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1   **Remapping the Sport Brandscape: A Structured Review and Future Direction for Sport Brand**

2   **Research**

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25   **Remapping the Sport Brandscape: A Structured Review and Future Direction for Sport**

26   **Brand Research**

27

28   **Abstract**

29   Despite consistent interest in sport brands and the multitude of brands in the sport ecosystem,

30   extant knowledge remains fragmented and unstructured. The purpose of this study is to integrate

31   and synthesize extant sport brand research, appraise the current state of knowledge, and suggest

32   future research directions. Following structured literature review guidelines, we coded 179 peer-

33   review articles published in four leading sport management journals between 2000-2020. Results

34   reveal increased publications in the area of sport brand research within the four examined

35   journals, as well as opportunities to increase theoretical and methodological rigor. Based on the

36   mapping and critical review of extant literature, we introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem &

37   Environment and discuss two distinct and complementary areas related to *theory and research*

38   *designs* and *topical domains* to address existent concerns and guide future research directions.

39

40   *Keywords:* Branding; Consumer behavior; Strategy; Management; Marketing; Sport organization

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42   **Remapping the Sport Brandscape: A Structured Review and Future Direction for Sport**

43   **Brand Research**

44   Branding, an essential part of marketing and management, is a source of brand equity,

45   competitive advantage, and differentiation from competitors (Kapferer, 2012). The International

46   Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2019) defines a brand as an "intangible asset [. . .]

47   intended to identify goods, services or entities [. . .] creating distinctive images and associations

48   in the minds of stakeholders, thereby generating economic benefit/values." High brand equity is

49   associated with a host of positive organizational and personal outcomes including increased

50   sales, higher consumer loyalty, ability to charge price premiums, and enhanced marketing

51   communication efficacy (Keller, 1993; Kotler & Keller, 2015). Brand equity also benefits

52   consumers through increasing confidence in consumption decisions, facilitating brand-related

53   information processing, and leading to higher use satisfaction (Aaker, 2009). As a result,

54   practitioners and scholars alike have sought to understand brand management.

55   The quantity of sport brand research published in top sport management journals has seen

56   a dramatic increase over the past decade as scholars seek to understand brand positioning

57   strategies and how brands associated with leagues, teams, athletes, and sponsors influence

58   consumer attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Sport brand research has

59   generated a multitude of results and findings; however, organizing these conclusions to generate

60   meaningful insight is challenging due to the broad nature of the topic and lack of overarching

61   structure. Much of this research can be piecemeal and disjointed, lacking in theoretical

62   grounding or established connections between disparate research streams (Funk, 2017).

63   To capitalize on an opportunity to synthesize sport brand research in a manner which can

64   help drive theoretical and managerial impact, we conducted a structured review of research

65   focused on sport brands. We position this review in the sport brand ecosystem framework

66   (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), which was conceptualized to comprise federations, leagues, teams,

67   individual athletes, events, and other sport-related non-profit and commercial/sponsor brands.

68   This framework was established on the basis of brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler,

69   2000), where athletes are defined as sub-brands while their teams are master brands (e.g., Na et

70   al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015) and teams are defined as sub-brands while their

71   leagues are master brands (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2013, 2014, 2017), and provides a starting point

72   from which we can organize the extant literature to identify connections, locate inconsistent

73   conceptualizations and findings, and generate a roadmap for future research directions. Based on

74   the review of existing sport brand research, we developed an overview of past, present, and

75   future research directions and identified patterns within the published literature. These patterns

76   build on the valuable extant work, illuminate the latent structure underlying existing sport brand

77   research, identify (under)utilized theories, and allow us to identify areas that merit greater

78   scholarly attention. We introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment and provide

79   theoretical, methodological, and focus-specific recommendations for future sport brand research.

80   **Literature Review Strategy**

81   Consistent with our goals to synthesize the existing sport brand research, appraise its

82   state, and reflect on the future research directions, we conducted a structured literature review

83   (Page et al., 2021). A structured literature review represents a "method for examining a corpus of

84   scholarly literature, to develop insights, critical reflections, future research paths and research

85   questions" (Massaro et al., 2016, p. 767), and provided a framework for our search, review, and

86   assessment of relevant studies from the above-mentioned publications. Our approach featured

87   structured identification and review of articles, coding, and quantitative analyses, which allowed

88   us to create a broad summary of the state of the field, while also documenting the path of our

89   exploration through predetermined article inclusion and exclusion criteria and detailed decision-

90   making process (Pickering & Byrne, 2014; Thomson et al., 2019, 2020).

91   The review focused on existing sport brand-related research published in four prominent

92   sport management and sport marketing journals, namely: *Journal of Sport Management* (*JSM*),

93   *Sport Management Review* (*SMR*), *European Sport Management Quarterly* (*ESMQ*), and *Sport*

94   *Marketing Quarterly* (*SMQ*). Our journal selection criterion was based on the journals' impact

95   within the discipline (Massaro et al., 2015). Each of the four chosen journals represents a major

96   sport management or marketing publication, affiliated with an influential academic association

97   within sport management, and indexed in Clarivate's Social Sciences Citation Index and Journal

98   Citation Reports. We identified the years of 2000-2020 as the timeframe for eligibility of

99   publications for the study because prior work has shown that most of the early major

100   advancements in sport brand research occurred in the early- to mid-2000s (Kunkel & Biscaia,

101   2020). Developments since 2000 provide the impetus to drive a research agenda over the next

102   two decades and beyond.

103   Data were collected through a structured approach based on predetermined keywords

104   (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). Specifically, to collect the data, we accessed the archives on the

105   respective websites of all four journals and manually identified and coded all relevant articles.

106   Article identification and analysis was comprised of three steps: 1) reading of titles, keywords,

107   and abstracts to identify articles that contained the words "brand," "brands," or "branding" in the

108   beforementioned attributes, 2) re-reading abstracts to shortlist the articles relevant to the study,

109   and 3) text analysis thorough reading and coding the shortlisted articles (de Araújo et al., 2017;

110   Shan & Robinson, 2006).

111   Between the years 2000-2020, the four journals collectively published 2,635 publications,

112   which included 2,234 academic articles ($N_{JSM} = 662$, $N_{SMR} = 625$, $N_{ESMQ} = 470$, $N_{SMQ} = 477$), as

113   well as editorial notes, book reviews, commentaries, digests, and practitioner interviews. Of

114   those academic articles, 179 contained words "brand," "brands," or "branding" in at least one of

115   the title, author keywords, or abstract, and were related to the topic of sport branding. These

116   articles ($N_{JSM} = 42$, $N_{SMR} = 43$, $N_{ESMQ} = 28$, $N_{SMQ} = 66$) represented the sample for our review.

117   While some relevant articles could have been inadvertently omitted, considering the number of

118   papers selected, the sample offered a comprehensive representation of sport brand research

119   conducted over the past two decades (Massaro et al., 2015). The overview of data collection flow

120   is presented in Figure 1.

121   [INSERT FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

122   **Descriptive Analyses**

123   As a part of our structured literature review, to provide an outlook on the state of sport

124   brand research and how that literature has evolved, we employed a coding framework to conduct

125   a series of quantitative descriptive analyses on the identified sample (Massaro et al., 2015). This

126   approach allowed us to identify emerging trends, providing a more comprehensive perspective

127   on the state of research compared to a descriptive-based narrative literature review (Pickering &

128   Byrne, 2014). These analyses included examining how many sport brand-related articles were

129   published in each of the four focal journals over time as well as reviewing the theoretical

130   foundations in which studies were grounded, study context, and patterns in keywords that

131   authors used in describing their research. In addition, we conducted a methodological assessment

132   that determined the prevalence and limitations of the employed research methods.

133   A careful examination of the research context is necessary to interpret research findings

134   (Funk, 2017). Therefore, we examined the sport-brand context along four dimensions. First, we

135   report on the frequency with which each sport appears in our article corpus. Second, we

136   categorized articles based on their primary focus (consumer, organizational strategy,

137   employee/internal branding, or other). Third, we examined the level of the focal brand (e.g.,

138   league, team, athlete, or sponsor). Finally, we evaluated how often studies focused on a single

139   brand versus the interactions between multiple brands.

140   For theoretical foundations, we focused on theories or models explicitly listed by authors

141   as guiding their research. Where authors described academic concepts (e.g., brand equity or

142   brand image), we captured that information even when a reference to a specific named theory or

143   theoretical model was absent. This approach helped to determine the extent to which previous

144   work has been grounded in theory or emerged using logic-driven approaches. To analyze

145   prevalent themes in the collected body of research, we conducted a textual network analysis on

146   the co-occurrence of the author keywords (i.e., how often two keywords were listed in

147   association with the same article) using VOSviewer software (van Eck & Waltman, 2010),

148   version 1.6.12. A total of 135 articles (75.4%) we reviewed had keywords specified, yielding a

149   total of 577 keywords and phrases (393 unique). Prior to analysis, we combined synonymous

150   terms (e.g., collegiate sport and college athletics), plural and singular forms, and variant spellings

151   (e.g., different English spelling conventions). After combining synonymous terms, plural and

152   singular forms, and variant spellings, we obtained a reduced list of 326 unique words and

153   phrases. We examined how often keywords appeared as well as the keyword co-occurrence

154   network that reflects how often pairs of keywords appeared together.

155   In examining research methods, we first categorized published articles a macro level

156   (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, or conceptual). Continuing to examine the statistical

157   approaches to branding research, we further delved into papers that employed quantitative

158   methods (quantitative or mixed methods) and examined their research procedure and robustness

159   of results (e.g., number of studies, inclusion of power analysis, and effect size). To facilitate our

160   assessment, we classified studies involving quantitative data into five categories: descriptive,

161   cross-sectional, experimental design, mixed-method, and longitudinal, considering both the

162   timeframe of the data collection and the purpose of the research design.

163   Since an important aspect of structured literature reviews is identifying the future

164   research recommendations (Massaro et al., 2015), we conducted a content analysis of the future

165   research directions of articles ($n = 62$) published in the last three years of the publication

166   timeframe within the dataset (i.e., 2018-2020). We selected three years given the fast-changing

167   nature of the modern sports business landscape and the long time it takes for academic articles to

168   go from the inception of the research idea to the initial journal submission, to final publication.

169   We also delimited it to this timeframe as it is logical that articles published later in our defined

170   timeframe (i.e., 2018-2020) would have been at least in part led by the future directions offered

171   in earlier work (i.e., 2000-2017). Results of these analyses are presented in the next sections.

172   **Results**

173   In this section, we present the results of our structured literature review. We begin by

174   reporting the prevalence of sport branding-related research in our four focal journals since 2000.

175   Next, we present results of our analysis of keywords and keyword co-occurrence as a means of

176   understanding which topics are most prominent and relationships between those topics in the

177   sport branding literature. Third, we examine the research contexts in which sport branding

178   research takes place, including what sports, perspectives, brand level, and whether studies

179   investigated interactions between multiple sport brands. We continue by highlighting the

180   methodological choices made by sport branding scholars, first at a macro level and then looking

181   at specific methods with a focus on quantitative research and analysis. In the next section, we

182   report on the theoretical foundations that authors report using to support their research. Finally,

183   we conclude with results of our analysis of future research directions suggested by authors in

184   articles published in the past three years (i.e., 2018-2020) to understand where sport branding

185   researchers recommend the field advance next.

186   **Publication Outlets**

187   Articles included in our review represent approximately 8.0% of those published by the

188   four journals since 2000, ranging from 6.0% of articles in *ESMQ* to 13.8% of articles in *SMQ*.

189   Despite publishing fewer articles overall, *SMQ* led the way with 66 brand-related articles (13.8%

190   of all articles), reflecting the journal's narrower scope and focus on sport marketing topics.

191   *ESMQ* published the fewest sport branding articles, with just under half (12 of 28; 42.9%)

192   coming in 2020, presumably driven by a special issue on "Exploring new routes within brand

193   research" (Ströbel, & Germelmann, 2020). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, there is an

194   overall increasing trend in the number of sport brand-related articles published, rising to a high

195   of 30 in 2020, the most recent year examined. Interestingly, 2019 was an aberration, with only

196   eight sport branding articles published during this time. This may reflect the impact of two

197   special issues in 2020 attracting submissions and leading to some authors directing their research

198   to one of those issues in preference to regular submission that might lead to publication in 2019.

199   Previous research has found that on average, articles published in special issues have shorter

200   time from submission to publication (Olk & Griffith, 2004). By contrast, research from

201   marketing finds promotions are associated with dips both before and following promotional

202   activity (Macé & Neslin 2004); a similar effect could occur around special issues.

203   [INSERT TABLE 1 AND FIGURE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

204   **Author Keywords**

205   The quantitative and textual network analyses of the author keywords revealed prevalent

206   research topics and the relationships between them. Keyword count suggested that most common

207   keywords were sponsorship ($n=23$), brand ($n=20$), brand management ($n=16$), social media

208   ($n=14$), and marketing ($n=10$). We provide a list of keywords that were associated with more

209   than five articles in Table 2. Further, analysis of author keyword co-occurrence (van Eck &

210   Waltman, 2010) elucidated nuances within focal areas. For example, the keyword athlete brand

211   was closely associated with social media. Other similar terms such as athlete endorser were

212   paired with concepts like advertising. These insights reveal the enhanced impact that social

213   media has had on branding at the individual athlete level, and how this has been captured within

214   scholarly research pursuits. Brand-related keywords like brand management, brand development,

215   and brand perceptions were regularly used together, showcasing the importance of considering

216   consumer perspectives (perceptions), in driving brands forward (development) and guiding

217   overall business strategies (management). Interestingly, keywords related to professional sport

218   (e.g., NFL) were commonly paired with terms like attendance and sponsorship, whereas

219   keywords related to federations (e.g., IOC) were more likely to be used in conjunction with

220   social representation, co-branding, and a focus on events. While the use of keywords may be

221   subjective, and restrictions on not using keywords that appear in the title are imposed by some

222   outlets, this analysis provides additional insights into the network of topics concurrently

223   examined within our sample and the state of sport branding research. The results of network

224   analysis are pictured in Figure 3.

225   [INSERT TABLE 2 AND FIGURE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

226   **Sport-Brand Context**

227   Findings revealed the prevalence of research in mainstream sports and a lack of

228   perspectives on non-mainstream, niche, and emerging sports. The most common sport context

229   was soccer ($n=38$), followed by American football ($n=18$), basketball ($n=15$), and baseball

230   ($n=11$). Further, most articles focused on a consumer perspective ($n=135$), followed by

231   organizational strategy ($n=25$). This highlighted the prevalence of consumer behavior research

232   and shortage of strategic brand management perspectives (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Brand level

233   showed a relatively less concentrated pattern. Team-level brands ($n=64$) were most often studied,

234   followed by sponsors ($n=46$), athletes ($n=36$), and events ($n=30$). Most of the articles ($n=96$)

235   reported on studies that involved a single brand, while a sizable minority ($n=81$) included

236   multiple brands, confirming prior observations that scholars tend to study sport brands in

237   isolation (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). There is some evidence that the proportion of brand-related

238   articles that assess multiple brands has increased recently, as multi-brand studies have been a

239   majority each year since 2018. Detailed results are provided in Tables 3-5 and Figure 4.

240   [INSERT TABLES 3-5 AND FIGURE 4 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

241   **Theoretical Foundations**

242   Analysis of patterns of usage of theoretical foundations showed the diversity of theories

243   currently used in sport brand research, yet also a strong tendency to gravitate toward heavily

244   drawing on few selected frameworks. Across the set of papers in the structured review, authors

245   listed more than 40 theories or theoretical models as the theoretical foundation for their research.

246   Many of these theories were named only once or a few times. Those named relatively frequently

247   included social identity theory (e.g., research on consumer identification with sport and sponsor

248   brands), schema theory (e.g., research on brand relationships and brand personality, including

249   sponsor and sport brands), congruence or congruity theory (e.g., research on implications of

250   sponsor-sponsee brand fit), associative network theory or the associative network memory model

251   (e.g., research on brand co-promotions), and network theory (e.g., research on fan and brand

252   communities). Theories that are commonly referenced in mainstream branding research that were

253   named relatively infrequently in our corpus include signaling theory and balance theory. Authors

254   frequently referred to broad areas that are not specific theories as their theoretical foundation.

255   Common examples include brand equity ($n=30$), brand association ($n=14$), brand personality

256   ($n=10$), brand image ($n=10$), and human brands ($n=10$).

257   **Methodological Approaches**

258   Findings highlighted dominance of quantitative methodologies in empirical sport brand

259   research studies. Nearly all of the articles in our review (95.0%) reported the results of empirical

260   studies, with approximately two-thirds of those articles using quantitative research methods.

261   Overall, 114 (63.7%) of the papers we reviewed were quantitative and 49 (27.4%) were

262   qualitative. Mixed method approaches that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative

263   approaches in the same project were relatively infrequent, accounting for only seven articles

264   (3.9%).

265   We conducted a methodological assessment of 121 papers that incorporated quantitative

266   methods (quantitative or mixed methods). The most common analytic method was analysis of

267   variance (ANOVA, including MANOVA), which was used in 43.8% of the quantitative articles

268   we examined. Other common analysis methods included structural equation modeling (primarily

269   covariance-based or CB-SEM) and linear regression. Results reveal that most of the branding

270   research relies on cross-sectional studies. Only two (1.6%) were longitudinal or had longitudinal

271   components.

272   **Research recommendations**

273   Largely, future directions published in the sample of papers reflected either limitations of

274   the studies reported in the article or general best practices advice for research design. That is, it

275   was overwhelmingly common for authors to suggest replicating their studies and results in

276   different countries, cultural environments, and sport settings. Many authors recommended

277   employing longitudinal data collections, despite the fact that longitudinal designs were almost

278   entirely absent from the sport branding literature. Suggesting additional sport contexts,

279   particularly recommending replication in women's sport, was common, although authors rarely

280   provided any indication of why or in what ways the specific sport context might advance theory.

281   While many of the suggested future research directions appeared largely formulaic, we

282   want to recognize that some authors actively engaged with their results to suggest future research

283   designed to build specifically on their conclusions. Such recommendations are necessarily

284   idiosyncratic to a specific research project and thus are numerically dwarfed by generic, anodyne

285   suggestions. Yet, these exceptional cases represent what scholars should do to promote continued

286   theoretical advances and a literature that builds upon itself for incremental knowledge

287   generation.

288   **Discussion**

289   In this section, we first discuss the most common theoretical perspectives and emerging

290   trends in sport branding literature, then we critically examine the methodological approaches

291   used by sport branding researchers. The state-of-the-art picture on sport branding research

292   reveals prevalent tendencies as well as important gaps in theory building and methodological

293   rigor that require future attention.

Theory

295   The field of sport brand research is broad, as indicated by the complex sport brand

296   ecosystem, which explains why authors examining sport brands draw on a wide range of

297   literature and theory as the foundation for their research. Sport management scholars have

298   actively differentiated their field from mainstream business and developed their own theories

299   (Chalip, 2006), which may explain why signaling theory or balance theory have not been utilized

300   frequently to examine sport brands. One unique aspect of the sport industry is the connection of

301   brands within the sport brand ecosystem. Therefore, research examining a brand in isolation

302   without considering effects of associated brands provides limited value to sport brand

303   knowledge, as sport brands interact – particularly from a consumer perspective (Kunkel et al.,

304   2013).

305   There are linguistic differences on the definition of theory and theoretical frameworks,

306   yet commonly a theory describes a general principle or body of principles offered to explain

307   phenomena (Merriam-Webster, 2021) and theoretical frameworks refer to a systemic and

308   detailed explanation of how and why phenomena occur and thus form the foundation to

309   formulate theories (Henderson et al., 2004). Our review indicates authors strive to build their

310   research on theoretical foundations, yet often mislabel broad, atheoretical areas as theory. For

311   example, Keller's (1993) foundational article focused on customer-based brand equity that built

312   the foundation for some of the most cited articles in the field of sport brand research (e.g.,

313   Gladden & Funk, 2002) is more a classification than a theory. This shows that sport brand

314   research can be relevant and impactful by examining a phenomenon without contributing to a

315   specific theory or can be used to establish programmatic research focused on knowledge-

316   building as "one study is unlikely to fully explain a sport management phenomenon or address a

317   research question" (Funk, 2019, p.9).

318   While Lewin (1945) famously held that "nothing is as practical as a good theory" (p.

319   129), theory building has become a must-have checkbox in academia, such that authors routinely

320   describe even merely descriptive results as a theoretical contribution. This uncovers either a

321   confusion in relation to what theory is or an aspiration to *sell* as theory something that is not yet

322   theory. Good theory captures causal relationships; that is, the *why* embedded in the relationships

323   between phenomena or concepts (van Knippenberg, 2011). Theorizing, on the other hand, relates

324   to the early, essential stages of theory development (Weick, 1995). Merely describing the

325   relationships between constructs without revealing why these relationships exist is insufficient

326   for adequate theoretical understanding (Doherty, 2013). However, interim struggles toward

327   mature theories also should not be devalued (Weick, 1995). Chelladurai (2013) observed that

328   theorizing represents a continuum, and although "a classificatory scheme does not have the same

329   status as a full blown and established theory, it is also true that developing a classification of the

330   observed phenomena is fundamental to any form of scientific inquiry" (p. 23). As such, pre-

331   theoretical works are a necessity for developing sound theory (Weick, 1995). As a discipline,

332   sport management serves a twin role as both an explanatory science, conducting descriptive and

333   predictive research, and a prescriptive science, conducting diagnostic and prescriptive research to

334   understand causal relationships and generate recommendations for how to bring about desired

335   outcomes. Therefore, sport branding researchers are in a unique position to build upon logical

336   arguments grounded in observed phenomena, prior experience, and existing knowledge, resulting

337   <mark>in meaningful pre-theoretical work that will prove useful in addressing the challenges of building</mark>

338   <mark>our own theory in sport management (Fink, 2013)</mark>

339   Ideally, knowledge building and theory building happen at the same time, when findings

340   are generalizable beyond the context and the research contributes to a higher degree of progress

341   along the contribution continuum (Ladik & Steward, 2008). However, given the rapid

342   development of sport brand practices mainly driven through technological innovation (Ratten,

343   2020), sport brand researchers, reviewers, and editors should consider the relevance and potential

344   impact of research findings (Levy & Grewal, 2007) – particularly in exploratory research settings

345   as authors may contribute knowledge to the field without fully formulating the theoretical

346   underpinning of the observed findings – to spark knowledge generation. Following a

347   programmatic research approach, this can lead to a combined effort of the field to develop

348   impactful research. Meanwhile, we encourage authors not to suggest that their research is based

349   on theory when it is not, merely to satisfy a desire to satisfy academic norms. We further call for

350   authors to carefully embed their research in theory rather than tangentially mention or allude to a

351   theory or theories, so that theoretical contributions become more evidentiary and impactful.

352   **Methodological Approach**

353   Our review reveals several threats to the methodological rigor in sport branding research,

354   especially when examining the dominant quantitative approach. First, the limitation of cross-

355   sectional studies' predictive ability was discussed within some of the papers we reviewed;

356   however, collectively, the prevalence of cross-sectional designs makes it difficult to generalize

357   about dynamic relationships among sport brands and their stakeholders. Specifically, cross-

358   sectional analyses based on linear models cannot provide accurate results as variables are

359   assumed to remain constant over time, thus failing to address chronological variability (Spector,

360 2019). Moreover, as exogenous variables and outcomes are simultaneously assessed, there is

361 generally little evidence of temporal causality. It is likely that the relationships measured in sport

362 branding research vary over time, especially since fans' relationships with sport brands are likely

363 to deepen when brands maintain relationships or dwindle over time when facing intense

364 competition. This is particularly relevant when examining sport brands within a network of

365 associations as those relationships are highly subject to change (Daniels et al., 2019), for

366 example, the transitory nature of a team roster as individual athletes join and depart. As a result,

367 longitudinal data is particularly valuable since it can be used to establish a causal relationship

368 between the different factors that determine consumers' desired branding outcomes. To date,

369 longitudinal investigations of sport branding have been centered on the development and change

370 of brand associations and team identity of new teams (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2016; Wear & Heere,

371 2020). However, other important variables like brand personality, brand loyalty, and brand fit

372 should also be investigated longitudinally. Experimental design has become increasingly popular

373 in recent years, but most of these studies relied solely on a single study design. In 39

374 experimental studies, only three incorporated three studies, while eight used two studies. Out of

375 these 11 multi-study articles, only four used different stimuli between experiments.

376   Second, experimental designs were commonly used to test the effectiveness of a

377 sponsoring brand on consumers in sport branding research. Research studies typically examined

378 a specific event and a set of brands as the research context, then tested the hypothesized

379 relationship between the attributes of sponsorship messages and branding outcomes (e.g., brand

380 attitude, purchase intention). The robustness and generalizability of results from a single study

381 seem questionable. It is advantageous to employ experimental designs to minimize the effects of

382 variables other than the independent variable, thus improving the internal validity to determine

383   potential causal effects; however, the external validity of the study must also be considered

384   (Morales et al., 2017). The randomization elements embedded in online surveys or in laboratory

385   settings limit the generalizability of consumer responses to specific stimuli. It should be noted

386   that the goal of researchers should not be to increase external validity rather than to assess

387   external validity to understand where findings may apply and where they might not (Lynch,

388   1999). Given that mediated sport consumption occurs in a complex, crowded marketplace, the

389   ecological validity of the experiment design should be seriously considered.

390   In summary, this assessment points to the need for sport branding research that moves

391   beyond cross-sectional study designs and a more transparent manner of reporting the results.

392   Power calculations appeared in less than 20% of the papers, yet only one paper reported the

393   effect size. Sport branding studies that use quantitative methods should also pay more attention

394   to statistical issues that arise when assumptions in the standard linear regression model are

395   violated. Heteroscedasticity is of particular concern given that online user generated data (e.g.,

396   number of likes and comments) is an emerging source of data as well as user generated data. In

397   addition, given the limited number of mixed-method studies, future researchers should also

398   consider more mixed-methods studies for improved data triangulation.

399   One more limitation that ought to catch researchers' attention is selection bias. Both

400   qualitative and quantitative research can suffer from distortions in sample selection, which may

401   be the result of researcher decisions or self-selection decisions made by agents in the study

402   (Zaefarian et al., 2017). Moreover, any information that pertains to the design or method of the

403   study, such as the point in time, the setting, and eligibility criteria was normally implicit but not

404   explicitly available. It was not always possible to know from the published article when or how

405   participants were recruited and how this may have affected the results of samples or surveys.

406   Sport branding research is largely concerned with fans' reactions, so selection bias is more

407   apparent since researchers are likely to have predetermined preferences for finding fans as well

408   as those who are willing to participate in sport branding research. On top of that, most of the data

409   gathered by sport brands' social media or online forums come from highly engaged fans, which

410   is not always representative of the total target audience. Overcoming selection bias is of vital

411   importance as sport branding research bolsters effects in areas of inclusion and diversity (Melton

412   & MacCharles, 2021) and seeks to better understand how sport can engage with new individuals

413   and sectors of society.

414   **Contribution and Recommendations for Future Research Directions**

415   By remapping the sport brandscape, the current research synthesizes extant knowledge to

416   offer directions to advance the literature. Specifically, we advance two distinct and

417   complementary areas which require attention and should be integrated into future research

418   examining the sport brand ecosystem. First, we advocate for improved research designs to

419   examine under-represented aspects identified that have been limiting the generalizability of

420   findings and likely contributing to ad-hoc management decisions. Second, we reconceptualize

421   the sport brand ecosystem framework and encourage the investigation of new topical domains

422   for scholars to derive insights benefitting both those brands within the sport ecosystem and to

423   wider society.

424   **Theory and Research Design**

425   To start with, the ever-growing importance of social media in the sport ecosystem (Filo et

426   al., 2015) has led to a growing number of studies examining how sport brands can leverage

427   social platforms (e.g., Doyle et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). Although researchers acknowledge that

428   the brand-consumer dynamic varies depending on the platform and its embedded uses and

429   functions (e.g., Weimar et al., 2020), further studies which consider multi-platforms are

430   warranted. Similarly, the new ways digital technologies allow brands to interact with consumers

431   (e.g., virtual reality; Kunz & Santomier, 2019) and the integration of esports into team branding

432   strategies (Bertschy et al., 2020) are progressively entering the research agenda and offer new

433   branding research routes which should be explored (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Given that the

434   credibility of scientific claims is established with evidence of replicability using new data (Nosek

435   & Errington, 2020), the development of replication studies and the provision of open data and

436   pre-registered studies (Standen, 2019) are encouraged to deepen the understanding of how social

437   media and new technology is shaping the sport branding landscape.

438   Despite the common acknowledgement that longitudinal approaches are critical to

439   advance sport branding theory (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2020), cross-sectional

440   studies continue to saturate the literature. Similarly, there is a lack of experimental designs and

441   most brand-related research is either purely qualitative or quantitative. Also, as opposed to most

442   branding studies in leading marketing journals, multi-study approaches are scarce. While we do

443   not dispute the value offered by studies utilizing cross-sectional and wholly quantitative or

444   qualitative approaches, longitudinal and mixed-methods work is pivotal to advance the field and

445   contribute to wider academic and professional conversations with neighboring fields (Ko & Lee,

446   2018). Thus, we echo Funk et al.'s (2016) call for more rigorous methodological work to

447   advance knowledge on the relationships between consumers and brands involved in the sport

448   ecosystem. Specifically, we encourage sport management scholars to move beyond cross-

449   sectional research designs and single-source (particularly self-report) data, or merely

450   acknowledging the weaknesses in research designs in article limitations sections and suggesting

451   that future scholars do better. Wide-spread adoption of this recommendation will enhance the

452   quality of sport brand research, increase the theoretical and practical impact, and improve the

453   credibility and status of sport management research. Similarly, as the field matures, we argue

454   that it is important to shift from scholarly metrics based on the number of articles published to an

455   approach that considers actual impact of the research on the sport ecosystem and beyond.

456   Lastly, as our review indicates, most branding studies published in the sport management

457   and marketing literature use convenience samples, with data collection typically occurring in a

458   single cultural environment (e.g., USA or Australia), sport (e.g., basketball or soccer), or setting

459   (e.g., professional or amateur sports). While the examination of the idiosyncrasies of each

460   context often provides useful insights for practitioners, we encourage researchers to adopt more

461   diverse data collection methods to further drive theory and enhance the generalizability of their

462   findings. Thus, moving forward, researchers should gather representative samples and collect

463   data from different sports, brands, and countries to develop multi-studies exploring the

464   similarities and differences of brand management in different contexts and provide a better

465   understanding of the global impact of sport brands in contemporary societies. Studies assessing

466   perceptions of men's and women's sport brands concurrently and acknowledging that these co-

467   exist within the same sport ecosystem, rather than seeing these as two separate research streams

468   are also strongly encouraged.

469   **Sport Ecosystem and Beyond**

470   We introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment (see Figure 5) as a basis for

471   organizing future sport brand research. The framework consists of the inner brand ecosystem that

472   accounts for the vertical brand architecture of sport brands and the event brand ecosystem that is

473   connected horizontally as event brands interact with the inner brand ecosystem, as indicated by

474   the double-headed arrow. The gray boxes surrounding these individual, yet connected,

475   ecosystems indicate the enclosed brands are also structurally connected – not just based on

476   consumer perceptions. The updated framework accounts for the outer brand ecosystem, where

477   external brands can temporarily enter the brand ecosystem of sport brands horizontally. While

478   athletes are nested within teams and teams within leagues, solely conceptualizing sport brands

479   according to this hierarchy risks mischaracterizing a collaborative partnership (athletes playing

480   on behalf of a team) with an ownership relationship (traditional brands within a brand

481   architecture) and may not reflect the reality of consumer perceptions of brand relationships. In

482   the modern sport brand ecosystem, some of the most powerful brands represent individual

483   athletes, who have been empowered by mainstream and social media to take control of and build

484   their personal brands independent of their respective team, league, or federation affiliations

485   (Kunkel et al., 2021).

486   [INSERT FIGURE 5 APPROXIMATELY HERE]

487   The Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment provides researchers with guidance on their

488   future research. For example, leagues, teams, athletes, and sponsors co-exist within the same

489   ecosystem and spill-over effects impact these brands due to a transfer of meaning in consumers'

490   minds (McCracken, 1986). However, despite some recent attempts to examine brand-to-brand

491   relationships (e.g., Su et al., 2020), most previous studies are focused on single-brand studies.

492   The brand architecture governing sport brands differentiates the field due to the numerous

493   vertical and horizonal hierarchies present in the sport ecosystem. Future research should examine

494   the implications of brand interactions within the sport ecosystem and changes in brand portfolio

495   on consumers.

496   The impact of social media empowering athletes to govern their own branding strategies

497   independent of (yet still impacting on) their team, league, event or association affiliations

498   provides a particularly interesting aspect to examine as technology continues to provide further

499   opportunities in this regard. Similarly, changes to legislation allowing student-athletes to benefit

500   from their name, image and likeness (NIL) necessitates further work on how individual athletes

501   can build their brands alongside how these changes impact related brands (Kunkel et al., 2021).

502   In addition, the increasing demand for brands to create shared value (Menghwar & Daood, 2021;

503   Su et al., 2021) calls for additional research to explore how brands can work together to create

504   value not only from fans, but also to fans and the wider society (Cook et al., 2021). Studies

505   advancing a transformative sport service research (Inoue et al., 2020) approach, which continue

506   to explore how sport intersects with individual and collective well-being, are particularly

507   encouraged.

508   Second, social media is a dynamic environment that allows two-way communications

509   between fans and brands in the sport ecosystem (e.g., Filo et al., 2015). The development of web-

510   based technologies has provided numerous opportunities to monitor and manage how fans

511   engage with sport brands on social media. Our review indicates that there is still much to be

512   discovered about sport brands and social media, with impacts on actual consumption one such

513   important area for scholars to examine. Future studies should extend the existent body of

514   knowledge by examining how both transactional (e.g., purchase of game tickets, branded

515   merchandise) and non-transactional fan behaviors (e.g., frequency of web visits, eWOM, content

516   liking, posts and comments; Yoshida et al., 2014) impact brand management practices and vice-

517   versa. The use of predictive analytics to explore fan reactions to brand messages may also

518   represent a fruitful research line to advance research and practice for brands in the sport brand

519   ecosystem. Research tracking new social media platforms, technologies, and modes of

520   consumption as they emerge and considering how these platforms can be collectively used

521   within a broader communications strategy, will also be important.

522   Third, our review identifies that little is known about how brand management is impacted

523   by the various stages of the brand lifecycle, nor how such effects impact other brands within a

524   portfolio. For instance, the growth in women's professional sport in recent years has provided

525   increased opportunities for organizations and sportswomen to build their brands. However,

526   men's sport has long profited from numerous social, historical, and economic conditions which

527   have not been equitably extended to women's sport (Delia, 2020). Similarly, women's sport

528   brands which are parallel to the same men's brand within a portfolio in some cases are 100 years

529   younger (e.g., Doyle et al., 2021). Research is needed to determine how sport brands can grow

530   across various stages of their lifecycle to produce impacts at the brand and portfolio level, as

531   well as how introductions, changes, or removals of brands from within a portfolio impact

532   consumers (Hasaan et al., 2021). This lifecycle perspective may also be applied to contexts

533   examining how sport brands adopt new technologies (e.g., non-fungible tokens or

534   cryptocurrencies) into their brand strategies.

535   Fourth, despite the wide variety of theories directly or indirectly used in previous studies

536   in the branding literature, our review indicates research is mainly conducted with a practical

537   perspective, and sound theoretical underpinnings are not evident in many studies. This may lead

538   to a limited application of work in which sport brand researchers speak only to themselves and

539   results are not deemed relevant to other fields (Funk et al., 2016). As sport brands can capitalize

540   on the emotional connection shared with fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005), additional

541   research is encouraged to draw from various theories and to build new theories to highlight the

542   interdisciplinary nature and show the potential of the sport ecosystem to act as a platform for

543   other service brand environments (Underwood et al., 2001).

544   **Limitations**

545   The present study provides an overview of the sport brandscape and outlines important

546   directions to advance knowledge. Yet, we acknowledge that it is not without its limitations. We

547   delimited the scope of our literature review to four prominent English-language sport

548   management journals to capture the discourse on sport brand research occurring in these

549   influential outlets. Research on sport brands and sport branding is published in venues beyond

550   these four journals, notably including mainstream business, management, and marketing journals

551   that may reach a broader audience than discipline-specific publications. Incorporating a review

552   of sport brand research in other journals could provide a more comprehensive perspective on the

553   current state of the literature and serve to differentiate work published within such outlets with

554   that published within the traditional outlets targeted by sport scholars. Similarly, we focused on a

555   twenty-one-year period from 2000-2020, restricted to the most prominent sport management and

556   marketing journals, and a set of defined keywords to help with our inclusion criteria. Although

557   these decision criteria were justified for the purposes of conducting a structured review of the

558   literature, it is likely that changes to these criteria may have added to or excluded some of the

559   179 research articles that we systematically analyzed. To the extent that sport brand research

560   published in our four focal journals differs from that published in other outlets, our choice of

561   publication outlet as an inclusion criterion may have excluded important perspectives. Overall,

562   we encourage further research, discourse, and perspectives to forward knowledge governing the

563   sport brand ecosystem.

564   Interpretation of our results is, naturally, influenced by our perspectives as researchers

565   active within sport branding. While we remain sensitive to our individual and collective

566   relationships with our research topic, it is impossible to discount the near certainty that our

567   conclusions are impacted by our personal and professional backgrounds and training. Our

568 research team has an international background, representing six nationalities, currently working

569 on three different continents. While this provides diversity in cultural and personal perspectives,

570 our professional experience is relatively more homogeneous. Similarly, our assessment of the

571 methodological approaches in the extant sport brand literature and related concerns regarding

572 statistical inferences and conclusions that could be supported by typical research designs was

573 focused almost exclusively on quantitative research. While this represents the majority of sport

574 brand research, it necessarily presents a partial picture of the state of the field. Additional

575 investigation of the methodological strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in

576 qualitative research of sport brands is warranted, as is future work examining how the field is

577 shaped by research published after this review, in 2021 and beyond.

Conclusion

579 In our article, we focus on a crucially important and emerging topical area. Sport brands

580 are a contemporary issue as the emergence of social media has enabled all individuals within the

581 sport industry to brand themselves, and numerous examples exist where individuals within the

582 sport ecosystem have used their status to achieve personal, societal, or economic gain. Brand

583 development and management are practically relevant to many stakeholders and provide an

584 opportunity to theoretically contribute to the sport management literature. The focus of the

585 present review was to challenge sport brand scholars, including the authors of this paper, to

586 elevate the field by taking bold steps forward both theoretically and methodologically. We hope

587 this work encourages the academy to tackle the limitations often spoken about in research, but

588 rarely addressed due to various constraints. We expect our article to produce valuable and much-

589 needed theoretical knowledge pertaining to how sport brands can be effectively managed,

590 alongside practical implications for numerous stakeholders in the sport industry. To guide future

591   research, we introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment and provide theoretical,

592   methodological, and focus-specific recommendations for future research. Our article establishes

593   a strong foundation for future sport brand research.

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829 **Table 1.** *Count of Sport Brand Research Articles by Journal and Year of Publication.*

Journal / Year	ESMQ	JSM	SMR	SMQ	Total
2000	0	0	1	0	1
2001	0	1	0	0	1
2002	0	1	0	2	3
2003	0	0	0	1	1
2005	0	0	1	0	1
2006	0	2	1	0	3
2007	1	1	2	5	9
2008	0	5	0	4	9
2009	1	3	1	3	8
2010	1	0	0	6	7
2011	0	0	3	3	6
2012	1	1	3	5	10
2013	3	3	2	6	14
2014	1	3	5	2	11
2015	0	2	4	1	7
2016	2	1	8	4	15
2017	2	5	3	4	14
2018	2	7	4	8	21
2019	2	2	1	3	8
2020	12	5	4	9	30
Total	**28**	**42**	**43**	**66**	**179**

830 *Note. ESMQ = European Sport Management; JSM = Journal of Sport Management; SMR = Sport*
831 *Management Review; SMQ = Sport Marketing Quarterly.*

832

833 **Table 2.** *Most Common Author Keywords.*

Keyword	Count	Keyword	Count	Keyword	Count
Sponsorship	23	Event	9	Consumer behavior	7
Brand	20	Branding	8	Brand association	6
Brand management	16	Team identification	8	Brand image	6
Social media	14	Brand equity	7	Co-branding	6
Marketing	10	Brand personality	7	Fans	6

834 *Note*. All author keywords that appeared more than five times

Table 3. *Count of Sport Context.*

Sport	Count	Sport	Count	Sport	Count
Soccer	38	Motorsport	8	Esports	4
American football	18	Rugby	7	Golf	4
Basketball	15	Ice hockey	5	Australian football	4
Baseball	11	Olympic sport	5	Action sports	3

Note. Count of sports listed at least three times. Articles that included multiple sport contexts are counted for each.

Table 4. *Count of Study Perspective.*

| Perspective	Count	Definition	Examples of Research
Consumer	139	Consumer viewpoint on sport brands, including consumer brand attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Consumer knowledge and values in relation to sport brands.	Effects of brand alliances on sports apparel expected price and user image (Wu & Chalip, 2013). Impacts of athletic performance on consumer perceptions of celebrity athlete credibility (Koo et al., 2012).
Organizational Strategy	29	Sport organizations' brand decision-making, strategies and tactics.	Strategies and actions employed by French soccer teams to build their brand (Couvelaire & Richelieu, 2005). Case study of brand building by a university (Lee et al., 2008)
Employee	11	Employee perspectives on brand-related issues.	Athlete perceptions of distractions inherent in social media and the need to build a brand during competition (Hayes et al., 2020). Employee perceptions of the organization's authenticity while pursuing expansion to mainstream markets (Giannoulakis, 2016).
General	2	Literature reviews and conceptual articles of general focus.	Review of extant brand research and future research directions (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Ströbel, & Germelmann, 2020)

Note. One article was classified as falling in both consumer and employee perspectives.

Table 5. *Count of Brand Level.*

Brand Level	Count	Definition	Examples of Research
Team	64	"Group of individuals who compete in a given sport representing an organization or brand at the national and/ or international level and that often possess a management structure. It is different from a club because it only focuses on one sport" [a]	Development of sport consumer team brand associations (Kunkel et al., 2013). Empirical assessment of professional team brand image (Bauer et al., 2008).
Sponsor	46	"Organizations that pay cash or in-kind fees to get the right to explore the commercial potential of being associated with a sport brand." [a]	Reactions to local and rival brands (Biscaia & Rocha, 2018). Impact of sponsorship alliance on sport and sponsor image (Kelly et al., 2016).
Athlete	36	"An individual who competes in a given sport and is often integrated in a club or team. Some athletes are popular figures in contemporary societies due to their on- and off-field attributes, becoming national and/or international stars" [a]	Conceptualization of the model of athlete brand image (MABI; Arai et al., 2014). Analysis of athletes' self-presentation on social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).
Event	30	"Sport competitive activities organized by (inter)national leagues or federations. It includes a fixed period of time and can be linked to a given sport or multi-sports." [a]	Development of host country brand image (Rocha & Wyse, 2020). Event ambush marketing (Ellis et al., 2011).
Merchandise, products, and services	21	Brands operating within sports, including sports apparel brands, sportsbooks etc.	Consumer responses to promotions of gambling during televised sport (Lamont et al., 2016). Activewear consumption (Zhou et al., 2018).
University	15	University that manages teams competing in intercollegiate varsity conferences and leagues.	Stakeholder attitudes toward intercollegiate athletic brands (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012). Assessing brand associations toward an intercollegiate sport (Ross et al., 2007).
League	10	"Organizing body composed by a group of professional or amateur teams that compete against each other in a given sport (e.g., handball). It is often organized at national level but can also have an international scope." [a]	Application of fan segmentation to leagues (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2015) Impacts of fantasy league participations on non-fans of Autosport (Goldsmith & Walker, 2015).
Federation	5	"Non-governmental bodies that administer a given sport at the national and/or international level, which are responsible for setting rules and regulations of that sport, promoting the sport among stakeholders, and organizing championships." [a]	Acceptance and usage of social media for marketing communications among employees of sport national governing bodies (Eagleman, 2013). Brand management practices in Canadian national sport organizations (Taks et al., 2020).

Note. [a] Definition adopted from Kunkel and Biscaia (2020, p. 8).
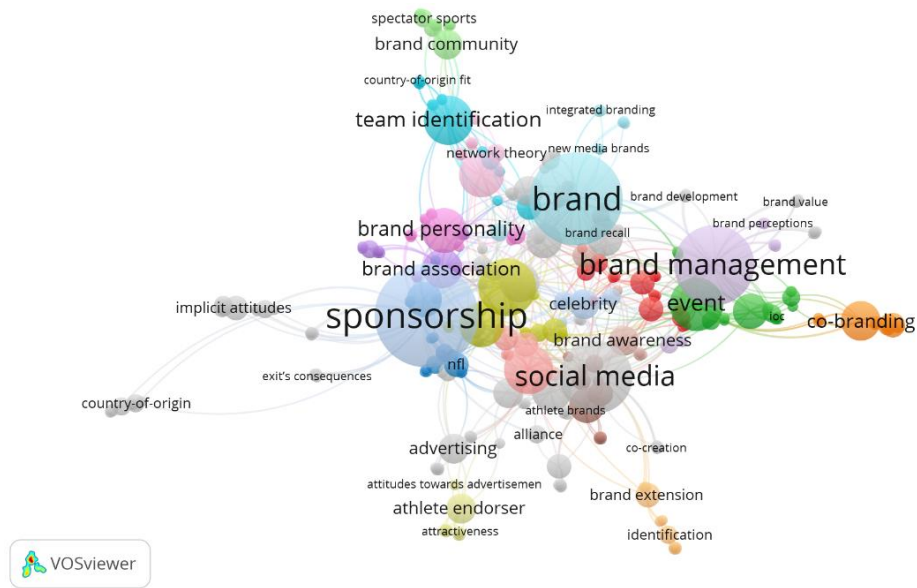
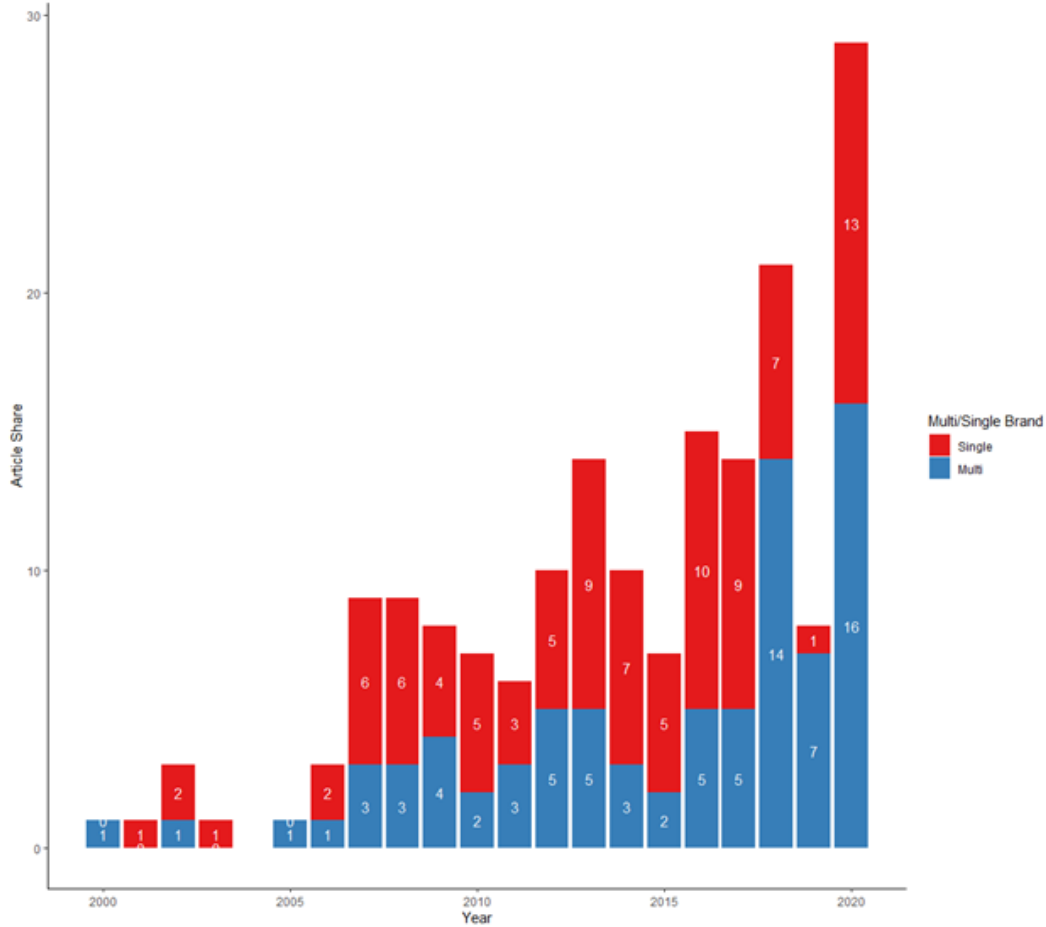**Figure 1.** *Data Collection Strategy.*
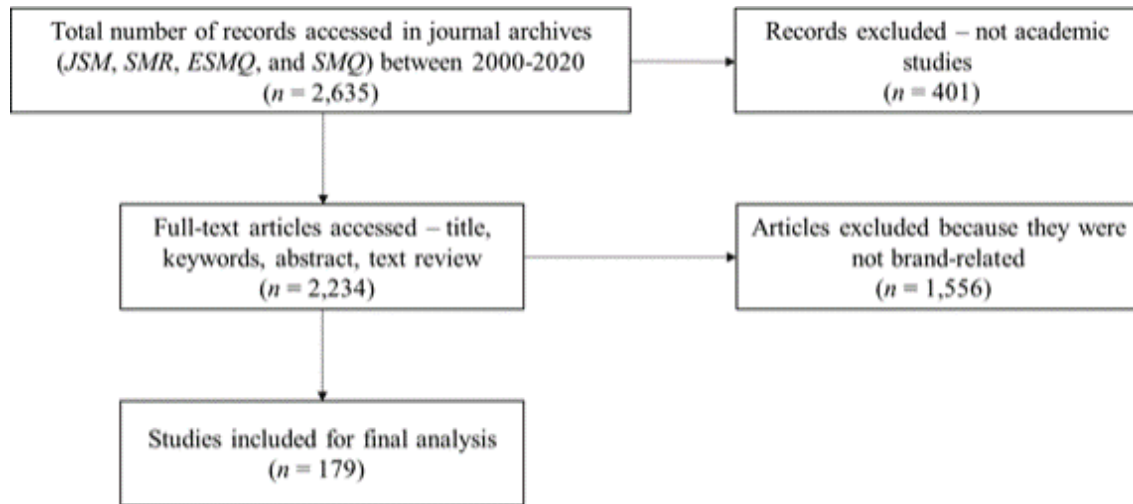
Figure 2. *Count of Sport Brand Research Articles by Journal and Year of Publication.*

Figure 3. *Visualization of the Network of Author Keyword Co-occurrence*

Figure 4. *Count of Articles by Number of Brands Considered.*

Note. Article counts for single and multi-brand articles for each year provided within bars.

Figure 5. *Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment.*

Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment