

The Evolution of Athlete Branding: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Athlete branding has become an increasingly important topic in sports management and marketing, particularly in the digital era. This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of athlete branding research from 2000 to 2024 to map the field's key developments and trends. Using performance analysis and science mapping, this study examined related scholarly publications and identified prolific authors, influential journals, and dominant themes. This study highlights the evolving nature of athlete branding and offers future research directions at the intersection of sports, business, and digital media. Specific research opportunities linked to these themes have been identified in the literature, and this study also suggests location, contextual, and methodological research. This review offers a deeper understanding of actionable research opportunities for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

Keywords

athlete brand, bibliometric analysis, science mapping, sport marketing, athlete brand research trends, human branding

Introduction

Athlete branding has emerged as a pivotal element in sports management and marketing, reflecting the growing recognition of athletes as influential personal brands (Kunkel et al., 2022; Robinson, 2014; Sotiriadou et al., 2025). The increasing commercialization of sports means that athletes are seen as marketable entities capable of leveraging their persona to build distinctive and impactful brands (Brison et al., 2016; Hasaan et al., 2020; Shin & Lee, 2021). This has generated a body of research exploring various facets of athlete branding, including their influence on endorsement deals, fan engagement, and personal brand management (Arai et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2023; Yoshida et al., 2014). The strategic development of an athlete's brand involves crafting a unique identity that not only resonates with audiences but also

differentiates them in a highly competitive market (Arai & Chang, 2015; Hasaan et al., 2020; Lobpries et al., 2017), enhancing their market value and influence in sports and broader society.

Athlete branding also significantly affects societal dynamics and culture. Athletes with influential personal brands shape public perceptions and trends, often becoming role models and advocates for social causes (Fleming et al., 2005; Hasaan et al., 2021; Taniyev & Gordon, 2022). As athletes navigate sports, media, and society, their personal brands can shape public opinion, address social issues, foster social change and promote philanthropic endeavors (Hasaan et al., 2021; Kunkel et al., 2022; Ratten, 2015). Consequently, studying athlete branding not only enriches our understanding of sports marketing but also highlights the societal impact of athletes' public personas on cultural and social landscapes (Antonucci et al., 2019; Caz et al., 2021; Taniyev & Gordon, 2022). Further, athlete branding increasingly intersects with digital identity, commercial partnerships, and social influence. Simultaneously, there is growing scholarly interest in athlete branding, yet the field remains methodologically scattered and thematically diverse, drawing from marketing, sport management, communication, and cultural studies. This fragmentation makes it difficult to track cumulative knowledge, evaluate thematic progress, or identify dominant scholarly voices and institutions, highlighting the need to conduct a structured and data-driven literature overview.

The purpose of the research was to investigate the state of research related to the “athlete brand” in associated academic literature, offering a retrospective synthesis and a prospective research roadmap, thus contributing to the development and expansion of knowledge in this field. In this way, a bibliometric approach can illuminate the structure and dynamics of an academic field, making it possible to identify overlooked or underexplored areas that qualitative approaches might miss. These insights will help athletes and organizations to adapt and strengthen athlete branding. The research questions for this study were developed to align with the core objectives of a bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021; López-Carril et al., 2020), drawing on precedents in related areas such as sports marketing and branding, where similar questions have been used to identify key contributors, influential publications, and thematic shifts. Thus, the following questions were formulated:

RQ1: How has athlete brand research developed?

RQ2: What is the current state of athlete brand research?

RQ3: Based on bibliometric mapping, what emerging future research themes are identified in athlete branding research?

RQ4: Based on bibliometric mapping, what additional future research opportunities are revealed through the analysis of the literature?

The paper will initially highlight the use of bibliometric studies in answering the purpose of the study, after which the key terms used in the study are presented. The bibliometric method

that is used in the study and its implementation is then presented. The paper concludes by presenting the findings and future research opportunities associated with the analysis.

The Importance and Use of Bibliometric Studies

Bibliometric analysis refers to the frameworks and methods used to analyze the citations of scholarly publications, leading to the development of metrics that provide insights into the intellectual structure of broad academic disciplines and research contexts (Merigó & Yang, 2017), helping to evaluate the impact of scientific journals, individual studies, and researchers (Ponce & Lozano, 2010). Moreover, bibliometric analyses enable researchers to trace the temporal evolution of ideas (Agostini et al., 2020), identify the emergence of new thematic areas, and measure the influence of individual scholars and institutions within the athlete branding literature. It identifies journal performance, co-authorship networks, co-citation patterns, and major research streams within specific fields (Baker et al., 2020), and indicates impactful contributions (Ida & Fukuzawa, 2013), with citation counts correlating with perceived quality (Wildgaard, 2015). In this way, bibliometric approaches uniquely illuminate the structure and dynamics of an academic field, making it possible to identify overlooked or underexplored areas that qualitative approaches might miss.

Bibliometric methodologies have gained widespread acceptance in academic research due to their objective and quantitative nature, which mitigates many of the sample-selection biases often associated with traditional systematic reviews (Donthu et al., 2021), although they remain influenced by researchers' choices of database, search terms, and inclusion criteria. This approach has become particularly advantageous with the advent of sophisticated software tools, cross-disciplinary methodologies, and the ability to efficiently process large datasets (Akhavan et al., 2016). Despite the widespread use of bibliometric and citation analyses in various fields, no comprehensive bibliometric or content analysis study on athlete branding has been published to date. This represents a significant gap in the literature, particularly as the field of athlete branding continues to gain academic and commercial importance (Dašić et al., 2021; Linsner et al., 2021). A bibliometric study is therefore not just filling a formal gap; it is a strategically important tool to consolidate what is currently a diffuse body of literature (Hicks & Melkers, 2013).

Defining the Athlete Brand

A brand is commonly defined as a name, term, sign, symbol, or a combination of these, identifying the developer or seller of a product (Kotler, 2009). An athlete brand can be defined as the public persona of an individual athlete who has established a symbolic meaning and value in the marketplace using their name, face, or other brand elements (Arai et al., 2014). Additionally, it comprises a strategic set of associations, such as personality, name, and values, that distinguish athletes in the marketplace while promising a functional and emotional experience to fans (Williams et al., 2015). Athlete brands also involve interpersonal and

relational components that influence their brand identity (Bredikhina et al., 2023). Thus, the athlete brand creates a curated and enduring identity that encompasses emotional, symbolic, strategic, relational, and commercial dimensions, shaped jointly by public perception, athlete behavior, and media communication, shaping how the public perceives the athlete's personality (Hasaan & Kerem, 2017) and by the collective opinions people form about them (Hasaan et al., 2020).

Athletes have been primarily considered components of team branding (Biscaia et al., 2013; Yang & Shi, 2011). However, more recent studies have recognized athletes as distinct brands in their own right (Arai et al., 2013; Hasaan et al., 2020; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). As human brands, they are public figures who are recognized and actively marketed and communicated to consumers (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Their brands include their on-field performance and public image (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018a; Kunkel et al., 2020; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012), which require athletes to actively manage their sporting endeavors and off-field activities as part of their branding efforts (Arai et al., 2014; Hasaan et al., 2018a; Hasaan et al., 2020; Lobpries et al., 2017). This has led to athletes engaging in branding by creating a unique identity and value perception (Aaker, 2012; Kotler, 2009), consciously building and cultivating their brands using symbolic assets, such as logos and personalized visual elements (Cortsen, 2013; Pedersen & Williams, 2022).

The Benefits of an Athlete Brand

The primary objective of establishing an athlete brand is to forge a strong and distinctive emotional connection between the athlete and their fans, thereby increasing fan loyalty (Linsner et al., 2021; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Taniyev et al., 2022). For example, positive athlete brand perceptions have been shown to significantly boost consumer loyalty and deepen emotional connections, which in turn benefits the athlete's affiliated products and endorsements (Aaker, 2012; Ballouli et al., 2016; Bauer et al., 2008; Fernandes et al., 2013; Shin & Lee, 2021) and increased resistance to switching their allegiance to other athletes (Constantinescu, 2016; Hasaan, 2021; Theysohn et al., 2009).

Branding enables an athlete to sustain and amplify their visibility, thereby increasing their marketability and earning potential (Hasaan et al., 2018b; Pashaie et al., 2022; Su et al., 2020a). Their brand can positively influence events, merchandise, and brand extensions, enhancing the overall image and market success of associated products (Boyd et al., 2021; Khosravi et al., 2024). Annika Sörenstam's¹ golf products and George Foreman's² grills exemplify how athlete brands can become commercial ventures (Cortsen, 2013; Ratten, 2015) or create distinct commercial identities through logos or monikers (Pedersen & Williams, 2022), such as Cristiano Ronaldo's³ CR7 and Michael Jordan's⁴ Air Jordan brands (Hasaan et al., 2018a).

The human connection raises the question of whether an athlete brand can outlast the person behind it, such as when there are transgressions, retirement from the sport, or death (Williams

et al., 2022). The retirement of an athlete often evokes nostalgia among fans, as they associate the athlete with a particular period, which can influence sports spectatorship (Taniyev & Gordon, 2022). In certain instances, an athlete's brand identity becomes so symbolically powerful that it retains cultural and commercial relevance long after retirement, or even after death. Icons such as Muhammad Ali⁵, Diego Maradona⁶, and Michael Jordan⁷ exemplify this trajectory with their brands evolving into symbolic legacies. This enduring relevance is often attributed to a high level of accumulated athlete capital, a term introduced by Hasaan et al. (2021) to capture the symbolic, emotional, and cultural values athletes accrue over time. However, as Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) argue, this symbolic strength depends on the delicate interdependence between human identity and brand persona. Disruptions in public perception, behavioral inconsistencies, or a lack of strategic brand cultivation can weaken this bond and diminish brand value over time. This dynamic suggests a partial decoupling between the athlete and the brand, where the latter may persist but only if meaning and emotional resonance are consistently managed (Manoli & Doyle, 2025; Rühley & Pate, 2017). For athletes who are unable to sustain such high levels of symbolic capital, a more durable strategy may be to convert their brand into a product, service, or business-focused entity. Examples like Stephen Curry's⁸ Curry Brand—a performance-focused athletic line featuring basketball and golf products—and Valentino Rossi's⁹ VR46 lifestyle brand demonstrate how athlete brands can transition into commercial ventures that outlast the athlete's active career.

Differentiating Athlete and Product Brands

Branding has evolved to encompass personal and human brands, including celebrities and athletes (Waller, 2020). Research has highlighted that product and athlete brands differ in several ways. Product brands are carefully manufactured, remain relatively stable over time, and rely on external representations or spokespersons to establish similar human connections (Fleck et al., 2014). In contrast, athlete brands are imbued with inherent personal attributes (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Hasaan et al., 2018a; Nichols & Shapiro, 2023) infused with human characteristics, emotional storytelling, and personal histories, which not only makes them more volatile but also deepens their emotional resonance with fans (Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Chang et al., 2018).

A well-established athlete brand transcends sports, influencing consumer behavior and industries beyond the athlete's immediate sphere (Arai et al., 2014; Shin & Lee, 2021). Athletes also operate as social constructs embedded within broader narratives of culture, community, and shared values (Osorio et al., 2020), making the athlete brand a reflection of both personal identity and collective meaning.

Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive-analytical approach utilizing bibliometric analysis to systematically examine scholarly publications and to establish indicators of research

performance and trends in athlete branding. The current research methodology follows the science mapping approach outlined by Aria and Cuccurullo (2017), and the five-step framework for science mapping in management and organization, adapted from Zupic and Čater (2015). This approach involves defining research questions, selecting bibliometric methods, filtering and analyzing data with appropriate software, determining visualization techniques, and interpreting the results.

Source of Data and Search Strategy

Using a single database ensures consistency in citation metrics and avoids biases caused by variations in data structures across databases (Zupic & Čater, 2015), and is standard and suitable for bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021). This study used only Web of Science (WoS) because synchronizing bibliometric data from multiple databases is difficult, thus reducing the likelihood of a robust bibliometric analysis (Romanelli et al., 2021). WoS is widely regarded as a crucial resource for bibliometric analysis in scientific research (van Leeuwen, 2006). The search was limited to the “Title,” “Abstract,” and “Keywords” fields in WoS, to include only relevant documents. Published papers were retrieved from a topic search of the WoS Core Collection in August 2024. The following search strategy was used: TS (topic search) = (Athlete AND (Brand OR “Image Management”)) and time span = 2000–2024. Keywords were chosen to ensure that the results specifically reflected scholarly work that explicitly framed athletes as brands to capture both broad and specific aspects of athlete branding. The focus on “brand” and “image management” was intended to limit the dataset to literature that conceptually engaged with athlete branding as a form of identity construction, strategic communication, and brand equity, rather than broader themes like athlete marketing, sponsorship, or general promotional activity. While terms like “athlete marketing” or “personal branding” may intersect with athlete branding conceptually, they also risk including articles that do not focus on athletes as standalone brand entities, potentially introducing conceptual noise. This narrow approach was selected to enhance the precision, replicability, and theoretical consistency of the analysis. However, we acknowledge that this focus may have excluded relevant studies that used broader or alternative terminology, and we reflect this as a limitation of the study design. The choice of the years 2000–2024 reflects the rise of digital media and the increasing commercialization of sports, both of which have had significant implications for the development of athlete branding. This strategy was designed to encompass a wide range of studies related to athlete branding, ensuring the inclusion of relevant literature and comprehensive coverage of the field.

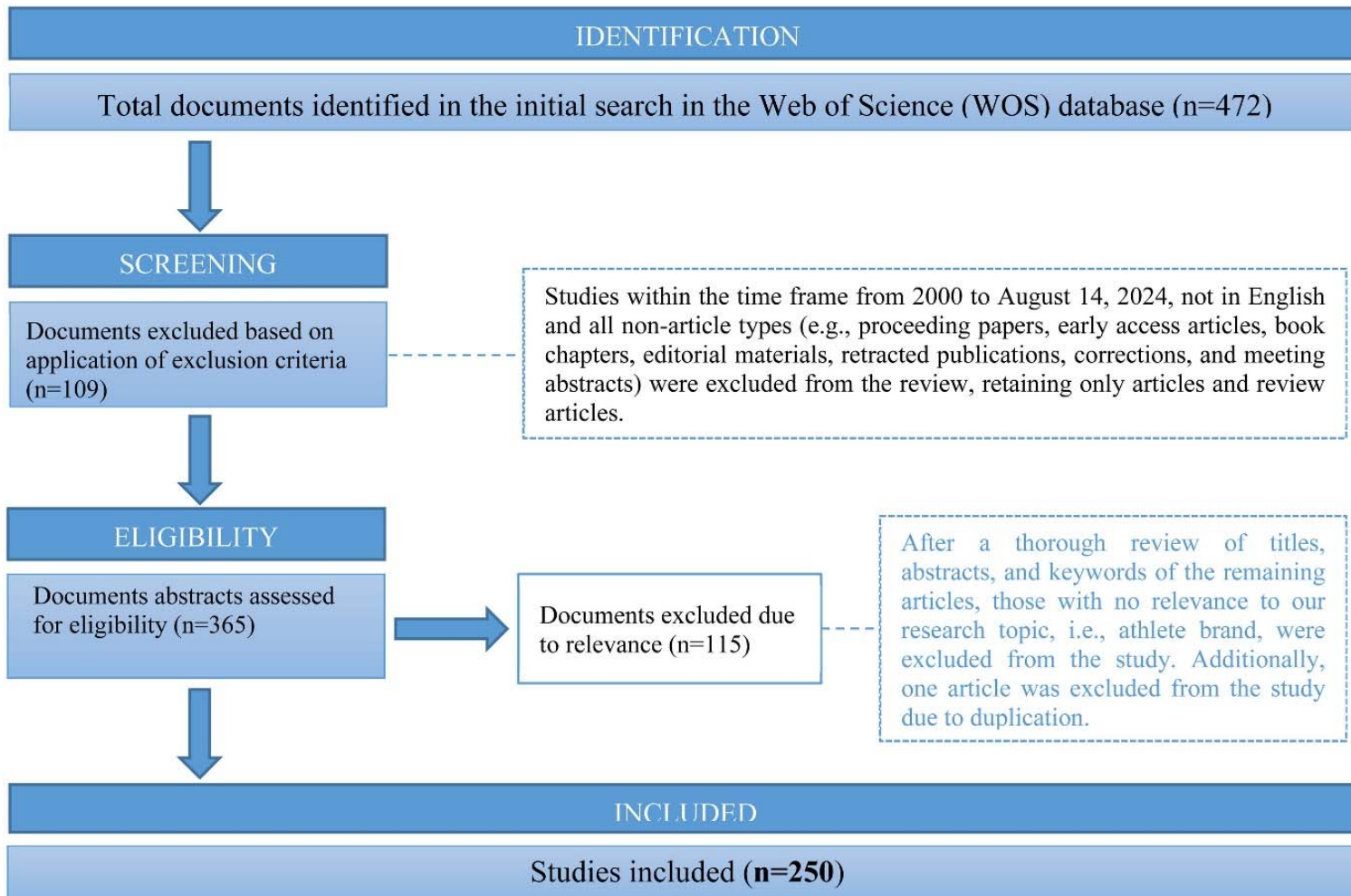


Figure 1. Literature Search Strategy. Source: Current Study.

Inclusion Criteria

A total of 472 documents were identified during the initial search of the WoS database. To maintain focus on peer-reviewed scientific literature, filters were applied to limit the search to journal articles and review papers, excluding conference papers, book chapters, and editorial materials. Additionally, only papers published in English were considered to ensure accessibility and consistency in language analysis. After applying the exclusion criteria, 109 documents were removed, including studies outside the time frame of 2000 to 14 August 2024 that were not in English and all non-article types (e.g., proceedings, early access articles, book chapters, editorial materials, retracted publications, corrections, and meeting abstracts). Thus, 365 documents remained, and abstracts were assessed for inclusion. Of these, 115 were excluded owing to a lack of relevance, as they did not pertain to our research topic, athlete branding. Additionally, one duplicate article was excluded from the study, resulting in 250 articles being retained for further analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the literature search strategy used in the study.

Data Analysis

We utilized the open-source statistical software “R” in conjunction with the “Biblioshiny” application to conduct a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. This approach allowed us to conduct data analysis across multiple dimensions. These tools have facilitated an in-depth examination of research trends, academic networks, and structural relationships in the literature. Bibliometrix, programmed in R, offers a flexible and upgradable workflow for bibliometric analyses and is easily integrated with other statistical R-packages to adapt to the evolving field of bibliometrics (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). We employed normalization techniques, particularly citation normalization, to compare citation counts across different periods and to ensure comparability between older and newer papers (Mio et al., 2022).

We explored various bibliometric methods, including Annual Scientific Production, Leading Publications, and Source's Local Impact. Additionally, we analyzed the Most Cited Journals, the Most Global Cited Documents and the Most Important Keywords (both Author's keywords and Keyword Plus). Trend analysis was conducted using Trend Topics, along with advanced visualization methods, such as the Three-Field Plot and the Thematic Map. The specific metrics used in this analysis included citation counts, H-index values, centrality measures for co-citation analysis, and clustering algorithms for grouping related documents.

Results

Data Description

Overview. The dataset spans 2000 to 2024, using 250 journal articles from 103 academic journals, specifically 248 articles and 2 reviews. The annual growth rate in document production was 11.94%, with an average document age of 5 years and 17.15 citations per

document. A total of 10,506 references were provided, with 760 author-provided keywords (DE) and 573 “Keywords Plus” (ID). Keywords Plus are automatically generated by the WoS based on the titles of cited references, whereas author-provided keywords reflect the terms intentionally selected by the authors to represent the focus of their study. The dataset included 545 authors, with 46 contributing single-authored documents and 48 single-authored documents in total. On average, each document had an average of 2.8 co-authors, and 24.8% of the documents involved international co-authorship, indicating a moderate level of global collaboration in the field. The top contributing journals in the dataset included the European Sport Management Quarterly, Journal of Sport Management, and Sport Marketing Quarterly, which together accounted for 22% of the total documents. Detailed findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Information About the Data.

Description	Results
Timespan	2000:2024
Sources (Journals)	103
Documents	250
Annual growth rate %	11.94
Document average age	5
Average citations per doc	17.15
References	10506
Keywords Plus (ID)	573
Author’s Keywords (DE)	760
Authors	545
Authors of single-authored docs	46
Single-authored docs	48
Co-authors per doc	2.8
International co-authorships %	24.8
Articles	248
Reviews	2

Source: current study.

Annual Scientific Production. The growth of documents in the bibliometric analysis of the “athlete brand” over time is shown in Figure 2. Annual scientific production increased significantly, beginning with one article in 2000, followed by periods of inactivity. However, since 2009, production has steadily increased, marked by notable peaks in 2014 (18 articles), 2017 (22 articles), and 2020 (29 articles). The most substantial growth occurred in 2023, with 46 articles, highlighting a sharp increase in productivity (Figure 2).

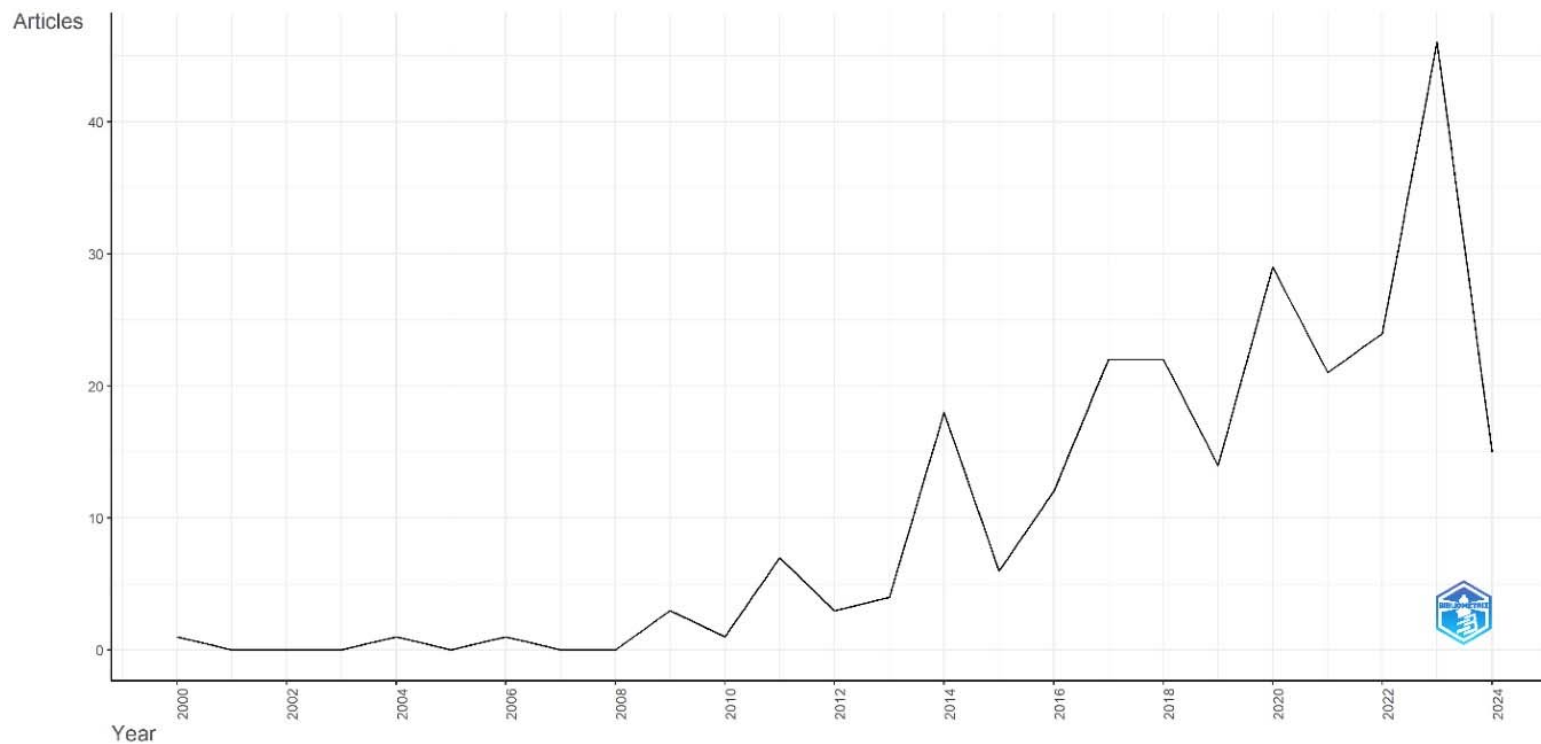


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production. Source: Current Study.

Sources

Leading Publications. The findings reveal that the concept of “athlete brand” is prominently featured within a select group of academic journals, with the top 10 journals standing out in the analysis of 103 journal articles. Notably, the top five journals accounted for 34.4% of all the articles related to this research area. Furthermore, the top ten journals collectively published more than half (50.4%) of the articles identified in the study. The *European Sport Management Quarterly* contains 20 articles, underscoring its central role in the discourse on athlete branding, followed by the *Journal of Sport Management* (18 articles), *Sport Marketing Quarterly* (17 articles), the *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship* (16), and *Sport Business and Management: An International Journal* (15). Their collective output positions them as key platforms for advancing knowledge on this topic.

Source's Local Impact. Table 2 reveals that the ten journals with the highest h-index were the same journals that published the most articles, highlighting their role as foundational resources that make distinct and valuable contributions to athlete branding. However, their ranking shifts when considering the h-index, which measures both the productivity and citation impact of a journal's published work, thereby providing a different perspective on their influence.

Table 2. Sources Local Impact.

Source	h-index	TC	NP	PY-start
Journal of Sport Management	12	574	18	2006
European Sport Management Quarterly	11	452	20	2013
Sport Business and Management-an International Journal	8	135	15	2011
International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship	7	100	16	2012
Sport Management Review	6	414	8	2014
Sport Marketing Quarterly	6	162	17	2017
Communication & Sport	5	101	10	2014
International Journal of Sport Communication	5	104	11	2017
Journal of Business Research	5	70	5	2019
Sport in Society	4	44	6	2013

Source: current study.

The data in Table 2 offers valuable insights into the academic impact and significance of journals that have contributed to athlete branding research. The *Journal of Sport Management* has the highest h-index of 12 and a total citation count (TC) of 574, indicating its influence and centrality in the field since 2006. Following closely, the *European Sport Management Quarterly* boasts an h-index of 11 with 452 citations, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping athlete-branding discourse since 2013. Other journals, such as *Sport Business and Management: An International Journal* (h-index of 8, TC of 135) and the *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship* (h-index of 7, TC of 100), also demonstrate significant

academic impact, particularly in the business and sponsorship dimensions of athlete branding. Meanwhile, the *Sport Management Review* and *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, both with h-indices of six, contribute through their respective focuses, with notable citation counts of 414 and 162, respectively.

Production Over Time. The data reflects the publication trends of various academic journals from 2000 to 2024, highlighting a clear growth trajectory, particularly from the mid-2010s. Notably, several journals began focusing on athlete branding around 2012–2013, aligning with increasing academic interest in this field. This shift coincided with the rapid expansion of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, which enabled athletes to build and communicate their personal brands more effectively and fostered a growing scholarly interest in understanding the athlete–fan relationship in the digital era. Overall, cumulative production trends indicate that the field of athlete branding is experiencing accelerated growth, with concentrated output in a select number of journals. These trends highlight the expanding academic interest and investment in this niche, making it an important area for ongoing and future research.

Figure 3 shows a steady increase in the cumulative number of publications on this topic, with substantial growth across journals between 2020 and 2024. The *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *Journal of Sport Management*, and *Sport Marketing Quarterly* stand out, with consistently higher publication rates, while the *European Sport Management Quarterly* shows the highest cumulative occurrence, followed closely by the *Journal of Sport Management* and *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. Other journals, such as *Sport Business and Management: An International Journal* and *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, also show significant growth, particularly after 2015.

These patterns mark a growing maturity in the field and the concentration of thought leadership within key journals. This centralization presents opportunities such as greater theoretical consolidation and strategic entry points. Simultaneously, the growth trend suggests future diversification potential, as athlete branding intersects with digital culture, media studies, and gender or identity scholarship.

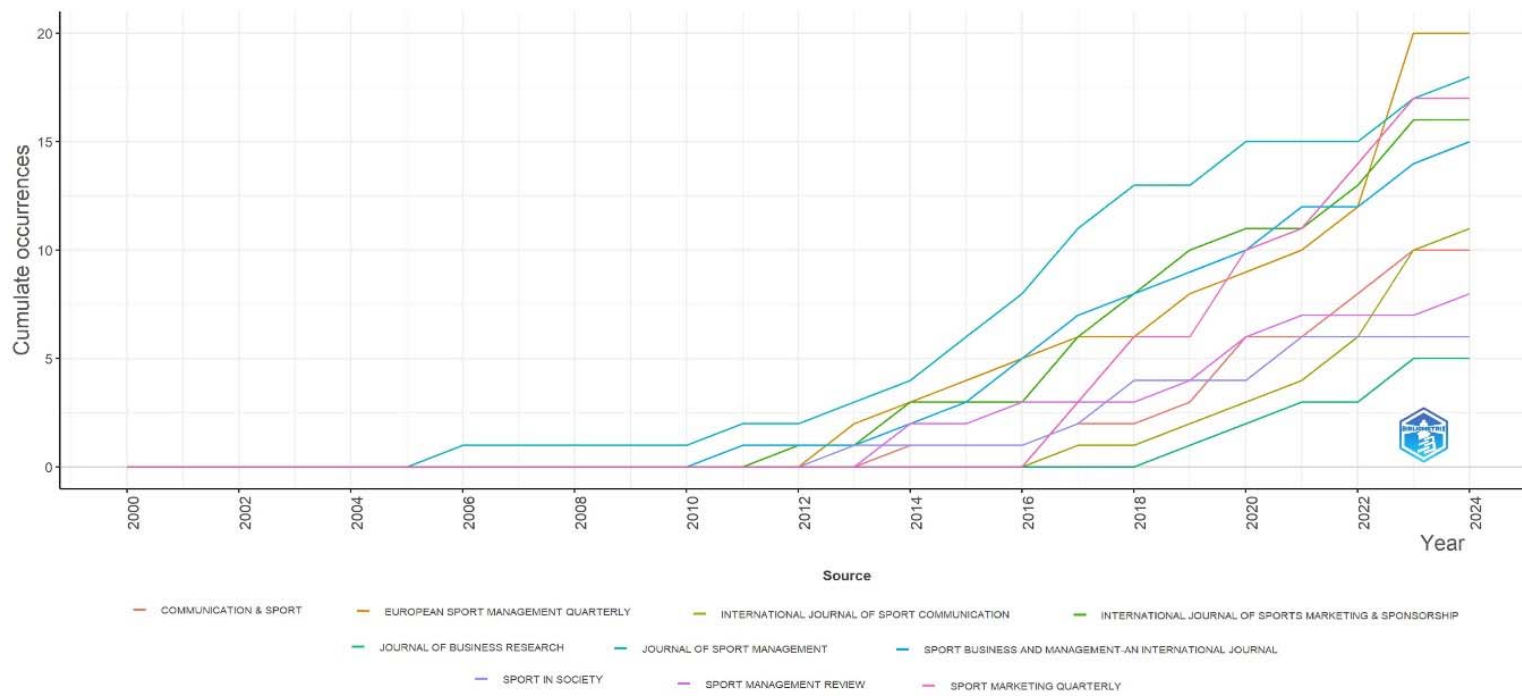


Figure 3. Sources' Production Over Time. Source: Current Study.

Table 3. Authors' Local Impact.

Author	NP	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	PY_start
Ko, YJ	12	7	12	0.583	374	2013
Kunkel, T	12	7	12	1.167	302	2019
Brisson, NT	10	4	7	0.444	52	2016
Hasaan, A	7	3	6	0.375	39	2017
Arai, A	6	5	6	0.417	312	2013
Sato, S	6	5	6	0.5	92	2015
Lee, JS	6	4	6	0.4	121	2015
Baker, TA	6	3	6	0.333	59	2016
Baker, BJ	5	4	5	0.8	140	2020
Chang, Y	5	4	5	0.364	48	2014
Su, YR	5	4	5	0.8	179	2020

Source: current study.

Note. NP = number of publications; TC = total citations; PY_start = publication year starting.

Table 4. Top Globally Cited Research Papers: Detailed Citation Metrics.

Paper	DOI	Total Citations	TC per Year	Normalized TC
Till and Busler (2000), <i>Journal of Advertising</i>	https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2000.10673613	633	25.32	1.00
Bush et al. (2004), <i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021849904040206	225	10.71	1.00
Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), <i>Sport Management Review</i>	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.03.002	169	18.78	4.91
Arai et al. (2014), <i>Sport Management Review</i>	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.04.003	151	13.73	6.55
Carlson and Donovan (2013), <i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.27.3.193	138	11.50	2.06
Elberse and Verleun (2012), <i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	https://doi.org/10.2501/JAR-52-2-149-165	113	8.69	2.63
Arai et al. (2013), <i>European Sport Management Quarterly</i>	https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2013.811609	106	8.83	1.58
Geurin (2017), <i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2016-0157	72	9.00	4.59
Dix et al. (2010), <i>Young Consumers</i>	https://doi.org/10.1108/17473611011025993	71	4.73	1.00
Lee and Koo (2015), <i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2014-0195	68	6.80	2.31

Source: current study.

Authors

Most Productive Authors. Table 3 shows the most productive authors based on the number of publications. The analysis is not intended to reflect the overall academic impact or influence across all domains but rather focuses on scholars who have contributed the most articles to this specific research area. Various indices have been developed to assess research impact and productivity. The h-index is defined as the number of articles (h) authored by a researcher who has received at least h citations (Hirsch, 2005), whereas the g-index was introduced as an enhancement of Hirsch's h-index to measure the overall citation performance of a collection of articles (Egghe, 2006). The median number of citations that publications in the Hirsch core receive is known as the M-index (Bornmann et al., 2008). In the review of authors who had the highest number of articles related to our research topic (Table 3), 11 authors were identified, each of whom published five or more articles in this field.

Among the authors, Ko, Y. J. and Kunkel, T. ranked first and second, with 12 articles each (h-index of 7 with 374 and 302 citations respectively). Brison, N. T. (h-index of 4, 52 citations), Hassan, A. (h-index of 3 and 39 citations), and Arai, A. (h-index of 5 and 312 citations) (see Table 3).

Most Cited Articles. The highly cited paper by Till and Busler (2000) in the *Journal of Advertising* leads with 633 citations and a substantial average of 25.32 citations per year. Other significant papers were authored by Bush et al. (2004) in the *Journal of Advertising Research* and Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) in *Sport Management Review*, with 225 and 169 citations, respectively. In addition, in continuation with the review of the top globally cited research papers in this field, we can refer to the articles of Arai et al. (2014), Carlson and Donovan (2013), Elberse and Verleun (2012), Arai et al. (2013), Geurin (2017), Dix et al. (2010), and Lee and Koo (2015). Table 4 provides a comprehensive summary of these articles and their respective impact. However, it is worth noting that these metrics are based exclusively on the WoS database, which generally indexes a more selective range of journals compared to platforms such as Google Scholar. As a result, some highly cited articles (e.g., Arai et al., 2014) may appear with lower counts here than those available on more expansive platforms.

Sporting Context of the Research

A large portion of the literature (n = 129) falls into non-specific sports contexts independent of a particular sport. Among the sport-specific categories, footballers (n = 17) and basketball players (n = 16) were the most frequently studied. This trend aligns with the global popularity and commercial prominence of these sports, in which athletes enjoy extensive media exposure, strong fan bases, and high-value endorsements. Studies on footballers frequently focus on European or international stars, whereas basketball-related branding research focuses on NBA athletes and their influence on global markets. Collegiate athletes (n = 14) also represent a significant area of interest where college sports carry substantial commercial and cultural weight. Much of this literature engages with themes such as amateurism, identity development,

and, more recently, the implications of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) legislation which has transformed the branding landscape for student athletes. In research involving Olympians (n = 12), athletes from various Olympic sports were frequently grouped into a single category. This underscores the symbolic power of the Olympic Games as a unifying mega-event, where the focus is often on collective representation, national identity, and global exposure, rather than on individual sporting disciplines. Female athletes (n = 19) have gained increased scholarly attention, reflecting growing interest in the gender dynamics of athlete branding. These studies have frequently explored issues such as gendered media portrayals, equity in endorsement deals, and the challenges female athletes face in building and sustaining strong personal brands. “Named athlete case studies” (n = 13) includes both single and dual-athlete focused studies that provide in-depth, contextualized analyses of individual athlete's branding strategies, often highlighting their personal narratives, crises, and identity construction. Prominent figures such as Taha Akgül¹⁰, Colin Kaepernick¹¹, and Marcus Rashford¹² are a few subjects. These studies provide nuanced insights that may not emerge from broader sample-based studies. Other categories, such as American footballers (n = 11), extreme sports athletes (n = 7), team sport athletes (n = 6), and runners (n = 6), indicated a diverse but less saturated interest in athlete branding across sporting disciplines (see Table 5).

Table 5. Top 10 Contextual Foci of Athlete Brand Studies.

Athlete Studies in Sporting Context	Frequency
Non-specific sport context	129
Female athletes	19
Footballers	17
Named athlete case studies	14
Basketball players	16
Collegiate athletes	14
Olympians	12
American footballers	11
Extreme Sports athletes	7
Team sport athletes	6
Running (Track and field, marathon, etc.)	6

Source: current study.

Most Important Keywords

Keywords are important words and phrases that express the main nature of a research article and help to find and retrieve articles in scientific databases by summarizing their main topics. Keywords are terms and expressions that refer to the main topics and axes of the research content and indicate the central areas studied by researchers to generate new data and information and expand the boundaries of knowledge (Tripathi et al., 2018). WoS records feature two types of keywords: Author Keywords, supplied by the original authors, and Keywords Plus, derived from the titles of the cited references (Zhang et al., 2016).

Author's Keywords. Author keywords indicate the terms that authors consider to best reflect the content of their papers (Li et al., 2009). Eight terms appeared more than nine times, ranging from 10 to 34. “Social media” was top with 34 mentions, “athletes” with 18, “athlete branding” with 17, “athlete brand” with 15, “brand management” with 12, “branding” with 11, “sports marketing” with 11, and “athlete endorsement” with 10. The prominence of terms such as “social media,” “athlete branding,” and “brand management” highlights their substantial role and focus.

Social media research in this context focuses on several issues, including self-presentation (Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Laurell & Söderman, 2018), fan engagement (Doyle et al., 2022; Na et al., 2020), authenticity (Fox & Royne Stafford, 2021; Nichols & Shapiro, 2023), and product endorsements (Brison et al., 2016; Pickett & Brison, 2019), on diverse platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (Geurin & McNary, 2021; Su et al., 2020b). With respect to athlete branding and brand management, research has addressed constructs such as brand identity (Linsner et al., 2021), brand image (Arai et al., 2014), and brand personality (Carlson & Donavan, 2013) and how these impact how athlete brands are perceived by fans and stakeholders. Constructs like brand equity (Hasaan et al., 2018a), brand loyalty (Mahmoudian et al., 2021), brand trust (Deheshti et al., 2016), brand authenticity (Hasaan & Fişne, 2021), and brand awareness (Williams & Pedersen, 2023) have been widely employed to assess athletes’ strength, value, and recall. Emotional and relational dimensions are captured through constructs, such as brand attachment (Ruihley & Pate, 2017), brand association (Kunkel et al., 2022), brand relationships (Kunkel et al., 2020), and brand reputation (Sato et al., 2015).

Figure 4 illustrates the trends in these topics over time, specifically the years in which these keywords began to appear in the author-provided metadata, revealing shifts in focus within the field, as expressed by the authors. Terms such as “celebrity,” “social media,” and “athlete brand” have gained prominence in recent years, reflecting the growing significance of social networks and athlete branding. Figure 4 displays the temporal trend of keywords based exclusively on author-supplied or database-indexed keywords in the selected articles. It reflects when specific terms started appearing as formal keywords, not necessarily when the concepts emerged in the literature. Notably, terms like “brand” and “celebrity” existed conceptually in earlier works (e.g., Arai et al., 2013, 2014), although not listed as keywords. This limitation is acknowledged and discussed further in the Limitations section.

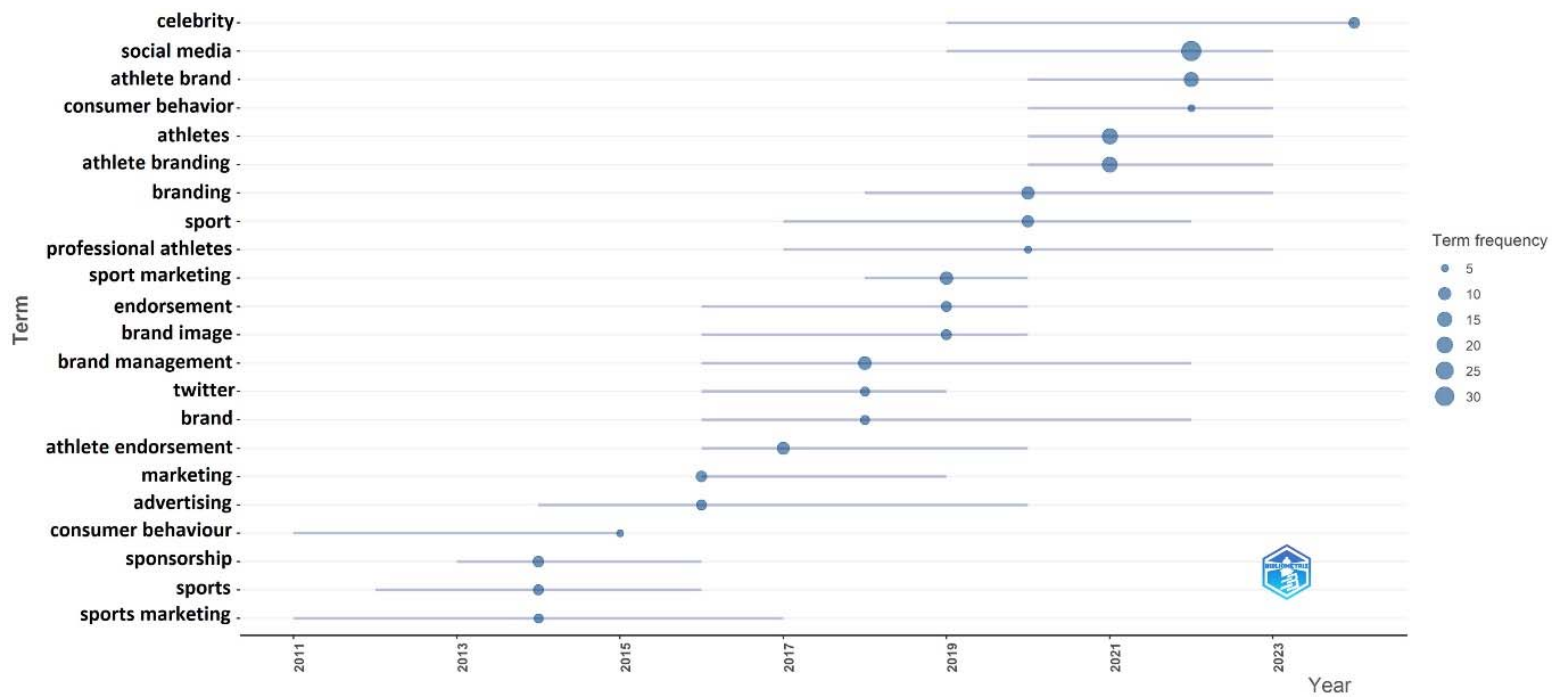


Figure 4. Trend Topic via Author Keyword. Source: Current Study.

Table 6. Key Terms and Thematic Clusters (7+ Occurrences).

Occurrences	Words	Cluster	btw centrality	Cluster_Label
34	social media	9	3,410.753	social media
18	athletes	9	1,939.361	
17	athlete branding	9	1,737.060	
15	athlete brand	9	1,307.978	
12	brand management	9	1,532.118	
11	branding	9	1,075.354	
11	sport marketing	9	1,533.847	
8	celebrity	9	680.485	
8	marketing	9	898.057	
8	sponsorship	9	1,097.045	
7	brand image	9	1,062.756	
7	advertising	4	1,067.865	advertising
7	endorsement	4	1,019.997	
7	sports	4	854.398	
10	athlete endorsement	3	2,306.342	athlete endorsement
9	sport	3	668.603	

Source: current study.

Detailed Key Word Analysis. Table 6 presents keywords with seven or more occurrences, based on the author's keywords and key metrics. This table illustrates the distribution of keywords across occurrences, clusters, and centrality scores, helping identify key topics and their interconnections in the thematic analysis. The keyword “social media” stands out, with 34 mentions in Cluster 9, which also has the highest centrality score of 3,410.753. This highlights the pivotal role social media plays in studies related to sports marketing and athlete branding. Other significant keywords, such as “athletes” (18 occurrences) and “athlete branding” (17 occurrences), are also present in this cluster, with centrality scores of 1,939.361 and 1,737.060, respectively. These high scores indicate the strategic importance within the network. The keywords in Cluster 9 primarily relate to brand management and sports marketing, and their elevated centrality emphasizes their key role in the field.

Table 7 presents a comprehensive breakdown of the key themes, based on the keywords identified throughout the study. Each theme was supported by a series of associated keywords that represented the critical concepts relevant to the research objectives. The number of keywords listed under each theme reflects the depth and diversity of the thematic area, whereas the aggregated occurrence of keywords provides insight into the frequency and prominence of these concepts across the dataset. The distribution of keyword occurrences allowed the identification of the most significant themes, with 132 keywords under theme 13 showing the highest frequency of 504 occurrences. This analysis helps illustrate which areas dominate discussions and highlight key trends related to athlete branding and associated topics.

Table 7. Research Themes Based on the Author's Keywords.

No.	Theme	No. of Keywords	Aggregated Occurrence
1	Athlete Brand Management	9	23
2	Athlete Endorsement	14	48
3	Advertising	13	48
4	Brand	24	70
5	Athlete Transgression	6	14
6	Athlete Image	15	69
7	Product Involvement	6	18
8	Representation	3	6
9	Social Media	32	185
10	Sport Communication	1	2
11	Athlete Activism	4	11
12	Sport	3	6
13	Diplomacy	2	4
TOTAL		132	504

Source: current study.

Keywords Plus. Keywords plus are automatically generated by the WoS database and are derived from the titles of the cited references within each article rather than from the article's title or author keywords, thereby capturing the content of an article with greater depth and diversity (Garfield, 1990). Keywords Plus presents additional, often broader, concepts that may not be explicitly stated by the authors but are relevant to the content of the article. Examining

both types of keywords enhances the robustness of thematic mapping by combining author-intended focus with citation-based context. The top 10 keywords with the highest frequency are: “impact” with 60 occurrences, “sport” with 45, “perceptions” with 22, “customers” with 21, “celebrity” with 20, “model” with 20, “social media” with 19, “antecedents” with 17, “match-up hypothesis” with 17, and “physical attractiveness” with 17, and are broadly aligned with those identified by the authors.

Future Research Based on Bibliometric Mapping

Thematic analysis of the various articles highlights the importance of various topics and identifies distinct future research themes.

Theme 1: Key Themes in Branding Research

Key themes include “brand loyalty,” “athlete endorsement,” and “consumer behavior.” These clusters are well-developed and central to the field, including the influence of athletes and their behavior on their brands and how their endorsements influence consumers and their perceptions.

This theme contained articles related to athletic performance (and athlete transgressions), athlete brand management, and their endorsements. As athlete branding continues to gain prominence, this analysis paves the way for future research and practical strategies that are aligned with the growing intersection between sports management, branding, and digital media. First, a key aspect of athlete brands is their performance on the field and behavior off the pitch, as these behaviors can affect the endorsed brands, impact fan behavior, perceptions and identification (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Lee & Koo, 2015). Athlete brands create loyalty to the endorsed brand and affect fan and consumer behavior, such as purchase behavior and word-of-mouth (Dix et al., 2010). Previous research has applied established branding concepts such as brand awareness, brand equity (Park et al., 2019), and brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) have also been applied to athlete branding, suggesting future research regarding their use in various sports and contexts. Their influence is not limited to endorsed brands, but also includes being perceived as a societal role model and linked to causes such as social and environmental issues (Biz & Schubert, 2024; Dix et al., 2010; Ogiso et al., 2022). Research topics include the type and nature of brand endorsements, as well as how these aspects can influence a wide range of fan and consumer behaviors (Ferreira et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020).

Second, media selection (e.g., TV commercials and social media) is also a fruitful area for future research (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006). Advertising uses different appeals, such as humor; hence, future research can investigate what type of advertising appeal is suitable for promoting athletes (Walsh & Williams, 2017). The ubiquitous nature of social media and the presentation of athletes on social media (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011) present research opportunities. This

includes the choice of social media platforms on the portrayal of the athlete online (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), how they connect with fans (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), and fan engagement with the athlete brand (Ferreira et al., 2022). Additionally, the impact of the platform on fan perceptions, such as perceptions of expertise and attractiveness of the athlete endorser, is recommended (Kim et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Niche Themes

This theme comprised topics such as “authenticity,” “commercialization,” and “Olympics.” The literature on this theme identifies niche themes specifically associated with athlete brands. Professional events such as the Olympics provide athletes with an opportunity to reach a broader audience and become celebrities (Rahman & Lockwood, 2011). How athlete brands differ before and after an event is also an important research topic (Geurin & McNary, 2021). Being associated with this event as their country's representation influences fan perceptions of athlete brand aspects such as credibility, expertise, and attractiveness (Fox & Royne Stafford, 2021). Perception of the event (Rahman & Lockwood, 2011) and the branding of the nation hosting the event (Dubinsky, 2023) can also serve as research topics.

Authenticity is one of the most widely researched topics in human brand research (Osorio et al., 2020). Authenticity refers to how people are true to themselves (Kennedy et al., 2021) and includes what is presented to consumers and the brand with which it is associated. It is a complex construct (Hasaan & Fişne, 2021), yet there is a lack of consensus regarding its meaning (Moulard et al., 2021), including among athletes (Panthen et al., 2024). It is used to build a successful and lasting connection with their audience. Various antecedents of authenticity of athlete brands have been identified, including rarity and stability (Moulard et al., 2015). Other factors include originality, heritage, passion, morality, visibility, and changes over the athlete lifecycle (Bredikhina et al., 2024; Hasaan & Fişne, 2021). In the case of celebrity endorsers, authenticity has received limited attention (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023), thus providing numerous research opportunities. These include how authenticity factors are used by athletes in the development of their personal and team athlete brands, differentiating between the various types of authenticity (Moulard et al., 2021). It is assumed that authenticity provides positive outcomes and that fans care about an athlete's authenticity (Moulard et al., 2021) yet it is unclear how fans perceive the authenticity of athletes (Moulard et al., 2015). Further, it is unclear whether there are demographic effects on these perceptions (Smith-Ditizio & Smith, 2023), suggesting a need for research.

Theme 3: Emerging or Declining Themes

These themes are less developed and can benefit from additional research. Human branding is grounded in established branding literature, drawing on concepts and frameworks that apply to personal brand development and has been widely researched (Thomson, 2006). Research has explored the process of building an athlete brand (Panthen et al., 2024) and the athlete brand

lifecycle (Caz et al., 2021), including retired athletes (Taniyev & Gordon, 2019), which provides several research opportunities. Examples of future research include how brand image varies over time, as well as factors such as nostalgia and its effect on athlete brand perceptions (Taniyev & Gordon, 2019).

Storytelling is a strategic power as a communication tool (Monarth, 2014). It is widely used in sports, with content used to create brand images and marketing a brand (Laurell & Söderman, 2018). A relatable story increases connection with fans (Taniyev et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of crafting a story that relates to a specific group (Laurell & Söderman, 2018). Stories comprise a range of common elements (Anglin et al., 2023), thus which elements are used and how they are communicated in media, including social media, is a possible focus of future research (Laurell & Söderman, 2018).

Panthen et al. (2024) propose a typology of athlete brands including a brand antagonist, brand supporter and brand manager which also highlights future research opportunities. Additionally, an athlete brand is part of a broader relationship within a brand architecture (Williams et al., 2015), influenced by other actors, each with a different brand meaning due to the spillover effect (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Athlete brands are built within a sports ecosystem comprising a wide range of actors that provide sports experiences (Buser et al., 2022; Tsiotsou, 2016). Athlete brands are connected to other sports and external brands (Brand et al., 2024). These brands affect the perception of the athlete, the team as well as league (Doyle et al., 2023), highlighting the need to conduct research into how stakeholders (e.g., managers) who also have their own brand (Berndt, 2022) affect individual athlete brands. This provides an opportunity to investigate athlete brand building by both individual athletes and within a sports team.

Theme 4: Basic Themes

Basic themes include fundamental topics such as “Brand image,” “athlete endorsement,” and “sports” that are well integrated into the research field but not yet extensively developed. Core constructs, such as brand identity (Linsner et al., 2021), brand image (Arai et al., 2014), and brand personality (Carlson & Donovan, 2013), form the foundation of how fans and stakeholders perceive athlete brands. Constructs like brand equity (Hasaan et al., 2018a), brand loyalty (Mahmoudian et al., 2021), brand trust (Deheshti et al., 2016), brand authenticity (Hasaan & Fişne, 2021), and brand awareness (Williams & Pedersen, 2023) have been widely employed to assess the strength, value, and recall of athlete brands. Brand image is an integral part of understanding a brand, and specifically develops in the consumer's mind (Linsner et al., 2021), contributing to an athlete's reputation (Boroujerdi et al., 2024). While athletic performance contributes to brand image, attractive appearance and marketable lifestyle are also important (Arai et al., 2014). Previous research has indicated that fan engagement is impacted by the age and gender of the athlete portrayed (Bodaghi & Oliveira, 2021), including portrayal on social media (Smith-Ditizio & Smith, 2023). Fans not only support their own team but may also take an oppositional position to athletes and teams that play against their teams. This may

also influence their perceptions of other brands associated with opposing athletes and teams (Popp et al., 2016; Popp et al., 2018), providing an important future research opportunity. Emotional and relational dimensions are captured through constructs such as brand attachment (Ruihley & Pate, 2017), brand association (Noh et al., 2023), brand relationship (Kunkel et al., 2020), and brand reputation (Sato et al., 2015).

The athlete image does not develop in isolation but is also influenced by other brands, such as the team, manager, and owner, as well as their online identity (Macková & Turková, 2019). Research opportunities in this area include the relative importance of the various components of athlete brand image as well as the relative importance of the other brand components in diverse sports (Arai et al., 2014) within the sports ecosystem (Panthen et al., 2024). Furthermore, many athletes play team sports, and there is a potential carryover effect of a team's success on the perceptions of the athlete and associated brands (Arai et al., 2014). Brand image and brand identity studies from the perspective of the athlete tend to be “neglected” (Linsner et al., 2021), thus numerous research opportunities can be presented, including the perspective of brand managers and other actors in the sports ecosystem (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020).

Athletes are also an integral part of broader society, highlighting the importance of social interaction and community dynamics. Themes such as fan engagement (Su et al., 2020b) and brand community (Carlson & Donovan, 2013) highlight fans’ role in co-creating and amplifying the athlete's brand. Constructs such as brand crisis management (Bredikhina et al., 2022) and brand resilience (Wong & Hung, 2023) have been introduced to understand how athlete brands maintain stability amid career changes and recover from reputational damage. Endorsement effectiveness (Lee & Koo, 2015), co-branding (Hasaan et al., 2018b), and brand extension (Walsh & Williams, 2017) are constructs evidence of the strategic and economic utility of athlete brands. The emerging construct of athlete-led brand activism (Brown et al., 2022) reflects the growing intersection between athlete branding and social influence.

Additional Future Research Opportunities

The analysis of the literature indicated other research opportunities associated with geographic location, methodologies implemented and the sports that can serve as the focus of future empirical studies.

Location-Related Research Opportunities

Although bibliometric studies provide a comprehensive picture of macro research trends, some subtle aspects and dynamics related to athlete branding in different cultural or geographic contexts may be overlooked. Given the diverse importance of sports in different cultures, athlete brands have diverse powers and significance worldwide, requiring additional research. For example, athletes can influence fan perceptions of a sport, as seen in Türkiye where Kübra Dağlı¹³ has elevated interest in taekwondo and Taha Akgül¹⁴ has shaped perceptions of

wrestling (Hasaan et al., 2020). Brand image is context-specific, thus, intercultural research on the four themes identified in the thematic research is also suggested (Ferreira et al., 2022; Kunkel et al., 2019).

Methodological Research Opportunities

The field would benefit from more qualitative methods to deepen our understanding of these dimensions, including ethnography (Jiang et al., 2024), case studies to explore athlete branding in various sociocultural contexts, and mixed methods. Quantitative methods have been widely used in previous research, yet opportunities remain regarding measuring constructs (Boroujerdi et al., 2024; Linsner et al., 2021; Moulard et al., 2021), the use of big data (Jiang et al., 2024), and longitudinal studies to examine how athlete brands change from a temporal perspective (Hasaan et al., 2016).

Research Opportunities Related to the Sports Context

While much of the athlete branding literature focuses on elite, globally recognized athletes, recent developments highlight the growing relevance of micro-celebrity brands and underrepresented athlete groups. The emergence of college athletes monetizing their NIL in the U.S. and the rise of social media-driven semi-professional athlete influencers illustrate how branding is being redefined at lower tiers of visibility (Kunkel et al., 2021; LeRoy, 2023). Additionally, athlete branding strategies differ significantly across niche sports (e.g., rugby, cricket, or track & field) (Fişne & Hasaan, 2020; Kunz et al., 2016), culturally specific contexts (such as Muslim women athletes navigating gender and religious dynamics) (Grubic, 2022; Hasaan et al., 2024), and regionally dominant sports like cricket or wrestling (Hasaan, 2021; Hasaan et al., 2020). These examples demonstrate that athlete brands are not monolithic; instead, they are shaped by intersecting factors, such as cultural background, sport-specific norms, audience scale, and institutional structures. Future research can explore how branding strategies differ across these varied contexts and how visibility, access, and identity influence brand formation and perception.

Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current state of research related to the “athlete brand” and propose a research roadmap. Previous studies have conducted bibliometric analyses focusing on specific journals (Gaviria-Marin et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2021), single databases (Herrera-Franco et al., 2020; Khudhair et al., 2020), and multiple databases (Farooq, 2024; Sánchez et al., 2017). Additionally, various fields of management have undertaken similar analyses (Martínez-López et al., 2020; Taqi et al., 2019; Valenzuela et al., 2017), hence, this study attempted to elaborate on athlete branding through bibliometric analysis. These results should be viewed considering the search constraints, as only literature explicitly referring to

“athlete brand” or “athlete branding” was included, potentially excluding influential works that use alternative terminology.

In answering RQ1, which explores how athlete brand research has developed over time, the analysis of 250 documents on the “athlete brand” shows a clear upward trajectory in publication activity, particularly since the mid-2010s. This growth reflects the increasing academic recognition of athlete branding as a distinct research area. It demonstrates that athlete branding research has evolved from scattered, conceptually diverse publications into a more coherent, interdisciplinary body of knowledge, increasingly anchored in sport management, marketing, and communication. The majority of publications appear in impactful academic sports journals by several leading academics. This indicates the development within the field, reflecting how it has evolved from sporadic contributions to a more systematic body of work across leading sport management and marketing journals. Beyond documenting publication growth, the analysis highlights the central role of a small set of journals, authors, and recurring concepts in shaping the trajectory of the field. This concentration reflects both the progress of consolidation and the risk of intellectual narrowness, offering opportunities for future studies to broaden perspectives by engaging with underrepresented contexts, sports, and cultural settings.

In answering RQ2, which addresses the current state of athlete brand research, the findings suggest that the field reflects a degree of maturity while continuing to draw academic attention and publications. Studies are no longer confined to sport-specific journals but increasingly draw on interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate insights from disciplines including marketing, communication, and cultural studies. These areas can provide a stronger conceptual foundation for future research as they help in understanding consumer behavior and social media engagement and clarify the functioning and value of athlete brands. It is anticipated that this trend will continue given the increasing significance of sport and athletes in society, the commercialization of sport (Winell et al., 2023), and the heightened interest in athletic branding and related topics.

RQ3 addressed the identification of future research opportunities based on the bibliometric mapping. Through this mapping and performance analysis, this study identified key research areas and emerging themes that can influence future athlete branding research. The key and basic research themes (themes 1 and 4) include consumer behavior and fundamental branding topics such as brand loyalty. These brand-related constructs have been studied in other contexts, indicating their suitability to provide a solid foundation to understand both the athlete brand and the associated perceptions of these brands (Hasaan et al., 2018a; Linsner et al., 2021; Mahmoudian et al., 2021). Branding concepts such as brand equity, brand identity, and brand authenticity are influenced by both the athlete’s on- and off-field activities, including the conduct of team members and the overall reputation of the sport. The significance of sport in broader society indicates the impact of athletes among a broad group of external stakeholders, not just fans. This is important given the intersection of the social embeddedness of athletes, their economic utility and the potential to positively influence society. Research opportunities

relating to how athletes who are associated with different sports are perceived on diverse social media platforms, and the most suitable appeals to influence fan behavior. Themes 2 and 3 reflect the niche and developing topics in the area. Niche areas such as the Olympics and athlete authenticity provide opportunities to investigate these unique topics as they pertain to athletes (Moulard et al., 2021). This includes authenticity, which, while also associated with celebrities, requires investigation due to its impact on athlete branding and perceptions. The developing topics in athlete branding indicate the frontier identified in this study. These are rich research areas, providing the opportunity to contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes and activities in athlete brand building and management while also providing new contexts to study these activities.

RQ4 focused on identifying additional future research opportunities suggested by an analysis of the literature. This study identifies the need to expand athlete branding research into previously unexplored sports locations, including cross-country studies to explore the themes identified in the bibliographic mapping, fan perceptions, and the use of social media in these geographical areas (Ferreira et al., 2022; Fişne & Hasaan, 2020; Hasaan et al., 2024). We also suggest the use of diverse research methodologies (Jiang et al., 2024), including the use of big data and longitudinal studies (Hasaan, 2021). Additionally, the studies highlight the potential to expand research into less-explored sports, the athletes taking part in these sports and their brand-building activities.

To summarize the research opportunities associated with research questions 3 and 4 and resulting from the analysis, possible research questions were formulated. These suggested questions can be used to further develop and drive research into athlete branding. These questions appear in Table 8.

Table 8. Research Questions Associated With the Future Research Opportunities.

Research Questions	Authors
<i>Research associated with the themes</i>	
Theme 1, Motor themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the demographic factors of fans impact perceptions of athlete brands? Dix et al. (2010); Taniyev and Gordon (2022) • How can social media impact athlete branding and how does this differ between the various platforms? Green (2016) • Are there particular causes that are particularly appropriate for athlete brands? (Biz & Schubert, 2024) • How do athletes manage fan perceptions of their on- and off-field behaviors? Hasaan et al. (2018b) • What type of advertising appeals are suitable for athlete brands and how does the type of appeal impact customer perceptions? Kunkel et al. (2019) • Does the appeal of athlete brands vary across different sports? Kunkel et al. (2019) • How do athlete brand portrayals differ between the various social media? Schibblock et al. (2022) • How does athlete portrayal impact the perception of the athlete's expertise, credibility and attractiveness? Kim et al. (2020)
Theme 2, Niche Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there differences in an athlete's brand when they are part of a successful (winning) team compared to a losing team? (Arai et al., 2013) ; (Arai et al., 2014) • Is there a connection between the brand perceptions of the event, the athletes and the events? Dubinsky (2023) • Do fans' perceptions of athlete brands vary depending on the type of event? Fox and Roynce Stafford (2021) • What behaviors (both positive and negative) are associated with the athlete brand impact authenticity perceptions among fans? Nichols and Shapiro (2023) • How do perceptions of authenticity vary based on the success of the athlete (e.g., on-field and off-field)? Nichols and Shapiro (2023) • How do athletes perceive changes in authenticity over the athlete lifecycle? Bredikhina et al. (2023); Caz et al. (2021) • How does an athlete brand change before and after an event (e.g., Olympics) in both traditional and online media? Does it differ across cultures? Geurin and McNary (2021)
Theme 3, Emerging or Declining Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the characteristics of the athlete brand vary over the life of the athlete brand? Hasaan et al. (2016) • How do athletes use storytelling as part of their branding strategy? Taniyev et al. (2022); Williams and Heo (2023) • How are various story characteristics perceived by fans? Williams and Heo (2023) • What are the outcomes of the various athlete brand typologies and do fan perceptions differ towards them? Panthen et al. (2024) • How does the broader sports ecosystem impact the development of the athlete brand? Panthen et al. (2024) • What attributes make an athlete's brand from the perspectives of marketing specialists? i.e., what makes them marketable? Taniyev et al. (2022) • Does there need to be alignment between the athlete brands with the sports teams? Wong and Hung (2023)
Theme 4, Basic Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does an athlete's brand image align with the self-identity of sports fans? Taniyev and Gordon (2022) • How do sports fans from various demographic backgrounds identify with an athlete's brand? Taniyev and Gordon (2022) • Are the elements/components of the athlete brand equally important across all sports and among all cultural groups? Arai et al. (2014); Arai et al. (2013) • How does the importance of the elements/components of the athlete brand vary across different sports? Hasaan et al. (2016) • How do fans of other teams engage with the brand of an opposing team. Popp et al. (2018) • How do demographic factors affect the portrayal of the athlete brand and does this differ between different types of media (i.e., traditional and online media)? Smith-Ditizio and Smith (2023) • How does the professional image and the media persona vary across the lifecycle of the athlete (and lifecycle brand)? Caz et al. (2021)
<i>Additional research directions</i>	
Location-related research opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do culture and intercultural contexts impact the athlete brand and the behavior of fans and consumers? Jiang et al. (2024) • Social media and the athlete brand - how does it differ across cultures? Sotiriadou et al. (2025) • How do athlete brand authenticity attributes vary across countries and cultures and other sports? Hasaan and Fişne (2021)
Methodological research opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding to include the use of other qualitative methods (e.g., ethnography) and quantitative methods (e.g., big data) Jiang et al. (2024) • What about developing new measurements for athlete-branding related constructs Linsner et al. (2020)
Contextual research opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do constructs vary across sports that are regionally dominant or how they are perceived among sports fans Fişne and Hasaan (2020)

Source: current study.

Conclusion and Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, our findings extend the literature by demonstrating how athlete branding has matured into a distinct research domain, yet one still tied to its roots in human and celebrity branding. The science mapping reveals that foundational marketing constructs such as loyalty, identity, and authenticity are not only central but also serve as bridges between athlete branding and wider theories of consumer behavior, reputation management, and digital identity. This bibliometric view therefore provides a roadmap to strengthen the conceptual distinctiveness of athlete branding, while also integrating it more systematically into broader branding and sport management theory.

This study has several implications. It not only maps the macro trends in the athlete branding literature, but it also indicates future research themes as well as suggests research associated with location, methodology, and context. It underscores the increasing importance of branding and related branding constructs that can be used in athlete branding research, in both general sports research as well as in niche areas such as the Olympics. The increasing role of social media in modern society highlights the need for research into aspects including athlete authenticity within broader society.

These insights can open new avenues for academics and practitioners, and provide integrative approaches that consider the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of athlete branding. By highlighting unexplored areas and future research directions, we aim to contribute to scientific discourse and guide further studies. This study also seeks to clarify research into athlete brands through a comprehensive bibliometric analysis, identifying athlete brand research developed and the current state of athlete brand research, suggesting current research issues and possible research areas, advancing the development of the field.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. One limitation is associated with bibliometric analysis, which relies on predefined keywords, including “athlete brand” or “athlete branding.” Although this approach ensures clarity, replicability, and analytical rigor, it narrows the scope of the included literature and may have omitted highly cited or seminal works addressing athlete brand concepts under different terminology. For instance, given the interdisciplinary and conceptually broad nature of athlete branding, several studies using alternative terminology may be excluded despite their conceptual relevance. Future studies could complement this approach by incorporating content-based screening or thematic inclusion strategies to capture broader yet contextually relevant works.

Bibliometric analyses are also based on citation indices, which may not fully reflect all the dimensions of scientific collaboration or the importance of research. Moreover, although bibliometric methods offer a structured approach, they remain influenced by the researchers’

choices of databases, search terms, and inclusion/exclusion criteria, potentially introducing a form of sample-selection bias. This limitation should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. Future research can mitigate this issue by experimenting with more expansive search strings, employing iterative or multi-round keyword strategies, and validating the keyword set through expert review, thereby reducing the risk of omission and increasing the reliability of results.

This research only used the WoS database, which may not cover articles in other scientific databases, thus reducing the comprehensiveness of the data. Researchers might consider extending the analysis to additional databases such as Scopus or conducting a multi-database review (including WoS, Scopus, and others) to achieve more comprehensive coverage. In addition, exploring “gray literature” or utilizing platforms such as Google Scholar can further broaden the scope and richness of the literature sample.

Research results are also affected by constant database updates, with new articles can influence the results. The literature was collected until August 2024, thus, conclusions cannot be drawn for the entire year. Moreover, the articles were only in English, ignoring research conducted in other languages. Expanding the review to include multilingual studies can provide a more global and culturally diverse understanding of athlete branding.

Beyond addressing these methodological limitations, future research can build upon the findings of this review by conducting in-depth systematic or scoping reviews of athlete branding literature, focusing on specific sports or athlete demographics (e.g., female athletes, niche sports). Additionally, exploring qualitative approaches such as interviews or case studies can deepen understanding of athlete brand construction, evolution, and management across different sports and cultural settings. By combining bibliometric analyses with qualitative and multi-disciplinary methods, future work can further refine theoretical frameworks, shed light on underexplored areas, and expand the practical and academic discourse on athlete branding.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve language and readability of certain parts of the article. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

1. Sweden/ golf
2. USA/ boxing
3. Portugal/ football
4. USA/ basketball
5. USA/ boxing
6. Argentina/ football
7. USA/basketball
8. USA/basketball
9. Italy/motorsport
10. Turkey/wrestling
11. USA/ American football
12. England/ football
13. Türkiye/ Taekwondo
14. Türkiye/ Wresling

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