

Original Article

Exploring Sports Communication: A Brief Bibliometric Scan

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Keywords: *Bibliometric analysis, Social media, Content analysis, Communication, Sport marketing***Abstract**

In recent years, sports communication has become a growing field that is getting more attention from researchers. This study examined research trends in sports communication from 1999 to 2025 using a bibliometric approach, analyzing 204 scientific articles retrieved from the Scopus database. The findings indicate that social media is a prominent and recurring theme in sports communication, playing a key role in audience engagement, sports marketing, and the formation of online communities around sporting events, while also shaping both the theory and practice of the field. The results of thematic analysis also indicate that some thematic clusters such as sports media, autobiographies, content analysis, and sports communications have high centrality and density, indicating their development and pivotal role in the knowledge structure of this field. This study offers valuable insights that help researchers and institutions in sports communication identify trends, choose suitable publication platforms, and build effective scientific networks.

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread and global popularity of sports, the attention of communication researchers to this social phenomenon was noticeably delayed compared to other humanities disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, so that until the 1980s we witnessed a significant lack of scholarly studies in the field of sports communication (Yoo, Smith & Kim, 2013). Since the 1980s, sports communication research has expanded considerably. As one of the four core functions of sports management, it has formed a mutually reinforcing relationship with the field. Scholars have extensively studied this connection and

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communication's evolving role in sports (Hambrick, 2017). Communication can sometimes be speaking or remaining silent, sometimes laughing or crying, and at other times, it can be a style of clothing or even a glance. More broadly, it is the most fundamental tool individuals use to express themselves. For individuals living within a social structure, communication serves as a bridge not only to express themselves to others but also to understand them (Akyazı, 2023). Not only in human relationships but also in professional fields, well-developed communication skills are necessary to establish effective communication and to gain the expected benefits from the communication process (Erigüç, Şener & Eriş, 2013). Effectively used communication skills make relationships in both interpersonal and professional contexts more efficient and beneficial, and they facilitate communication between individuals and groups. Therefore, in the field of sports where human relations are of great importance all sports professionals must possess strong communication skills and be able to use them effectively (Kissal, Kaya & Koç, 2016).

As in every scientific field, communication is considered to have an important place in the field of sports as well. Sports communication refers to the interaction and activities that clubs or athletes establish with their audiences (Danış & Yengin, 2020). According to another definition, sports communication encompasses a process that begins with the communication between athletes and extends to inter-club communication, media, and stakeholders (Yıldırım, 2017). Based on this information, it is possible to say that sports communication has many dimensions and involves a comprehensive process (Ünlü & Gürel Boran, 2024). In light of all this information, sport now a major industry is in interaction with many different sectors. Accordingly, sports clubs closely follow all developments in the field of communication, just as they do in other areas they are involved in, and they strive to adapt these developments into their practices. This interaction, which began with newspapers, radio, and television, took on a new dimension with the emergence of internet technologies. The process of enhancing the communication capabilities of sports organizations began with websites and has continued through social media platforms (Üçüncüoğlu, 2021).

At the same time, there is a noticeable increase in academic studies on sports communication. This growing academic interest highlights the value of systematically reviewing the literature, mapping the existing knowledge, and providing researchers with a foundation for new studies that can contribute to the advancement of science. The aim of this study is to carry out a bibliometric analysis of research in the field of sports communication. This analysis helps identify main trends, patterns, and important themes in the literature. By doing so, we seek to better understand the current state of global research, explore key research directions, and examine the development and changes in this area over time. This will provide a clear and organized view of how sports communication has evolved in academic studies. To guide this investigation, the following research questions (RQs) have been formulated:

- RQ1: Who are the key influencers driving research in sports communication?

- RQ2: What keywords and trends define global sports communication studies?
- RQ3: What core themes shape the research landscape of sports communication?

By answering these research questions, this study presents a clear overview of the sports communication research landscape, highlighting major contributors and new trends. The structured approach used in this study offers useful insights into the current state and development of research in this field.

2. Material and methods

Research settings, bibliometric methods and science mapping are commonly applied to give a clear overview of the most recent scientific developments on a particular subject (Pessin, Yamane & Siman, 2022). Examining the progress of research in related fields plays an important role in assessing the level of scientific productivity and understanding current trends in that research field (Wijewickrema, 2023). Bibliometric is a quantitative method in information and library sciences used to analyze bibliographic data (e.g., publication year, authors, countries) and provide a structured overview of research trends, with many studies covering topics, journals, institutions, and fields like fuzzy research relevant to Information Sciences (Merigó, Pedrycz, Weber & De La Sotta, 2018). The research employed Bibliometrix, an R package designed for bibliometric and co-citation analysis. Developed in R, Bibliometrix offers an efficient method for conducting bibliometric studies, providing flexibility, fast updates, and smooth integration with other R statistical tools, making it highly valuable for the continuously evolving field of bibliometrics (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). This study also applied the science mapping method, following the five steps outlined by Zupic and Čater (2015) including study design, data collection, data analysis, data visualization, and interpretation.

On May 23, 2025, a comprehensive database search was conducted using Scopus to identify scholarly articles relevant to the field of Sports Communication. The search strategy targeted the article title, abstract, and keywords, using the query: TITLE-ABS-KEY("sport* communicat*" OR "communication of sport*"). This initial search retrieved 356 documents for preliminary screening.

To align with the objectives of the study, which focused on original research articles and review papers, all other types of publications (e.g., editorials, notes, conference papers) were excluded. Furthermore, a language filter was applied to include English-language publications, ensuring consistency in analysis. After these filtering procedures, a total of 214 articles were selected and downloaded from Scopus for further analysis. Subsequent full-text screening identified 10 articles as irrelevant to the research topic, resulting in a final sample of 204 articles included in the bibliometric analysis.

This rigorous and systematic selection process ensured the inclusion of high-quality and thematically relevant literature, thereby supporting a robust and comprehensive bibliometric study. The methodological flow and selection stages are illustrated in Figure 1.

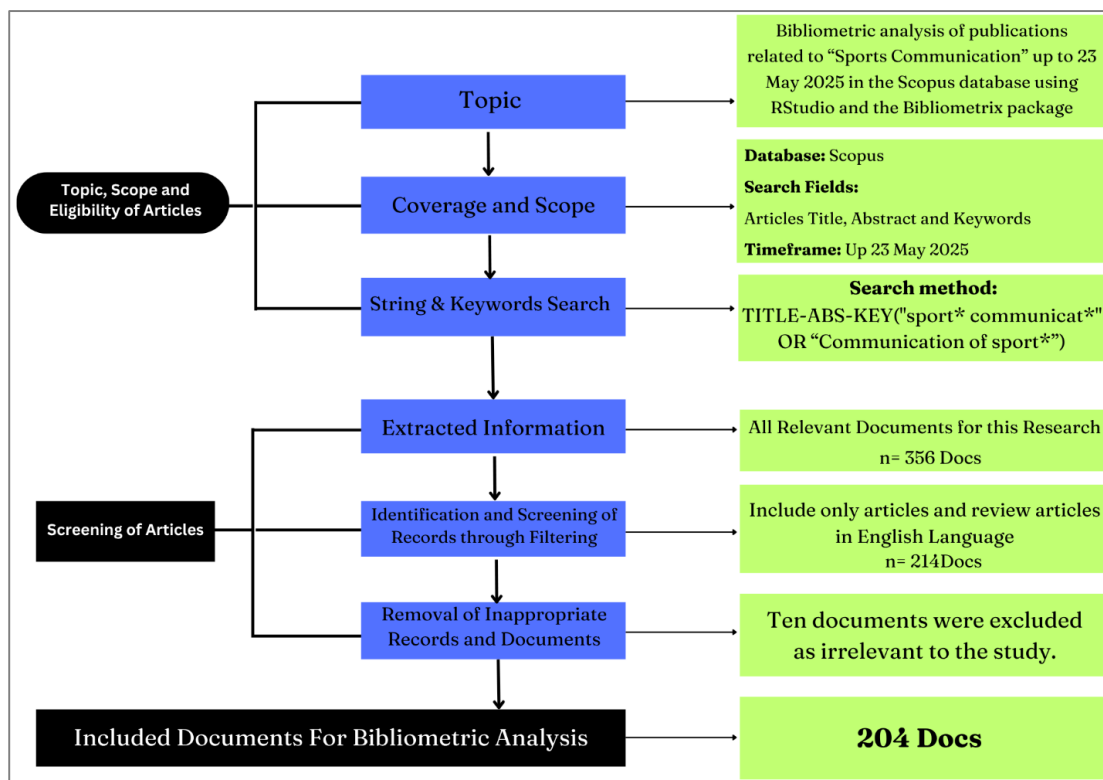


Figure 1. Research methodology stages

Additionally, EndNote™20 reference management software was employed to organize citations and references, facilitating accurate documentation and streamlined access to source materials throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview and Data Description

Based on bibliometric analysis of 204 articles (including 192 original research papers and 12 review articles) published in 92 academic journals from 1999 to 2025, the key findings show a significant growth in scientific production in this field, with an annual growth rate of 10.37%. The documents studied have an average age of 5.57 years and an average of 9.922 citations per article, showing a relatively good scientific impact.

At the author level, 401 researchers contributed to these publications. Among them, 51 authors published single-authored works, with a total of 59 documents. The scientific collaboration index, with an average of 2.42 authors per paper and 13.24% international collaboration, shows the pattern of research cooperation in this field.

In total, the documents cited 9,215 references, which shows strong scientific connections with previous literature. These results give a clear picture of the research status in this field over the past two decades.

Table 1. Overview of the research data

Description	Results
Timespan	1999:2025
Sources (Journals)	92
Documents	204
Annual growth rate %	10.37
Document average age	5.57
Average citations per doc	9.922
References	9215
Authors	401
Authors of single-authored docs	51
Single-authored docs	59
Co-authors per doc	2.42
International co-authorships %	13.24
Article	192
Review article	12

3.2. Annual scientific production

Figure 2 shows the trend of yearly scientific publications related to sports communication from 1999 to May 2025. In the early years (1999 to around 2010), the number of published articles was very low and stayed almost the same. However, starting from 2011, there is a growing trend, although with some ups and downs. A major increase happened between 2016 and 2017, when the number of articles suddenly rose. After that, there was a clear drop in 2018, but the overall trend continued to rise until 2024. Another strong increase can be seen from 2022 to 2024, with more than 30 articles published in 2024 alone.

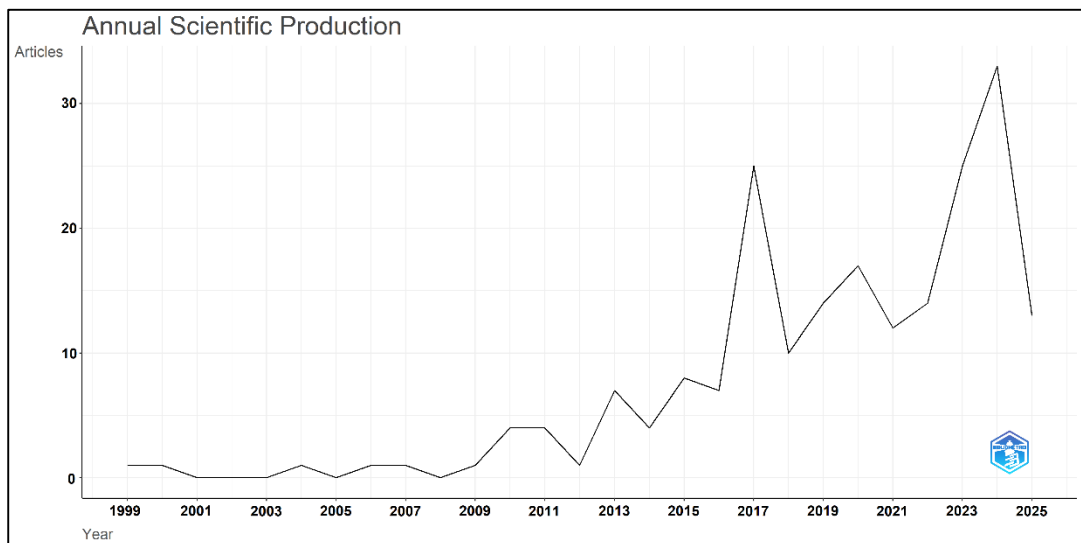


Figure 2. Annual scientific production

This general trend shows that sports communication has slowly become an important and popular topic in academic research. One possible reason for this growth is the rise of social media and digital platforms, which have changed the way people communicate about sports. **3.3. Leading publications**

Based on Table 2, the top three journals with the highest number of publications in the field of sports communication are listed. The journal of “Communication and Sport” is ranked first, with 50 published articles since 2015, an h-index of 14, and a total of 616 citations. In second place is the “International Journal of Sport Communication”, which has published 20 articles since 2019, with an h-index of 9 and 161 citations. The “International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing” comes third, with 7 articles, an h-index of 3, and 68 citations since 2007. These results show that newer journals focusing on sport and communication have had a greater role in publishing and receiving attention in this research area.

Table 2. *Most relevant sources*

Source	NP	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	PY_start
Communication and Sport	50	14	23	1.273	616	2015
International Journal of Sport Communication	20	9	11	1.286	161	2019
International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing	7	3	7	0.158	68	2007

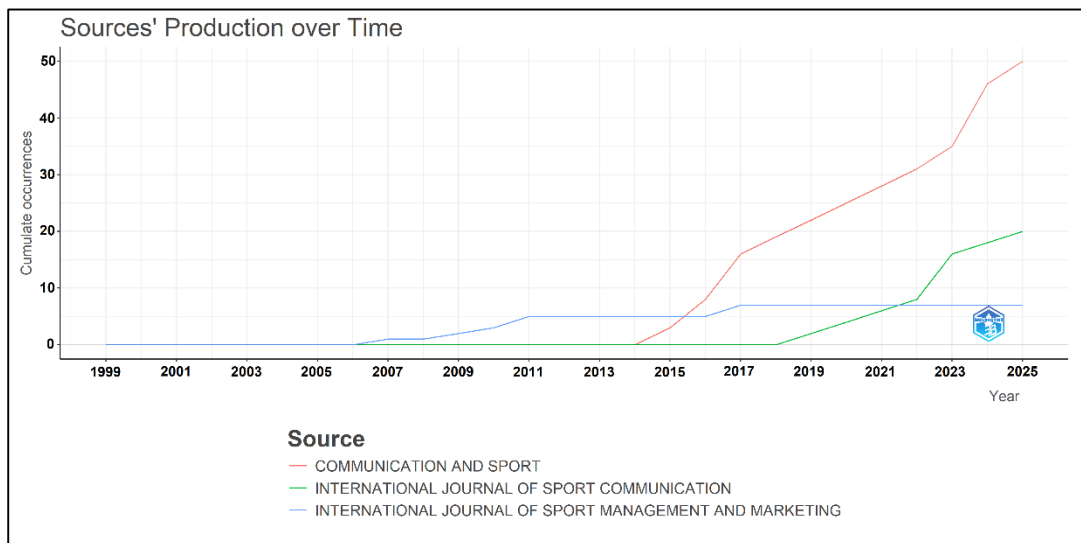


Figure 3. *Trend of publication of articles by different sources over time*

The following figure 3 shows the trend of publication of articles by different sources over time. This chart clearly shows in which years each journal or scientific source was most active and to what extent it contributed to the scientific production

of the field of sports communication. Through this chart, it is possible to identify which sources have had a greater contribution to the publication of articles in recent years.

3.4. Analysis of the most influential authors

Based on the quantitative analysis of published articles in the field of sport communication (Table 3), three top authors were identified in this study. Cranmer GA ranked first with 17 articles (NP), an h-index of 9, a total citation count (TC) of 205, and started publishing in 2015. Billings AC is in second place with 5 articles, an h-index of 3, and 241 total citations since 2010. Denham BE also has 5 articles, an h-index of 3, and 48 citations, with publishing activity starting in 2004. The findings show that while Cranmer GA has performed better in terms of article count and h-index, Billings AC is more influential based on citation numbers. These differences may be related to the length of research activity, specific research topics, or the level of contribution to highly cited studies.

Table 3. Authors' local impact

Author	NP	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	PY_start
Cranmer GA	17	9	14	0.818	205	2015
Billings AC	5	3	5	0.188	241	2010
Denham BE	5	3	5	0.136	48	2004

3.5. Most relevant affiliations

Based on the data provided, Clemson University with 40 articles, Universitas Padjadjaran with 12 articles, and West Virginia University with 10 articles are recognized as the top three universities in terms of the number of articles published in our research topic. This ranking indicates the significant contribution of Clemson University in the production of scientific research, which is significantly ahead of other leading institutions. Table 4 lists the universities and the number of their articles related to our research topic.

Table 4. Top 3 universities by published articles

Affiliation	Articles
Clemson University	40
Universitas Padjadjaran	12
West Virginia University	10

3.6. Most Cited Countries

Based on citation data (Table 5), the United States is the most cited country in our research, with 1,274 citations and an average of 12.70 citations per article. After the U.S., Germany (83 citations, average 10.40), New Zealand (82 citations, average 20.50), and Canada (74 citations, average 14.80) are next on the list. Other countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Georgia, Turkey, China, and Spain are also included. It is important to note that Turkey, although it has only 27 citations, has

the highest average citations per article (27.00). New Zealand also has a strong scientific impact with a high average of 20.50 citations.

Table 5. *Leading countries by citation count*

Country	TC	Average Article Citations
USA	1274	12.70
Germany	83	10.40
New Zealand	82	20.50
Canada	74	14.80
Australia	49	8.20
United Kingdom	47	7.80
Georgia	38	12.70
Turkey	27	27.00
China	25	1.70
Spain	24	8.00

3.7. Most global cited documents

The table below (Table 6) presents the top 10 most cited articles in our research area. Among them, the article by Brown and Billings (2013), published in the journal of “Public Relations Review”, ranks first with 125 citations, highlighting its significant impact on the field. The remaining articles, ranked second to tenth, have received between 101 and 36 citations, indicating their varying degrees of influence within the scholarly discourse.

Table 6. *Top Globally cited research papers: detailed citation metrics*

Paper	Journal's name	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
Brown and Billings (2013)	Public Relations Review	125	9.62	5.72
Brown, Brown & Billings (2015)	Communication & Sport	101	9.18	3.18
Walsh and McAllister-Spooner (2011)	Public Relations Review	67	4.47	1.89
Coombs, Lambert, Cassilo & Humphries (2020)	Howard Journal of Communications	63	10.50	5.20
Cranmer and Myers (2015)	Communication & Sport	49	4.45	1.54
Coppola, Ward & Freysinger (2014)	Journal of Applied Sport Psychology	47	3.92	2.29
Frederick Burch & Blaszk (2015)	Communication & Sport	44	4.00	1.39
Denham (2004)	Journalism	38	1.73	1.00
Dees (2011)	International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing	37	2.47	1.04
Rowe (2017)	Communication & Sport	36	4.00	2.94

3.8. Most important keywords

The keywords in scientific papers are thoughtfully chosen by authors to represent the main topic and the core focus of the research (Karimi, Green, Matous, Varvarigos & Khalilpour, 2021). Analyzing author keywords provides an effective approach to identifying research trends by leveraging the key terms used across scholarly publications (Ciric, Lalic, Marjanovic, Savkovic & Rakic, 2021; Strozzi, Colicchia, Creazza & Noè, 2017). An analysis of the most frequently used keywords by authors in published articles revealed the top ten recurring terms, as shown in Figure 4. Based on the findings obtained from analyzing word frequency over time, a better understanding of the topics and scientific approaches commonly used in this field can be gained (Golmohammadi & Pashaie, 2025).

Notably, “sport communication” and “sports communication” were the most repeated keywords, each appearing 48 times, securing the first and second ranks respectively. The term “social media” followed with 26 mentions, indicating its significant presence in the literature. Other frequently occurring keywords included media (9), communication (8), content analysis (7), crisis communication (7), sport (7), sport marketing (7), and framing (6). These results highlight the dominant themes and areas of interest among researchers in this field.



Figure 4. Word Cloud of author's keywords (Top 10 words)

3.9. Co-occurrence Network with authors keywords

Literature keywords form an effective corpus for shaping the structure of scientific knowledge due to the informative relationships among them and their ability to convey clear content that represents knowledge (Zhang, Xie, Song & Song, 2022). Word co-occurrence analysis is a method that enables researchers to identify similarity relationships among various keywords and, based on these connections, build a network of concepts and ideas within a corpus (Karimi, Green, Matous, Varvarigos & Khalilpour, 2021). The frequency of co-occurrence for each keyword pair is shown as the weight of the link that connects them (Yuan, Kamarthi, Jin & Moghaddam, 2022). Analysis of the co-occurrence network of author's keywords in our study (Figure 5), shows that the main ideas in this area are centered around “sports communication” and “social media”. This network shows that sports communication, as an interdisciplinary research area. It studies how social media helps connect with audiences, supports sports marketing, and builds online communities around sports events. Also, it focuses on both the theory and practice of communication in sports settings. The strong links between these keywords

suggest that social media is seen as an important tool in changing how sports content is created, shared, and used. These results can help us better understand how digital technologies shape modern discussions in the world of sports.

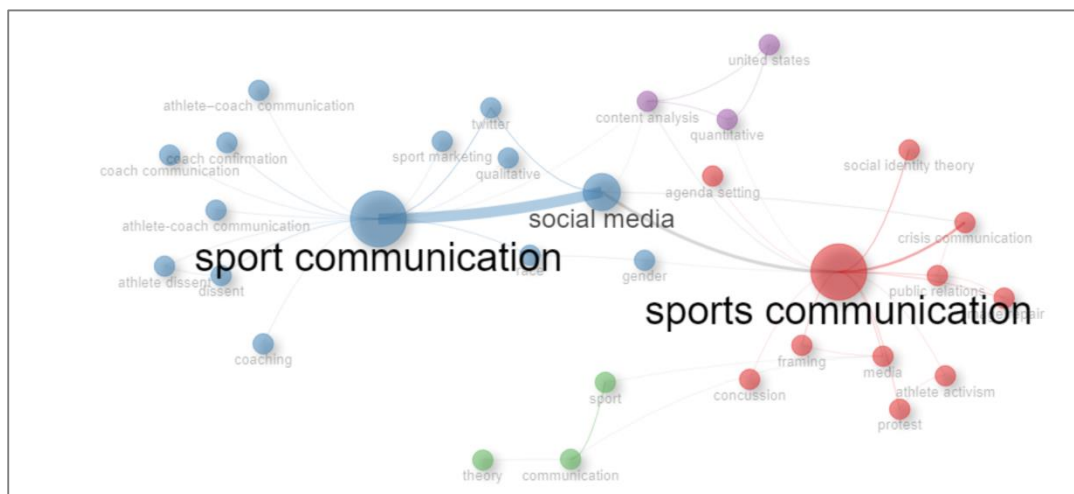


Figure 5. Co-occurrence Network

3.10. Thematic map

The current study utilizes the authors' keywords section to uncover the foundational conceptual structure of the field. Figure 6 presents a thematic map constructed through a co-occurrence analysis of author's keywords in the field of sports communication, based on data retrieved from the Scopus. By plotting the themes, we identified: (a) motor themes (top-right quadrant): clusters with both high centrality and high density, indicating they are well-developed and play a key role in structuring the research field; (b) niche themes (top-left quadrant): themes with strong internal development (high density) but limited overall relevance (low centrality); (c) emerging or declining themes (bottom-left quadrant): characterized by low density and centrality, suggesting minimal development and peripheral status; (d) basic themes (bottom-right quadrant): showing high centrality but low density, meaning they are important yet still underdeveloped (Alkhamash, 2023).

In the motor themes, topics such as sports media, autobiographies, content analysis, and sport communication are found. In the basic themes, topics like sports communication, sport media and motivation are classified. In the emerging or declining themes, we see topics like technology and interdisciplinary. And finally in the niche themes, topics such as identity, theory and intermediary appear.

The map shows which topics are well-developed and important in the field, as well as those that need more attention. Overall, it highlights the current focus and potential areas for future research.

This map offers valuable insights into the structural organization of research within the field, highlighting both the significance and the level of development of various topics. Moreover, it assists researchers in identifying which areas are well-

established, which are emerging, and which may require further investigation.

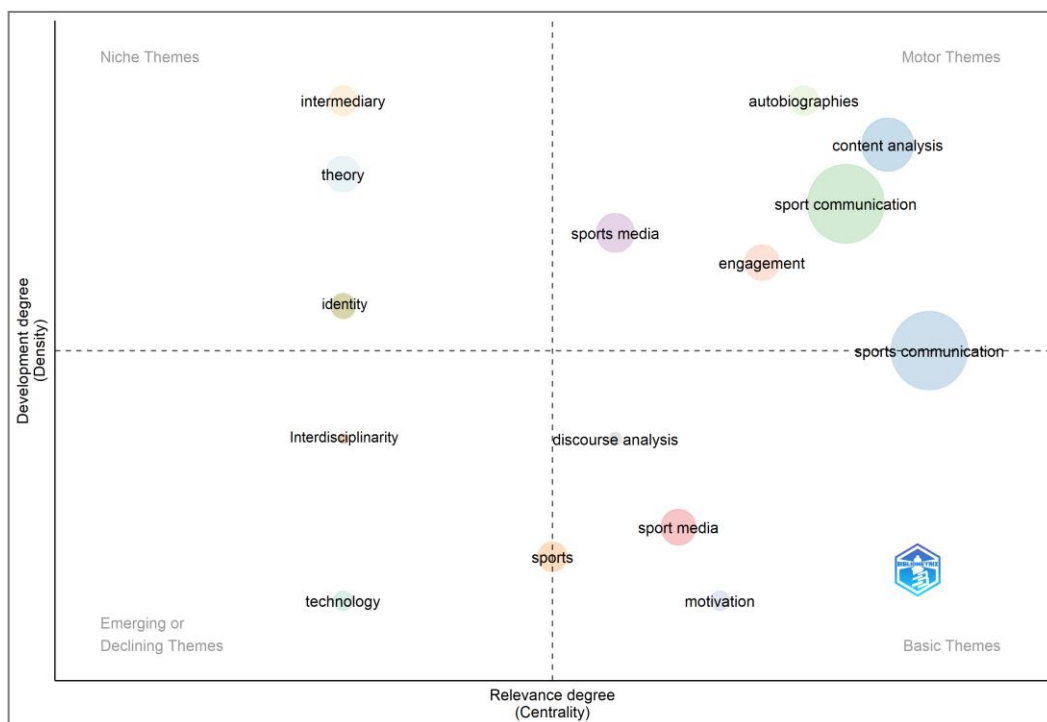


Figure 6. *Thematic mapping analysis*

Discussion

Bibliometric techniques play a crucial role in supporting researchers by helping them organize and compile bibliographic sources that strengthen theoretical discussions (Pessin, Yamane & Siman, 2022). The bibliometric analysis in this study offers a clear overview of the current landscape of sports communication research by identifying key contributors, institutional leaders, and emerging themes. The field demonstrates a strong orientation toward original knowledge production and international collaboration, reflecting its multidisciplinary nature. The presence of evolving topics and global research networks highlights the potential for both quantitative growth and qualitative depth. Overall, these insights emphasize the importance of continued interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts to advance the theoretical and practical development of sports communication. Numerous studies are carried out globally in the field of scientometrics and research trend analysis, utilizing bibliometric methods to explore particular research domains or specific journals (Gholampour, Noruzi, Gholampour & Elahi, 2019).

Sport and communication have coexisted since the earliest forms of human interaction, with organized sport and structured communication taking shape over centuries. Yet, it is only in the past decade that social science scholars have shown substantial interest in sport communication (Abeza, O'reilly & Nadeau, 2014). Based

on the bibliometric analysis of 204 articles published between 1999 and 2025 across 92 academic journals, findings indicate a notable upward trend in scholarly output, with an annual growth rate of 10.37%. While publication rates remained low and stable until 2010, a gradual increase began in 2011, with significant spikes observed between 2016–2017 and 2022–2024. Over 30 articles were published in 2024 alone, reflecting growing academic interest. This rise likely corresponds with the increasing influence of social media and digital platforms, which have transformed communication practices within the sports context. With the rapid proliferation of social media, scholars employing diverse methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives have increasingly turned their attention to examining the role of social media in sport (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Research on social media usage in sports communication and its associated media platforms has advanced considerably over the last 2 decades (Clavio, 2023).

Peer-reviewed scientific journals are considered the most authoritative sources of scientific information and play an important role in the spread of knowledge by publishing the latest findings. These journals are a valuable tool for researchers, students, and science and technology policymakers in analyzing research trends, as they present the latest achievements (Gholampour, Noruzi, Gholampour & Elahi, 2019). More and more researchers are using discourse analysis as both a theory and a method. Since this approach focuses on communication, it has become a key part of studying sport media and communication (Wagner & Sveinson, 2024). The continuous advancement of science has opened up new paths for researchers, and as a result, efforts to elevate the status of science and expand its impact in various fields of research continue (Golmohammadi & Pashaie, 2024). Scientific research builds upon prior studies and scientifically validated knowledge (Kumpulainen & Seppänen, 2022). Researchers rely on citation tracking to identify the most impactful publications within a given field and to monitor the citation frequency of their own scholarly work (Bakkalbasi, Bauer, Glover, & Wang, 2006). The analysis highlights key contributors and outlets in sports communication research. Communication and Sport leads in publication volume and citation impact, followed by International Journal of Sport Communication and International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, reflecting the growing role of specialized journals in this field. Among authors, Cranmer GA stands out in productivity, while Billings AC demonstrates greater citation influence. Clemson University emerges as the most prolific institution, significantly ahead of others. The United States dominates in citation count, though countries like Turkey and New Zealand show high average citation rates, indicating strong impact per publication. The most cited article by Brown and Billings (2013) further underscores the influence of foundational studies in shaping the field's discourse.

Researchers in this study analyze keyword networks to map research trends, where repeated terms like “sport communication”, “social media”, “content analysis”, “crisis communication” and “sport marketing” reveal dominant themes in scholarly literature. The amount of research related to digital innovation in the field of sports marketing has grown significantly in recent years (Stegmann, Nagel &

Ströbel, 2023). The emergence of social media has created a significant transformation in the presentation and consumption of sports content (Filo, Lock & Karg, 2015). Sports organizations need to engage and communicate with their audiences to retain customers by building, maintaining, and strengthening relationships. To achieve this on a consistent basis, it is essential to utilize effective communication platforms. In this context, social media has become an ideal tool for two-way and ongoing dialogue (Abeza, O'reilly & Reid, 2013). The lack of a practical perspective in 'crisis response' management is a significant gap in the communications literature, and particularly in the field of sports communications, which exacerbates the gap between academia and practice (Kitchin & Purcell, 2017).

The thematic map shows which topics in the field are well-developed and important, and which ones need more attention. Among the main topics in the field are topics such as sport communication, autobiographies, and content analysis. Overall, the map shows the current focus of research and identifies potential areas for future research. Content analysis is known as one of the most widely used research methods in communication and media studies (Schäfer & Vögele, 2021). An increasing number of academic fields are turning to biographical methodologies in their research. These methods allow for the simultaneous identification of general patterns and unique characteristics of life (Dašić, 2023). Also, social media has brought about changes in the processes of production, distribution, consumption, analysis, and interpretation of sports content (Tang & Mahoney, 2025).

Practical implications

The results of this study give useful ideas for researchers, professionals, and organizations working in sports communication. By showing which journals, authors, and universities are most active, the study helps highlight where important research is happening and who the main voices are. This can help researchers choose the right places to publish and connect with others in the field. Looking at keywords and research topics also shows which parts of sports communication are already well-studied and which still need more work. For example, topics like technology and interdisciplinary research may need more attention. These findings can help guide future studies, encourage teamwork between researchers, and focus efforts on the most important and growing areas in the field.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study gives a clear and useful look at the main trends and key work in sports communication, and it sets a solid base for future research. Still, there are a few limits to keep in mind. One major issue is that it only used the Scopus database for analyzing the data. Also, because it only looked at English-language articles, it might have missed important studies written in other languages. Another point is that the study mostly used numbers and data, which means it might have missed out on deeper insights, like people's personal stories or the broader social effects of sports communication.

In the future, researchers can look at more sources, like Web of Science or Google Scholar, and include countries that haven't been studied much. They can also use databases in other languages. This can help show bigger global patterns and

cultural differences in sports communication. Using methods like interviews, group talks, or looking at real-life examples can also be helpful. These ways can give a better understanding of the personal and social sides of how people communicate in sports. New studies should also look at how new technology, like AI or online media, is changing things. They can check how media affects what people know and think, and see if education programs and safety rules in sports clubs are working well. It's also a good idea to see how communication changes between different sports, places, and groups of people. These differences might affect what the public thinks, how athletes see themselves, and how fans stay involved. Looking into all of this can help us learn more and come up with better, fairer ways to share messages in the world of sports.

4. Conclusions

This study provides an overview of the current state and research trends in the field of sports communication and can indicate the direction of future research. By identifying areas that need improvement and areas that have been under-researched, this study can be a good guide for researchers to focus on new and less explored topics. Also, the information obtained about active authors, journals and educational centers provides an opportunity to create scientific networks and international collaborations; something that can greatly help to improve the quality and impact of future research.

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Ethical approval: Not applicable.

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