play a decisive role as a primary source of revenue for sports franchises. According to data from Statista (2024), the global sports sponsorship market was valued at around USD97.35 billion in 2023 and is estimated to reach USD190 billion by 2030. Specifically, the “signage” sponsorship modality, which facilitates the display of logos and messages at sporting events, stands out as the most profitable. Geographically, North America contributed more than one-third of global sports sponsorship revenues in 2024, with the NFL and NBA being key pillars of this contribution. It is worth noting that emblematic franchises such as the Dallas Cowboys boasted a brand value of USD10 billion in 2024 (Forbes, 2024a), while in the soccer arena and on the European continent, Real Madrid was the most valuable brand with USD6.6 billion (Forbes, 2024b). In parallel with conventional sports sponsorship, the eSports (electronic sports) sector is undergoing significant expansion, with revenues expected to exceed USD1.87 billion by 2025 and an audience of 550 million mobile viewers. In addition, a high percentage of eSports enthusiasts perceive sponsorships as vital to the financing of events. Thus, sponsorships not only represent a highly profitable and interesting marketing tool, but, according to 2024 global surveys, they are widely supported by fans, who believe they reinforce the social relevance of companies and boost the appeal of brands.

The rise of sponsorship, compared to traditional marketing communication methods, has been especially notable in sports (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Koronios *et al.*, 2022; Rumpf and Breuer, 2018). However, despite the increase in investments, considerable challenges persist in measuring its effectiveness and return on investment (ROI) (Koronios *et al.*, 2022; Rumpf and Breuer, 2018). There is a growing demand for accurate measurement tools, evidence-based perspectives, and innovative approaches to assess the impact of sponsorship from both

quantitative and qualitative perspectives (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Koronios *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, the current literature reflects a gap in the in-depth understanding of how sponsorship operates within the context of sports media and how viewers actually process sponsor-related information (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Rumpf and Breuer, 2018). The obstacles associated with current measurement techniques, together with the limited empirical validation of existing strategies, underscore the complexity of the topic and evidence the urgency to improve the transparency and accountability in sponsorship investments (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Koronios *et al.*, 2022). Sport sponsorship has not only grown in importance as a vital form of marketing communication (Koronios *et al.*, 2022), but also faces crucial challenges in terms of understanding and measuring its impact on consumer behaviour and financial performance (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Rumpf and Breuer, 2018). To this end, new means for the realisation of sports sponsorship have emerged thanks to digital environments (Koronios and Dimitropoulos, 2020), such as on websites (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016), in-game games (Hickman, 2020), or eSports (Giakoni *et al.*, 2022). In addition, new methodologies have appeared to evaluate the effectiveness of sports sponsorship through the use of psychophysiological or neuroscience techniques such as eye-tracking (Alonso Dos Santos *et al.*, 2019, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2024; Oboudi *et al.*, 2023), EEG – electroencephalogram (Lee *et al.*, 2020) or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Martin *et al.*, 2019).

Sports sponsorship, with its growing relevance and interdisciplinary nature, deserves a detailed analysis on the topics already investigated and possible future areas of study. This understanding will help marketers to design more effective sponsorship strategies. The literature reflects a boom in research related to sports sponsorship. However, given the increasing number of articles published each year, it becomes complex to keep up to date in this field. Faced with this challenge, our study seeks to provide academics and marketing experts with a clearer view of the world of sports sponsorship. In addition, we aim to identify emerging areas of research with potential to enrich the existing knowledge base. Building on previous research, we have decided to map the literature on sports sponsorship. To do so, we analysed the participation of various countries, organisations, authors, journals and key terms, using the Bibliometrix package tool. The present study will address the following research questions (RQ) related to performance analysis:

- RQ1. What is the performance (productivity and impact) of the most relevant authors and journals in the field of sport sponsorship?
- RQ2. What have been the intellectual interactions and structural connections of authors and topics in the field of sports sponsorship?
- RQ3. What are the future lines of research?

By answering these questions, this study will help scholars and marketing experts understand sports sponsorship and identify future research directions. The article is structured as follows: First, the methodology and research design are detailed. Next, the findings are discussed. Finally, the contributions and main limitations of the study are highlighted.

Methods

Regarding the research design, the present study was based on a bibliometric approach to examine the literature in the domain of “Sport Sponsorship”. According to Donthu *et al.* (2021), a bibliometric analysis is a scientific method that relies on bibliometric data, statistical techniques, and specialised tools in order to analyse academic production. Although there are various methods to review literature, as pointed out by Paul *et al.* (2021), the bibliometric methodology employed in this work was selected because of its objectivity and broad scope, especially for its ability to handle extensive amounts of data and to discover patterns that are not easily discernible by other literature review techniques (Kraus *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, a bibliometric analysis of the literature was considered appropriate for several reasons: (1) when at least 40 papers have been published in an area of study; (2) when there are no recent literature reviews to date (at least within the last five years); and (3) if previous reviews exist, they have not been published in high-quality journals (Paul and Criado, 2020). Regarding the review protocol, there are currently several recognised processes for conducting systematic literature reviews, such as PRISMA (Moher *et al.*, 2009) or PRISMA-P (Moher *et al.*, 2015). However, for this study, we chose to use a more recent protocol, the SPAR-4-SLR (Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews Protocol). This protocol is one of the most current tools for systematic reviews and was constructed by synthesising the most widely used methods in the field of bibliometric analysis (Paul *et al.*, 2021). The decision to use SPAR-4-SLR was based on several factors. Firstly, while PRISMA and its updated version in 2020 (Page *et al.*, 2021) are well-established and comprehensive, they are primarily designed for health sciences and clinical research, potentially lacking specificity for bibliometric analysis. Secondly, SPAR-4-SLR offers a more tailored approach to the nuances of bibliometric data, addressing specific methodological gaps identified in PRISMA, such as the integration of co-citation, co-word, and co-authorship analyses, which are crucial for our study's objectives. Therefore, SPAR-4-SLR provides a robust framework that aligns more closely with the goals of our systematic review, enhancing the precision and relevance of our findings in the context of sports sponsorship research.

In order to deeply understand the predominant connections and themes in the field, several bibliometric techniques were applied to analyse the selected records. Specifically, co-citation analysis, co-word analysis and co-authorship networks were applied in this study.

Data collection

Exhaustive searches were carried out in the main collection of Web of Science (WoS) by Clarivate, recognised as the most recommended and reliable international bibliometric database (Casado-Aranda *et al.*, 2023; Hammerschmidt *et al.*, 2024).

In this study, the Web of Science (WoS) database was selected as the primary source due to its global recognition as one of the most reliable and rigorous platforms for bibliometric analyses in disciplines such as marketing and psychology. WoS offers highly selective curation based on quality criteria that ensure the inclusion of publications in high-impact indexed journals (Casado-Aranda *et al.*, 2023; Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018). In comparison, while widely used, Google Scholar has significant limitations due to its inclusion of non-peer-reviewed materials, such as thesis, books, and grey literature, which can compromise data quality and consistency (Halevi *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, although Scimago uses metrics derived from Scopus, previous studies have highlighted that WoS tends to provide more stable and homogeneous metrics for longitudinal analyses and allows greater traceability in impact indicators (Mariani *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, WoS is widely recognised for its compatibility with specific bibliometric tools such as Bibliometrix, which ensures robust and reproducible data analysis (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). These characteristics make WoS the most suitable database for this bibliometric analysis, ensuring an accurate and high-quality representation of the scientific output in sports sponsorship.

The search strategy was defined with the following terms: Topic (search by subject) = (Sport*) AND (Sponsors*). We established a time period from January 1, 1993, to December 31, 2024, and the query was performed on January 1, 2025. To ensure the relevance and pertinence of the retrieved documents, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined. Inclusion: articles had to focus specifically on the domain of sport sponsorship. Only articles written in English were included. Exclusion: records related to letters and book reviews were eliminated, giving priority to original research articles. Conference articles were excluded to preserve the focus on the analysis of journal distribution.

To ensure accuracy and objectivity, two researchers independently conducted the selection of documents, focusing on the title and abstract. The supervision of a third investigator was

implemented to ensure compliance with the previously established criteria. In cases where there were discrepancies between the first two reviewers, an internal discussion was initiated in search of a consensus. If disagreement persisted, the third reviewer intervened to make a final decision, following a process similar to that described by Liu *et al.* (2023). Once the documents were selected and filtered, the data were downloaded in “.bib” (BibTeX) format (Table 1). The analysis was carried out using the Bibliometrix tool (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). This open-source software for quantitative research in scientometrics and bibliometrics is widely recognised for its integration, ease of use, and completeness in the bibliometric field (Casado-Aranda *et al.*, 2023; Calderón-Fajardo *et al.*, 2023; Moral-Muñoz *et al.*, 2020).

An exhaustive search was carried out in the main collection of Web of Science (WoS), resulting in an initial total of 1,373 records. Following the established exclusion criteria, those records that were not English-written were removed, with the specific purpose of mapping the works published in this language. Subsequently, the final sample was consolidated, comprising a total of 851 articles registered in the period between 1993 and 2024. The selection and filtering process is illustrated in Figure 1. The synthesis of the information collected is shown in Table 2.

Analysis and findings

Performance analysis

Applying bibliometric techniques, such as co-citation, co-word, and co-authorship analysis, offers a nuanced understanding of sports sponsorship, enhancing sponsorship effectiveness. Co-citation analysis reveals intellectual structures and central themes, aiding in identifying influential theories. Co-word analysis highlights emerging trends by examining term frequency and co-occurrence in titles, abstracts, and keywords. Co-authorship networks visualise researcher collaborations and knowledge dynamics, fostering new partnerships. These techniques collectively provide a comprehensive perspective to inform effective sponsorship strategies based on field dynamics and trends.

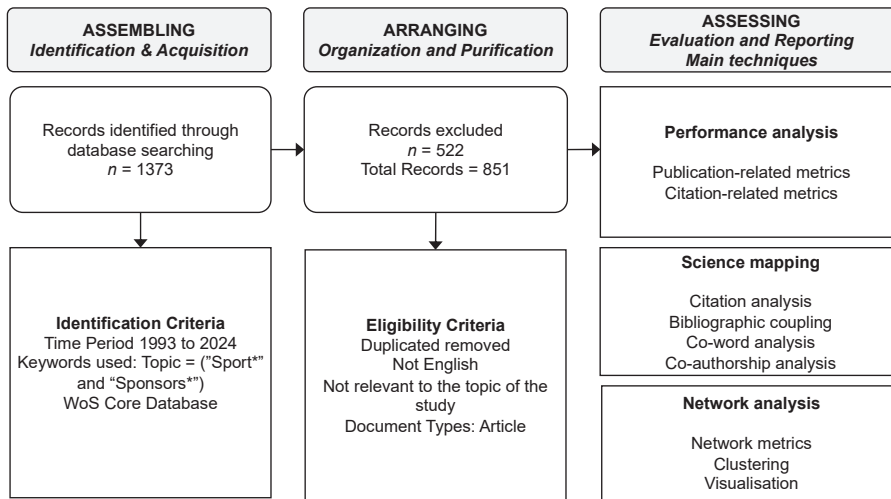
Overview – research trends

According to the scientific production associated with sport sponsorship from 1993 to 2024, the bibliometric analysis indicates that studies in the last decades have increased rapidly with an annual rate of 12.69% (Table 2). During the decades analysed, the academic production reached 851 articles, carried out by 1,598 authors from all over the world. The analysis of the production revealed a high level of co-authorship per paper, as well as a high percentage of

Table 1. Specifications of the analysis

Level of analysis	Metric	Unit of analysis	Bibliometric technique	Structure
Source	Journal impact and leading journals	Journal	Co-citation	Conceptual
Authors	Most influential authors and evolution per year	Authors	Co-citation	Intellectual
Countries	Inter-country collaborations and dominant countries	Countries	Co-citation	Social
Documents	Key documents and citation trends	Documents	Co-citation	Intellectual
References	Recurring references and collaboration	References	Co-citation	Intellectual and social
Keyword	Emerging and dominant terms	Keywords and references	Co-cite and co-word	Conceptual

Source(s): Adapted from Aria and Cuccurullo (2017)



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Data collection flow diagram and techniques

Table 2. Main information of the scientific database

Description	Results
Timespan	1993:2024
Sources (journals, books, etc.)	198
Documents	851
Annual growth rate %	12.69
Document average age	8.13
Average citations per document	19.37
Keywords plus (ID)	1,176
Author's keywords (DE)	2047
Authors	1,598
Authors of single-authored docs	127
Single-authored docs	142
Co-authors per doc	2.66
International co-authorships %	30.2

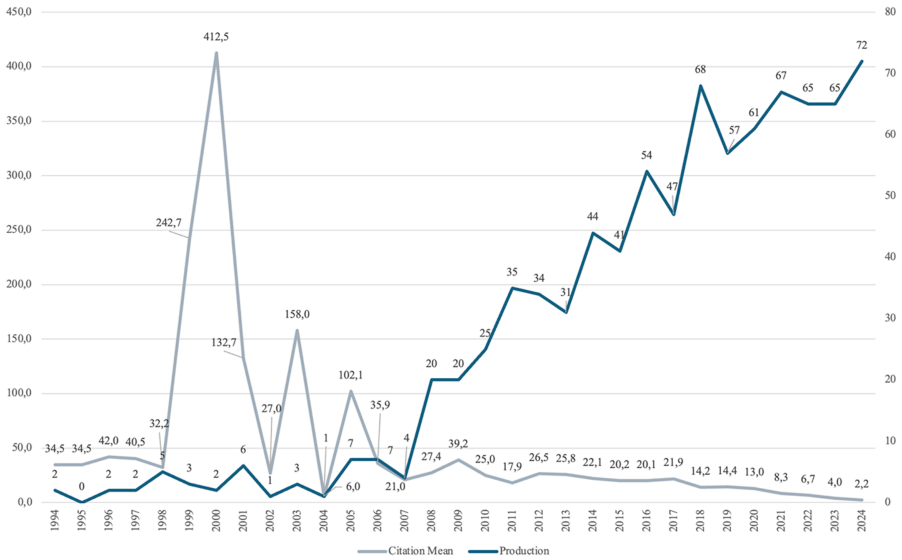
Source(s): Authors' own work

international collaboration (30.2%), which evidences the importance and global trend of the subject of study, Figure 2 shows a sustained increase in the number of annual publications (production) on sport sponsorship research from 1993 to 2024, with a notable rise beginning in 2008.

Most relevant sources and authors

In relation to the sources analysed, the most productive journals are shown in Table 3. It can be seen that in the last thirty years the number of articles published in the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship* and the *Journal of Sport Management* has been exceptionally high, with 134 (15.75%) and 59 (6.93%) papers published respectively.

With regard to local citation sources, i.e. how many times a document from a collection is cited by documents from the same collection, we see that four of the journals analysed were



Source(s): Authors' own work

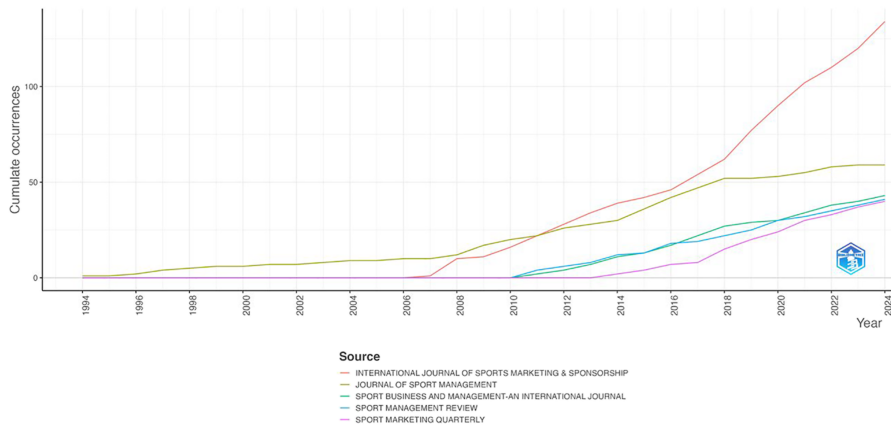
Figure 2. Evolution in the number of articles on sports sponsorship research and citations (1993–2024)

Table 3. Top ten productive journals in sport sponsorship

Sources	Articles	%
<i>International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship</i>	134	15.75
<i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	59	6.93
<i>Sport Business and Management-An International Journal</i>	43	5.05
<i>Sport Management Review</i>	41	4.82
<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	40	4.70
<i>European Sport Management Quarterly</i>	34	4.00
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	23	2.70
<i>Sport in Society</i>	20	2.35
<i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	19	2.23
<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>	17	2.00

Source(s): Authors' own work

cited more than 50 times. Regarding the local impact of the source by H index, the following journals stand out: *Journal of Sport Management* ($H = 26$), *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship* ($H = 21$), *Sport Management Review* ($H = 20$), *European Sport Management Quarterly* ($H = 16$), *Journal of Business Research* ($H = 16$), *European Journal of Marketing* ($H = 13$) and *Psychology and Marketing* ($H = 13$). These figures highlight the quality and influence of the papers published in these journals, as well as their significant contribution to the field of Sport Sponsorship. Figure 3 illustrates the growth trend in the number of articles published in the five most productive journals. The sustained increase in the number of publications over the years is remarkable. Particularly, the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship* has experienced a significant increase in its contributions since 2007, consolidating its position as a leader in the field of Sport Sponsorship.

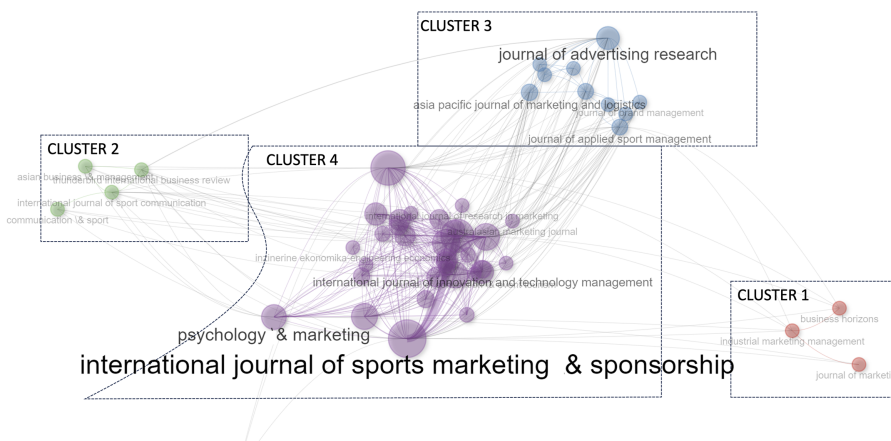


Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 3. Cumulative occurrences of publications in key journals on sports sponsorship research (1993–2024)

Regarding the author-level analysis, Cornwell holds the highest position with 19 publications, 1,001 total citations, and an *H*-index of 16. Jensen ranks second with 26 publications, 389 total citations, and an *H*-index of 11, followed by Breuer, who has 18 publications, 364 total citations, and an *H*-index of 10.

To explore the interactions and bibliographic connections in the field of sports marketing and sponsorship, co-citation analysis was used through the “cluster by coupling” technique. This technique, as proposed by Kessler (1963), enables the graphical representation of co-citations between sets of works. Specifically, it suggests that two papers can be closely correlated if they share at least one bibliographic reference, even if they do not directly cite each other. In our analysis, two clusters were discovered in the co-citation network (see Figure 4).



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 4. Co-citation network of key journals in sports sponsorship research

Country collaboration, production, and citation

To detect the nations with the highest levels of production, an analysis of social networks of cooperation, national and international collaboration, productivity, and citation networks was conducted. Figure 5 shows the collaboration network among the top 30 countries: node size indicates collaboration level (larger nodes mean greater collaboration), and connection thickness reflects the number of collaborations (thicker connections mean more collaborations). The United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) show the most collaboration, with the UK collaborating with 47 countries and the USA with 44. The most frequent collaborations were between the USA and UK, and the UK and Australia, with 86 and 60 articles respectively.

The results indicate that, while the USA leads in total citations with 6,120, the Australia ranks first in average citations per article with 35.60. This suggests that, although the USA has a higher overall volume, articles from the Netherlands tend to be cited more frequently (Smith, 2018). Australia, with fewer total citations than the USA, surpasses it in average citations per article at 23.90, indicating potentially higher quality or relevance (Smith, 2018). China shows the lowest average, with 13 citations per article, possibly due to the relatively recent growth of its research output and differences in publication practices (Li and Wu, 2017). English-speaking countries such as the USA, Australia, and the United Kingdom dominate the citation landscape, reflecting the prevalence of English as the academic lingua franca (Taylor and Chen, 2011). However, non-English-speaking countries like Germany and Greece also make notable contributions (Martínez *et al.*, 2015) (see Table 4).

Most relevant contributions

Since recent publications tend to have fewer citations, we identified the most influential sport sponsorship articles by considering the average citations per year, calculated by dividing global citations (GC) by the number of years since publication (Casado-Aranda *et al.*, 2023). This approach reduces bias from newer articles that may initially accumulate citations but might not have a lasting impact. We focused on articles with at least five years of citation data. Local citations (LC) represent the total citations each article received within the analysed dataset of 851 studies. The LC/GC ratio indicates an article's impact within sport sponsorship research; a high ratio demonstrates significant influence within the field, while a low ratio suggests a broader impact beyond the selected publications.

Several articles with high average citations per year concentrate on advertising, sponsorship, and marketing practices in sports and health contexts (see Table 5). Among these, Speed and Thompson (2000) are particularly notable, achieving 22.35 citations per year. Their work provides foundational insights into the determinants of sports sponsorship

Table 4. Most cited countries

Country	Total citations	Average article citations
USA	6,120	23.90
Australia	3,420	35.60
United Kingdom	1,098	21.10
Germany	893	16.50
Canada	818	16.00
Greece	387	17.60
Korea	347	9.90
Ireland	319	31.90
China	312	13.00
France	310	17.20

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 5. Highly cited publications in sport sponsorship and most local cited documents

Ranking	Publication	Global citations	Average citation per year	Ratio local citations/global citations (%)
1	Speed and Thompson (2000) . Determinants of sports sponsorship response. <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , 28(2), 226–238	581	22.35	27.02
2	Gwinner and Eaton (1999) . Building brand image through event sponsorship: The role of image transfer. <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , 28(4), 47–57	535	19.81	23.18
3	Madrigal (2001) . Social identity effects in a belief–attitude–intentions hierarchy: Implications for corporate sponsorship. <i>Psychology & Marketing</i> , 18(2), 145–165	267	10.68	33.61
4	Madrigal (2000) . The Influence of Social Alliances with Sports Teams on Intentions to Purchase Corporate Sponsors' Products. <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , 29(4), 13–24	244	9.38	21.72
5	Cornwell et al. (2001) . Exploring managers' perceptions of the impact of sponsorship on brand equity. <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , 30(2), 41–51	202	8.08	39.60
6	Farrelly and Qvester (2005) . Examining important relationship quality constructs of the focal sponsorship exchange. <i>Industrial marketing management</i> , 34(3), 211–219	133	6.33	14.29
7	Olson (2010) . Does sponsorship work in the same way in different sponsorship contexts? <i>European Journal of Marketing</i> , 44(1/2), 180–199	127	7.94	45.67
8	Lardinoit and Derbaix (2001) . Sponsorship and recall of sponsors. <i>Psychology & Marketing</i> , 18(2), 167–190	113	4.52	48.67
9	Cornwell et al. (2005) . The relationship between major-league sports' official sponsorship announcements and the stock prices of sponsoring firms. <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , 33(4), 401–412	111	5.29	32.43
10	Miyazaki and Morgan (2001) . Assessing the market value of sponsoring: Corporate Olympic sponsorships. <i>Journal of Advertising Research</i> , 41(1), 9–15	107	4.28	25.23
11	Woisetschlaeger et al. (2017) . Inferring corporate motives: How deal characteristics shape sponsorship perceptions. <i>Journal of Marketing</i> , 81(5), 121–141	104	11.56	37.50
12	Pappu and Cornwell (2014) . Corporate sponsorship as an image platform: understanding the roles of relationship fit and sponsor–sponsee similarity. <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , 42, 490–510	104	8.67	30.77

Source(s): Authors' own work

response and remains highly relevant for understanding consumer attitudes and sponsorship effectiveness. Similarly, [Gwinner and Eaton \(1999\)](#), with 19.81 citations per year, contribute significantly to understanding image transfer in event sponsorship, emphasising the importance of sponsor-event congruence in shaping brand perceptions. For example,

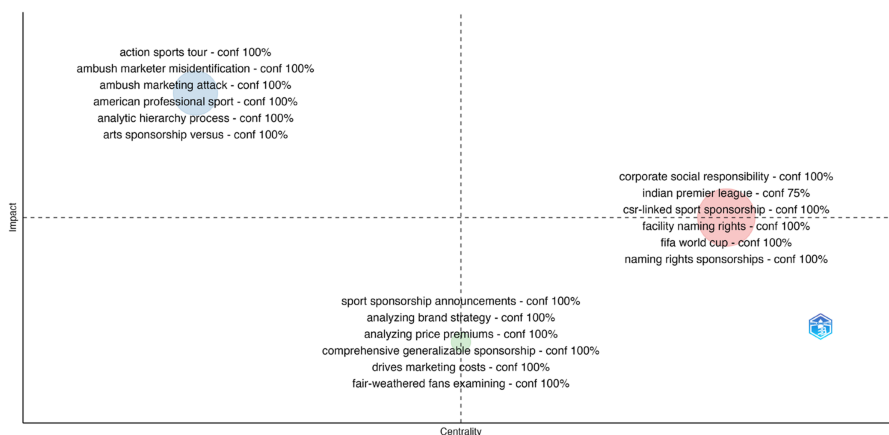
Lardinoit and Derbaix (2001) exhibit the highest LC/GC ratio (48.67%), underscoring their focused impact on sponsor recall and its determinants. Olson (2010), with a ratio of 45.67%, compares the effectiveness of sponsorship in different contexts, offering a key methodological perspective. Cornwell *et al.* (2001), with an LC/GC ratio of 39.60%, explore managers' perceptions of the impact of sponsorship on brand equity. Collectively, these studies address crucial topics such as sponsor recall, image transfer, and corporate motivations, while underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of sponsorship research, integrating insights from marketing, psychology, and business strategy.

The ten most locally cited papers belong to the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Sport Management*, *European Journal of Marketing*, and *Marketing Letters*. Based on document clustering through the Author Coupling method, three main clusters were identified, reflecting differences in centrality, impact, and frequency within sports sponsorship research (Figure 6).

The first cluster (red), focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability-linked sponsorships, is characterised by high centrality and significant impact. This group addresses topics such as sustainability and corporate legitimacy through sponsorship, establishing itself as one of the most influential areas in the discipline. Notable contributions include the works of Breuer and Rumpf (2012), which examine how sponsorships associated with ethical values influence public perception and business strategies. Additionally, studies such as Grohs *et al.* (2015), which explores naming rights, and Madrigal (2001), which focused on high-profile events like the FIFA World Cup, underscore this cluster's practical and theoretical relevance.

The second cluster (blue), centred on ambush marketing and ethical challenges, exhibits moderate frequency but considerable impact due to the growing interest in ethical tensions within sports sponsorship. This cluster includes representative studies such as those by Woisetschlaeger *et al.* (2017) and Meenaghan *et al.* (2013), investigating ambush marketing tactics and their influence on consumer perceptions. Similarly, the works of Cornwell (2008) and Jensen and Cobbs (2014) stand out for analysing how these practices affect the legitimacy of official sponsors, offering strategic and ethical insights into the phenomenon.

The third cluster (green) focuses on brand strategies and cost analyses associated with sponsorship. Although it shows a lower frequency than the other two clusters, its relevance lies



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 6. Cluster by document coupling in sports sponsorship research

in its connection to practical aspects of sponsorship management. Research by [Olson \(2010\)](#) and [Pappu and Cornwell \(2014\)](#) provides valuable insights into how sponsorship affects brand differentiation strategies and consumer perceptions of pricing. Furthermore, studies by [Biscaia et al. \(2013a\)](#) and [Ko et al. \(2008\)](#) delve into how relationships between brands and sports events influence public loyalty, emphasising the importance of this cluster in applied studies and marketing strategies.

Conceptual structure: thematic analysis

Frequency and evolution of themes: wordcloud of keywords. As recommended by [Aria and Cuccurullo \(2017\)](#), before implementing the wordcloud, the keywords used in the initial WoS search for the analysis should be eliminated. In our case, all terms related to sport and sponsorship were removed. This prevents the search terms from affecting the shape of the conceptual structure most used in this line of research. [Figure 7](#) shows the most frequent terms based on the occurrence of keywords used by the authors in the publications after filtering the data.

The word cloud generated from the “Keywords Plus” terms in sports sponsorship research represents this field’s most relevant and frequently addressed thematic areas. The term “impact,” with a frequency of 244, emerges as the most recurrent, highlighting the importance of evaluating the effects of sports sponsorship on key dimensions such as brand performance and consumer perception. Concepts like “identification” (105) and “image” (102) emphasise the focus on emotional connection and the construction of identity between consumers and sponsoring brands, as well as on enhancing corporate image. Terms such as “model” (89) and “determinants” (78) reflect the interest in developing robust theoretical frameworks and identifying the factors that influence sponsorship effectiveness. Similarly, concepts like “intentions” (68) and “loyalty” (60) underscore a central interest in consumer behaviours, particularly purchase intention and loyalty towards sponsoring brands. Related topics such as “congruence” (66), “fit” (51), and “event sponsorship” (40) highlight the importance of strategic alignment between the event and the sponsor, which is critical for a successful partnership. Furthermore, terms associated with corporate social responsibility, such as “corporate social responsibility” (38), and those linked to perception, such as “satisfaction” (41) and “perceptions” (51), reflect the growing interest in how sponsorship initiatives can generate value for both brands and society. This visual analysis highlights the most prominent thematic trends and identifies opportunities for future research, particularly in underexplored domains.

Based on trigrams extracted from titles, the second word cloud emphasises more specific topics related to high-profile sports events and particular sponsorship strategies. Notable examples include terms such as “FIFA World Cup” and “Indian Premier League,” which demonstrate the interest in using these events as key platforms for sponsorship initiatives. Other concepts, such as “brand image transfer” and “CSR-linked sports sponsorship,” underscore how these strategies enhance brand perception and social legitimacy. Additionally, terms like “facility naming rights” and “sport management research” open new opportunities for applied research, particularly regarding sponsorship’s financial and organisational impacts.

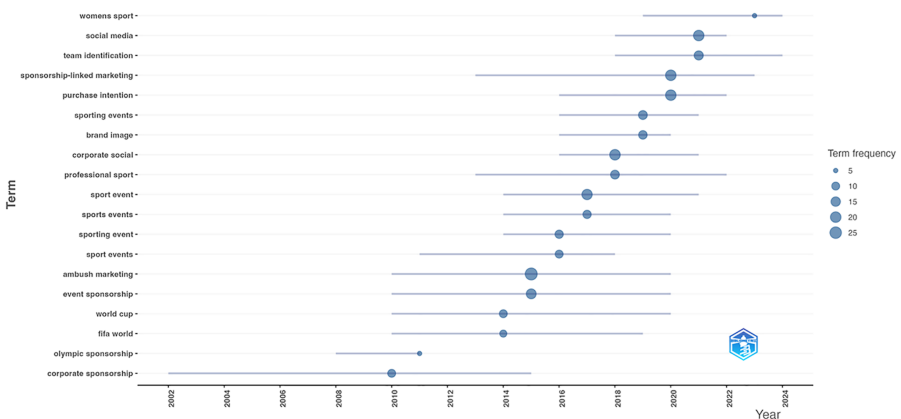
Finally, emerging themes such as “extreme sporting events” and “experiential sponsorship activation” reflect exploring novel areas, including sponsorship in extreme events and implementing innovative activation strategies. Together, these visualisations provide a comprehensive overview that integrates established and emerging sports sponsorship research areas, highlighting theoretical advancements and practical applications. Moreover, they suggest the continuous expansion of the field into topics of increasing social and economic relevance, further consolidating its importance within academic and professional contexts.

Early topics like corporate sponsorship and Olympic sponsorship saw peaks of interest from 2002 to 2010, reflecting their foundational role in understanding sponsorship’s impact on

global events. Themes related to team identification and fan engagement gained prominence starting in 2012 and continued to be relevant through 2021–2022, emphasising the growing focus on the emotional and psychological connections between fans and teams. The digital era brought significant shifts, with themes like social media and esports experiencing rapid growth from 2015 onwards, showcasing the integration of technology and digital platforms into sports marketing. Additionally, contemporary topics such as corporate social responsibility, activation, and purchase intention gained traction post-2016, signalling an increased emphasis on ethical corporate behaviour, consumer behaviour, and advanced sponsorship activation strategies.

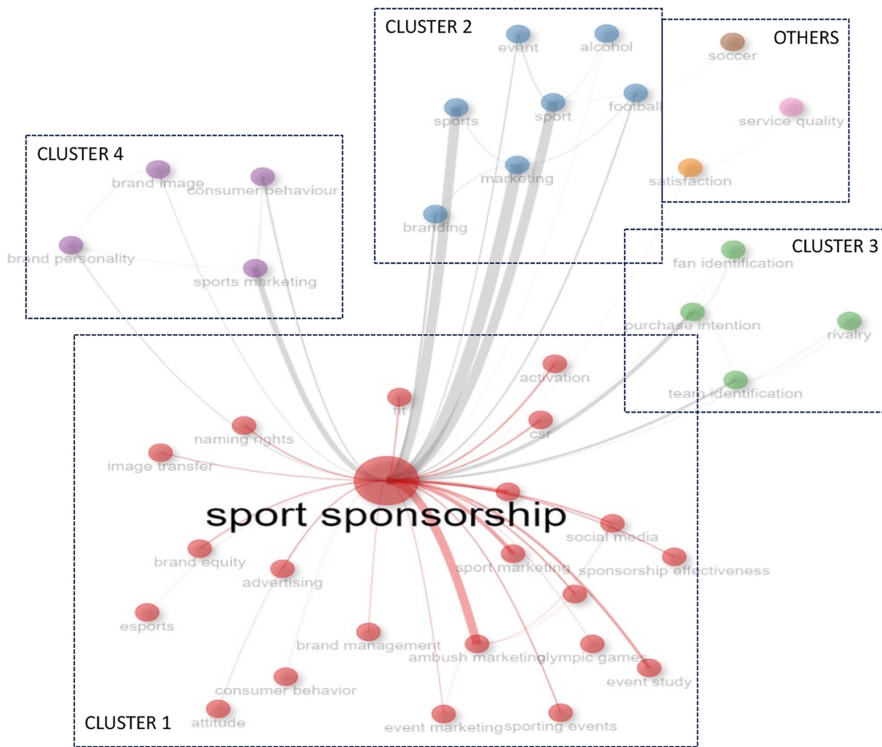
In recent years, research has expanded to include more diverse and emerging topics. For instance, women’s sport has gained visibility since 2020, pointing to a shift toward inclusivity and diversity within sports sponsorship. Simultaneously, studies on fandom and social identity theory in 2022–2023 reflect a deeper exploration of fan identity and community within sports contexts. These evolving trends underscore the dynamic nature of the field, balancing longstanding topics with emerging areas of inquiry, and highlight the growing interplay between technology, corporate responsibility, and consumer engagement in sports sponsorship (Figure 8).

The analysis of keywords co-occurrences reveals a deep interconnection between concepts in the field of sports marketing (Figure 9). In cluster 1, the term “sport sponsorship” stands out for its prominence with a high Betweenness and PageRank, signalling its relevance in the literature. This is complemented by terms such as “ambush marketing” (Burton and Chadwick, 2018; Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Grady, 2023; Meenaghan, 1998), “social media” (Do *et al.*, 2015; Steiner *et al.*, 2023; Weimar *et al.*, 2022) and “corporate social responsibility” (Chen and Lin, 2021; Lacey *et al.*, 2010; McCullough and Trail, 2023), suggesting a discussion around the impact and strategies of sponsorship on digital platforms and their ethical responsibility. Meanwhile, in cluster 2, words such as “sport,” “marketing,” and “football” (Buhler, 2006; Mahmoudian *et al.*, 2023; Thomas, 2018) indicate a focus on traditional sports and their marketing strategies. In addition, cluster 3 highlights aspects related to fan identification, such as “team identification” (Kim and Kim, 2009; Lintumäki and Koll, 2023; Pontes *et al.*, 2021) and “fan identification” (Pepur *et al.*, 2023; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2012), pointing to consumer psychology in the sports context. Finally, other clusters highlight areas such as service quality (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013b), consumer satisfaction (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2017; Duan and Liu, 2021; Foroughi *et al.*, 2023) and specific sports such as



Source(s): Authors’ own work

Figure 8. Temporal evolution of key terms in sports sponsorship research (2006–2024)



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 9. Conceptual structure map of key topics in sports sponsorship research

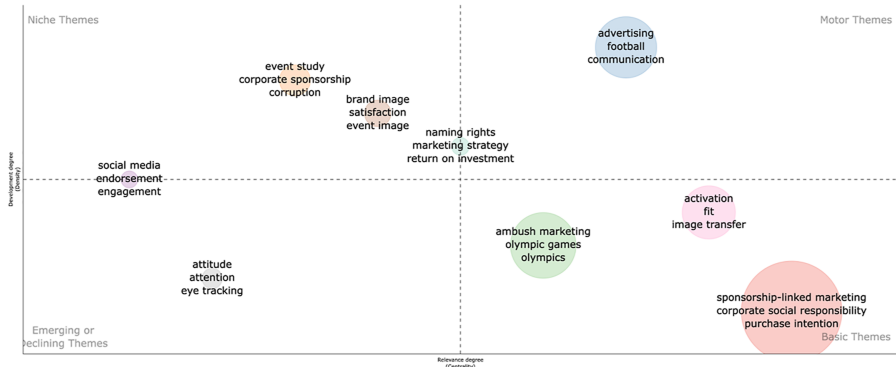
soccer (Chadwick and Thwaites, 2005; Silva, 2022), revealing a diverse range of research topics in the sports marketing domain.

Content analysis: the map of thematic evolution

Following Callon's methodology for thematic maps, centrality and density are used to evaluate the structure and relevance of clusters. Callon Centrality measures the importance of a cluster relative to others, with higher values indicating central themes. On the other hand, Callon Density assesses the internal interconnection of terms within a cluster, where higher values signify well-structured and focused research discussions.

While some themes exhibit lower frequency in the dataset, their centrality often highlights their integrative role in linking broader research areas. For instance, cluster ambush marketing has moderate frequency but strategic centrality, bridging topics related to ethics and competitive strategies. Conversely, themes such as social media and engagement have lower centrality and density, indicating that their discussions remain less interconnected and peripheral while they are emerging.

A thematic map was constructed to analyse research topics in sport sponsorship (Figure 10). This analysis indicates that studies conducted over the past 30 years can be categorised into nine thematic groups, with representative labels including sponsorship-linked marketing, advertising, ambush marketing, social media, event study, brand image, activation, attitude, and naming rights.



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 10. Thematic map of sports sponsorship research topics

The analysis identifies several thematic categories that define the structure and progression of research within the field. Basic topics represent consistently popular and extensively researched areas that are the foundation for advancing knowledge. These themes provide a robust literature base and are fundamental to understanding key concepts. The cluster related to sponsorship-linked marketing exemplifies this category, encompassing terms such as “corporate social responsibility” and “purchase intention.” These topics reflect a growing interest in the ethical dimensions of sponsorship and their influence on consumer behaviour. For instance, [Mazodier et al. \(2018\)](#) examine how sponsorship enhances brand perception through corporate social responsibility, while [Deitz et al. \(2012\)](#) explore its effects on consumer loyalty and ethical perceptions. The high centrality of this cluster underscores its role as a cornerstone of the literature on sports sponsorship.

Driving themes are characterised by high centrality and frequent citations, marking them as the forces propelling contemporary research. These topics often represent dynamic and rapidly expanding areas of inquiry. In this analysis, advertising and communication emerge as pivotal driving themes, reflecting their critical role in shaping the field. [Chien et al. \(2016\)](#) investigate the impact of sports scandals on sponsorship decisions, while [Cornwell et al. \(2014\)](#) analyse how advertising strategies can amplify the benefits of sports sponsorship. These studies highlight how advertising and communication are central to maximising sponsorship effectiveness.

While critical to specific subfields, Niche topics exhibit lower centrality in the broader literature. Their impact and relevance are often confined to specialised areas of study. Examples include event study, corruption, and corporate sponsorship, demonstrating high density but low centrality, indicating a more focused and specialised research interest. For example, [Mazodier et al. \(2018\)](#) analyse the evaluation of sports events and perceptions of corruption in sponsorship, while [Tyler and Cobbs \(2015\)](#) examine how rivalry between events and brands affects sponsorship effectiveness. These contributions underscore the importance of niche topics in advancing disciplinary insights.

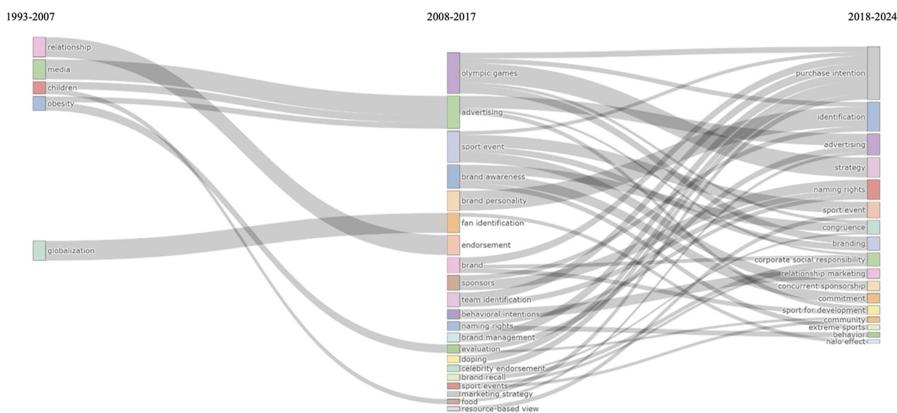
Emerging themes represent nascent areas of research gaining traction and often indicate future trends or growing interests within the field. By contrast, once prominent, declining themes now receive less attention due to shifts in research priorities. The cluster of emerging themes in this analysis includes topics such as attitude, eye tracking, and attention. Although less developed, these areas hold significant potential, mainly through innovative technologies to analyse consumer attention and attitudinal perceptions. For instance, [Oshimi and Harada \(2019\)](#) explore residents' perceptions of sports events, while [Ko et al. \(2016\)](#) use experimental methods to investigate the formation of attitudes towards sponsor brands.

Thematic evolution. A division of the period analysed was made between the years 1993–2007, 2008–2017, and 2017–2024 (Figure 11). The analysis reflects a transition in the field of sponsorship and advertising, from more general topics such as the effect on children to globalisation in the 1990s and early 2000s, to greater specificity and complexity in topics such as Corporate Social Responsibility, fan identification and the role of sporting events in society in later decades. This thematic evolution reflects both changes in global society and consumer expectations as well as emerging trends in academic research. The periods analysed are described in detail below:

Period 1993–2007: we have named it as “sports marketing and society”. In this period, the emerging themes according to the most cited articles were mainly focused on sport sponsorship and its impact on marketing, the demand for sport and the implications of advertising in sport (Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Madrigal, 2000; Speed and Thompson, 2000). Finally, relevant to this period is the analysis of relationships in the marketplace and how these can influence sponsorship decisions (Farrelly and Quester, 2005). This analysis suggests that there was a growing interest in the intersection between sports, marketing and socioeconomic relationships, reflecting the increasing commercialisation of sports and the role of sport in modern society.

Period 2008–2017: we have called this period the Rise of sports marketing, advertising and corporate influence. Specifically, there is growing concern about how gambling advertising and marketing can influence attitudes and behaviours, especially among young people (Hing et al., 2013; Monaghan et al., 2008). It also focuses on studying the effectiveness of sponsorships, especially at sporting events (Lacey et al., 2010; Olson, 2010). This period analyzes how alcohol industry sponsorship may be related to problematic alcohol consumption (O’Brien et al., 2014). Another recurring theme was linked to the study of corporate interests; specifically, the literature sets out a critical exploration of how corporations, especially in the alcohol industry, influence research and policy in areas related to addictions (Casswell, 2013).

Period 2018–2024: era of digital convergence and the responsibility of sports marketing. In this period, there is an interest in the study of online sports advertising and betting, from a public health perspective (Djohari et al., 2019; Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018; McGee, 2020). The influence and consequences of COVID-19 in sport are also analysed (Bowes et al., 2022). A new model of consumer engagement with sponsorship focused on authenticity is proposed (Cornwell, 2019). The influence of sports sponsorship on consumer behaviour is also studied in this period, e. g. the effect on brand equity and purchase behaviour (Tsordia et al.,



Source(s): Authors’ own work

Figure 11. Thematic evolution in sports sponsorship research (1993–2024)

2018), the effect of sponsor-event congruence and its influence on attitudes toward sponsor (Koo and Lee, 2019). The consumer behaviour of fans or engagement in branded virtual communities by fans is also analysed (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2018; Casper *et al.*, 2020).

The growth and convergence towards the digital sphere is also observed through various works focused on the effectiveness of sports sponsorship on websites (Aguilo-Lemoine *et al.*, 2020), sponsorship on influencers' social media (Radmann *et al.*, 2021), the long-term impact of sponsorship on social media engagement (Naraine *et al.*, 2022) engagement on twitter (Eddy *et al.*, 2021), or the study of the impact of sponsorship on video games (Limbach *et al.*, 2019).

Discussion and conclusion

This study makes several key contributions to the literature on sport sponsorship. Firstly, to date no bibliometric or systematic review has been conducted with the aim of analysing the evolution of scientific production, identifying the main journals and prominent topics in the general field of sport sponsorship. In this work, we have made progress by implementing a focused and exhaustive review of the subject. To our knowledge, previously author's output over time has not been analysed, developing frequent topics of study to gain a better understanding of research in the field of sport sponsorship. By incorporating these perspectives, the literature review conducted paints a more convincing picture of the conceptual structure of the use of sport sponsorship as a communication tool and the concepts analysed around this topic.

In summary, the performance analysis shows a continuous growth in the scientific production in relation to sport sponsorship, with a high degree of international collaboration, which shows the global importance of the topic of study. It is worth noting the growth and importance of the *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship*, which has experienced a very significant increase in its impact and number of contributions since 2007, consolidating its position as a leader in the field of sport sponsorship studies. Although, it has also been published quite a lot in journals within the field of business and marketing, thus the impact of the articles published in the *Journal of Business Research* in relation to sport sponsorship is worth highlighting. The analysis of the sources and authors suggests that there are various areas of specialisation and types of focus within the field of study (RQ1).

In terms of the structural relationships of the topic, the analysis has revealed that sports sponsorship is an area of research that connects various discussions within the field of study. In particular, it has been shown that there is a diversity of approaches in the sport marketing literature, ranging from more generalist to more specific and complex topics. For example, the study of image transfer, the analysis of marketing tactics in the field of health, or the need for government regulation of this activity. This suggests a rich panorama of research areas that are still expanding and have theoretical potential for new incursions. It has also been observed that over time, certain topics have changed in relevance, although some such as "team identification" have gained interest over the decades analysed, while others such as "social media" or "digital media sponsorship" are emerging as topics of growing interest (RQ2).

From a practical implication point of view, this paper highlights the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Thus, companies, especially in the sport domain, need to be aware of the growing importance of CSR and its impact on consumer loyalty. Also, brands should consider the positive impact of sports sponsorship but also be wary of overexposure. At the level of global vs local strategies and actions, it is important to maintain a dual strategy: although some brands may need a more global approach, others may benefit from a more localised strategy. Another lesson learned comes from the importance of social media and advertising. In particular, brands need to be aware of the growing importance of social media in the sporting arena. On the other hand, the literature speaks of the relevance of team identification. Thus, brands and sports teams should consider how fans' attitudes and their identification with a team can influence their behaviour, as suggested by works on "team

identification". Finally, the study of sport sponsorship has an interdisciplinary impact, so practitioners and academic institutions should be aware that the impact of many of these works may extend beyond their original field, suggesting opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and application in diverse contexts.

In addressing RQ3, this study identifies several promising lines of future research in sport sponsorship. Emerging areas include the intersection between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and consumer behaviour, with studies like [Inoue et al. \(2017\)](#) highlighting the potential to explore how CSR initiatives influence consumer perceptions and decision-making across diverse industries. Another critical avenue relates to the dichotomy between regional and global strategies, as evidenced by [Grohs and Reisinger \(2014\)](#), which calls for further investigation into the effectiveness of sponsorship efforts at both local and international levels. In an increasingly digitalised context, the role of social media and its capacity to reshape sponsorship strategies warrants deeper examination, particularly in terms of audience engagement and the determinants of advertising success in these platforms. Similarly, evolving technologies like eye tracking and big data analytics present opportunities to assess consumer attention and optimise sponsorship effectiveness. Recent contributions by [Alonso Dos Santos et al. \(2019, 2024\)](#) and [Oboudi et al. \(2023\)](#) have demonstrated the applicability of eye-tracking techniques in examining how consumers visually process sponsorship elements during sporting events, offering valuable insights into message effectiveness. Additionally, EEG (electroencephalogram) studies, such as [Lee et al. \(2020\)](#), and research employing fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), like [Martin et al. \(2019\)](#), have advanced our understanding of the neural responses to sponsorship stimuli, particularly in terms of emotional engagement and memory encoding.

Furthermore, service quality during sporting events emerges as a niche but significant topic, offering insights into enhancing viewer experiences and sponsorship outcomes. The persistent connection between alcohol sponsorship and problematic drinking behaviours, as highlighted in [Casswell's \(2013\)](#) work, underlines the need for further inquiry into the cultural and regulatory aspects of sponsorship in sensitive contexts. Fan identification and its impact on brand loyalty and long-term engagement also represent a fruitful research direction, particularly in understanding the psychological bonds between fans, teams, and sponsors.

In addition, the rapid expansion of e-sports sponsorship presents a growing area for exploration. Studies like [Giakoni et al. \(2022\)](#) have highlighted the relevance of sponsorship in this sector, where innovative digital strategies and community engagement play a pivotal role. With revenues in e-sports sponsorships expected to surpass USD 1.87 billion by 2025, understanding how fans perceive these sponsorships and their effectiveness in virtual and gaming environments remains crucial. Similarly, the work of [Alonso-Dos-Santos et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Cuesta-Valino et al. \(2022\)](#) on branding and sponsorship strategies in e-sports underscores the unique dynamics of this domain, which differ from traditional sports due to the highly interactive and digitalised nature of the medium.

Finally, with the growing internationalisation of sports brands, it is essential to examine how globalisation strategies influence sponsorship practices, balancing the demands of local relevance and global consistency. These potential areas of inquiry underscore sports sponsorship's dynamic and interdisciplinary nature, offering a roadmap for future scholarly and practical advancements in the field.

Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations that it is essential to recognise. Primarily, the literature search was conducted using the WoS database, which could have led to the omission of relevant publications not indexed in the WoS database. Although WoS was chosen due to its recognised impact in areas such as marketing and psychology ([Martín-Martín et al., 2018](#)) and its data quality that favours working with tools such as Bibliometrix ([Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017](#)), it is undeniable that other databases such as Scopus or Google Scholar can present a broader

corpus, incorporating, for example, the most recent conference proceedings (Mariani *et al.*, 2022). However, it is important to note that previous work has validated the relevance of WoS for bibliometric research (Casado-Aranda *et al.*, 2023; Yuan *et al.*, 2019). While it is possible that some relevant studies have not been included due to these methodological decisions, the results obtained offer an unprecedented perspective on current developments and trends in the field of sport sponsorship. These limitations do not detract from the value of the findings presented, which provide a detailed framework of recent scientific research in the area, providing useful insights for future research. It is suggested that subsequent research consider the inclusion of multiple databases to achieve a more comprehensive coverage of the field of study.

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