



Bibliometric Mapping of the Global Research Landscape of Marketing and Sponsorship in Women's Sports

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Abstract

This study offers a systematic bibliometric mapping of marketing and sponsorship research in women's sport, a field that has expanded rapidly yet remained analytically uncharted. Data were retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection. Following PRISMA-guided screening, a final corpus of 97 articles published between 1993 and 2026 was analyzed. Descriptive statistics examined publication trends, journal distribution, and citation patterns, while keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to identify thematic clusters. The temporal analysis reveals a pronounced acceleration after 2022, with nearly half of all publications appearing in the final four years of the study period. Structural catalysts including the NCAA's Name, Image, and Likeness policy and the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup help explain the timing of this shift. Publications are distributed across communication, sociology, and sport management journals, reflecting a historically gendered displacement toward critical social science outlets and the absence of a single disciplinary home. Citation patterns concentrate around a small number of foundational works, consistent with a consolidating rather than mature field. Five thematic clusters emerge from the co-occurrence analysis: post-feminist advertising critique, socio-institutional commercial governance, digital identity negotiation, gendered media consumption dynamics, and strategic personal branding. These findings establish a structural and interpretive baseline for a literature that has grown without synthesis. The thinness of the personal branding cluster and the unresolved tension between critical and applied research traditions identify where the field must invest to achieve genuine theoretical maturity.

Keywords: Bibliometric analysis, women's sport, sport sponsorship, sport marketing, thematic mapping



Introduction

Women's sport has undergone a profound commercial transformation over the past three decades. Sponsorship revenues, media rights deals, and merchandise sales have grown substantially, driven by rising participation rates, expanding fan bases, and increasing corporate interest in gender-inclusive marketing (Fink, 2015; Lopiano, 2000). The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, record-breaking WNBA attendance figures, and the rapid commercialization of collegiate women's athletics under Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) regulations, which for the first time allowed athletes to monetize their personal brands, illustrate how women's sport has become an increasingly attractive commercial proposition for brands and sponsors alike (Economou & Gamble, 2024).

The academic literature, however, has not kept pace with this growth. As early as 2001, Shaw and Amis demonstrated that corporate sponsorship decisions are shaped less by commercial logic than by managerial values, media representation, and mimetic pressures that collectively favor men's sport. This dynamic is not incidental. Caple et al. (2011) describe a circular relationship in which limited media coverage suppresses sponsorship interest, which in turn sustains low visibility, a self-reinforcing cycle that women's sport has long struggled to escape. By 2019, some cracks in this pattern had begun to appear. Morgan (2019) found that sponsors of women's Australian Rules football were motivated primarily by a desire to promote gender equality, framing women's sport as a commercially underexploited space rather than a risk.

Recent figures suggest modest but real progress. Women's professional sport sponsorships grew by 22% in a single year, though the gap with men's sport remains substantial (Joo et al., 2025). Jensen and Smith (2024) add a more encouraging finding: across more than 750 event title sponsorships, renewal rates for women's events were statistically comparable to those for men's, pointing to similar returns on investment. Yet the scholarly conversation has not caught up. Staley (2025) identified a marked absence of research on the commercial and financial dimensions of women's sport across four leading sport management journals, and Thomson et al. (2023) called for more theoretically innovative approaches to advance the field. Taken together, these assessments suggest that marketing and sponsorship in women's sport remain both undertheorized and underexplored. The necessity of a current evaluation is underscored by the recent volume of scholarly output. As the temporal analysis in this research demonstrates, nearly half of all relevant publications have appeared since 2022. This rapid expansion risks a fragmented understanding of the field, which makes a systematic synthesis essential for establishing a clear research trajectory.

This study addresses that gap by providing the systematic bibliometric mapping of marketing and sponsorship research in women's sport. In doing so, it offers both a structural overview of how the field has developed and a foundation for identifying where future scholarly attention is most needed.

Methodology

This study employs bibliometric analysis to map the intellectual landscape of marketing and sponsorship research in women's sport (Donthu et al., 2021). The unit of analysis is the individual article.



Database and Search Strategy

Data were retrieved from the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection on March 5, 2026. WOS was selected for its rigorous indexing standards and its established role as the primary database in bibliometric research. Searches were conducted in the Topic (TS) field, which encompasses titles, abstracts, and author keywords. Truncation operators (*) were applied to capture all relevant word variants. The following query was applied:

(women sport* OR female sport* OR women* athlet* OR female athlet* OR women in sport*)AND(market* OR sponsor* OR endorsement* OR brand* OR commerciali* OR advertis* OR naming right*)*

Two deliberate decisions shaped the search design. First, sport-specific terms such as football or tennis were excluded to avoid selection bias, as no principled criterion exists for privileging certain sports over others. Second, the search design deliberately omitted specific social media and digital communication terms. This decision was based on the premise that such platforms represent contemporary contexts for broader marketing activities rather than independent domains. By prioritizing fundamental concepts such as branding and advertising, the analysis allowed digital platforms to emerge organically within the thematic clusters. This approach ensures that the study captures digital engagement only where it is fundamentally integrated into the commercial and promotional discourse of women's sport. The search was restricted to articles and review articles in English, yielding an initial pool of 200 records.

Screening

Records were screened at the title and abstract level by two reviewers following PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), yielding a Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = .92$. A record was retained if its primary focus concerned marketing or commercial sponsorship in the context of women's sport or female athletes. Of the 200 initial records retrieved, 103 were excluded based on four primary criteria. These included studies focused on sports medicine or health ($n = 47$), media representation without a commercial link ($n = 18$), sociological or cultural analyses ($n = 14$), and unrelated topics such as journalism or career development ($n = 24$). This selection process resulted in a final corpus of 97 articles (see Figure 1).

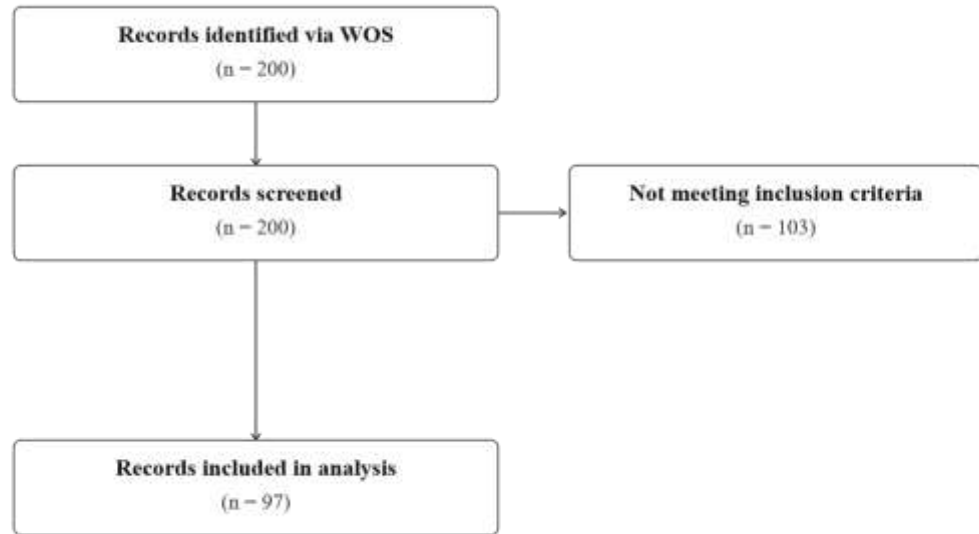


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Bibliometric and Visualization Procedures

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine annual publication trends, leading journals, and highly cited works. Citation counts reflect WOS-indexed citations only and may differ from figures reported in other databases.

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted using VOSviewer (version 1.6). Author keywords were preferred over Keywords Plus, which are algorithmically assigned and prone to introducing noise. Full counting was applied as the weighting method. Prior to the analysis, a thesaurus file was utilized to consolidate synonymous terms and spelling variations, such as "post-feminism" and "postfeminism" or "athlete branding" and "athlete brand," to ensure conceptual uniformity and linguistic consistency. The minimum co-occurrence threshold was set to 2. At the software default of 5, only eight keywords qualified, which was insufficient for a meaningful cluster analysis.

Following the application of the thesaurus and the threshold, 42 keywords met the criteria. Four were subsequently removed through manual screening: three disciplinary or methodological labels (case study, social role theory, gender studies) and one keyword with zero co-occurrence links (sports fan motivation). The final visualization and clustering were produced using 38 keywords. The clustering resolution was set to 0.60 through an iterative optimization process, yielding five distinct thematic pillars: post-feminist critique and commodity feminism in sports advertising, socio-institutional professionalization and commercial governance, digital identity negotiation and commercial autonomy in women's sport, gendered media representations and consumer dynamics in sport marketing, and strategic personal branding in women's sport.

Results



The bibliometric analysis of 97 articles examines four dimensions of the marketing and sponsorship literature on women's sport: publication trends, journal distribution, citation patterns, and keyword co-occurrence structures.

Table 1. Distribution of Publications by Period

| Period / Year | n | % |
|---------------------------------|----|------|
| 1993–2016 (Early Period) | 25 | 25.8 |
| 2017–2021 (Growth Period) | 25 | 25.8 |
| 2017 | 9 | 9.3 |
| 2018 | 7 | 7.2 |
| 2019 | 5 | 5.2 |
| 2020 | 2 | 2.1 |
| 2021 | 2 | 2.1 |
| 2022–2026 (Acceleration Period) | 47 | 48.5 |
| 2022 | 4 | 4.1 |
| 2023 | 10 | 10.3 |
| 2024 | 13 | 13.4 |
| 2025 | 15 | 15.5 |
| 2026* | 5 | 5.2 |
| Total | 97 | 100 |

* 2026 data covers January–March 2026 only (data retrieved: March 5, 2026)

Publication output remained sparse through 2016, with 25 articles accounting for 25.8% of the total corpus. The period from 2017 to 2021 produced an equal share of 25 articles (25.8%). The most recent period, from 2022 to 2026, accounts for 47 articles, representing 48.5% of all publications. Within this period, annual output increased consistently, rising from 4 articles in 2022 to 15 in 2025.

Table 2. Most Productive Journals

| Rank | Journal | n | % |
|----------------|---|----|------|
| 1 | Communication & Sport | 7 | 7.2 |
| 2 | Sport in Society | 6 | 6.2 |
| 3 | Sport Management Review | 6 | 6.2 |
| 4 | International Journal of Sport Communication | 5 | 5.2 |
| 5 | International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship | 5 | 5.2 |
| 6 | Journal of Sport & Social Issues | 4 | 4.1 |
| 7 | Journal of Sport Management | 4 | 4.1 |
| 8 | Sociology of Sport Journal | 4 | 4.1 |
| 9 | International Review for the Sociology of Sport | 4 | 4.1 |
| 10 | Sport Marketing Quarterly | 3 | 3.1 |
| Total (Top 10) | | 48 | 49.5 |

Communication & Sport leads with 7 articles (7.2%), followed by Sport in Society and Sport Management Review with 6 articles each (6.2%). The International Journal of Sport Communication and the International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship each contributed 5 articles (5.2%). The top ten journals collectively account for 48 of the 97 articles (49.5%).

Table 3. Most Cited Articles

| Rank | Author(s) | Year | Title | Journal | Citations |
|------|------------|------|---|------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Fink, J.S. | 2015 | Female athletes, women's sport, and the | Sport Management | 271 |



| | | | | | |
|----|--|------|---|-----------------------------|-----|
| | | | sport media commercial complex: Have we really "come a long way, baby"? | Review | |
| 2 | Geurin-Eagleman, A.N. & Burch, L.M. | 2016 | Communicating via photographs: A gendered analysis of Olympic athletes' visual self-presentation on Instagram | Sport Management Review | 222 |
| 3 | Kane, M.J., LaVoi, N.M. & Fink, J.S. | 2013 | Exploring elite female athletes' interpretations of sport media images: A window into the construction of social identity and "selling sex" in women's sports | Communication & Sport | 170 |
| 4 | Toffoletti, K. & Thorpe, H. | 2018 | Female athletes' self-representation on social media: A feminist analysis of neoliberal marketing strategies in "economies of visibility" | Feminism & Psychology | 157 |
| 5 | Geurin, A.N. | 2017 | Elite female athletes' perceptions of new media use relating to their careers: A qualitative analysis | Journal of Sport Management | 105 |
| 6 | Toffoletti, K. & Thorpe, H. | 2018 | The athletic labour of femininity: The branding and consumption of global celebrity sportswomen on Instagram | Journal of Consumer Culture | 97 |
| 7 | Cooky, C. & McDonald, M.G. | 2005 | "If you let me play": Young girls' insider-other narratives of sport | Sociology of Sport Journal | 65 |
| 8 | Bowes, A., Lomax, L. & Piasecki, J. | 2022 | The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on elite sportswomen | Managing Sport and Leisure | 64 |
| 9 | Knijnik, J.D., Horton, P. & Cruz, L.O. | 2010 | Rhizomatic bodies, gendered waves: transitional femininities in Brazilian surf | Sport in Society | 51 |
| 10 | Lopiano, D.A. | 2000 | Modern history of women in sports: Twenty-five years of Title IX | Clinics in Sports Medicine | 50 |

Fink (2015) is the most cited work in the corpus with 271 citations, followed by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) with 222 and Kane et al. (2013) with 170. Six of the ten most cited articles were published after 2013.

Table 4. Co-occurrence Clusters

| Cluster | Key Terms | n | Thematic Focus |
|-----------|--|----|---|
| Cluster 1 | brand, desire, female athlete, femininity, feminism, femvertising, Nike, postfeminism, sexuality, sport, sport advertising, women | 12 | Post-Feminist Critique and Commodity Feminism in Sports Advertising |
| Cluster 2 | athlete brand, endorsements, gender differences, gender equality, name, social media, sport sponsorship, women's football, women's sport | 9 | Socio-Institutional Professionalization and Commercial Governance |
| Cluster 3 | college sport, Instagram, motherhood, NIL, self-presentation, TikTok, WNBA, women athletes | 8 | Digital Identity Negotiation and Commercial Autonomy in Women's Sport |
| Cluster 4 | consumer behavior, fandom, gender, marketing, media, sexualization, sport marketing | 7 | Gendered Media Representations and Consumer Dynamics in Sport Marketing |
| Cluster 5 | brand management, personal brand | 2 | Strategic Personal Branding in Women's Sport |

The keyword co-occurrence analysis yielded five thematic clusters, as presented in Table 4. Together they trace a transition from feminist critiques of sport advertising and media representation toward the institutional, digital, and strategic dimensions of women's sport's commercial landscape. The thematic structure encompasses post-feminist advertising discourse, the socio-institutional governance of sponsorship, the negotiation of commercial identity on digital platforms, the dynamics of gendered media consumption, and the strategic management of personal branding.

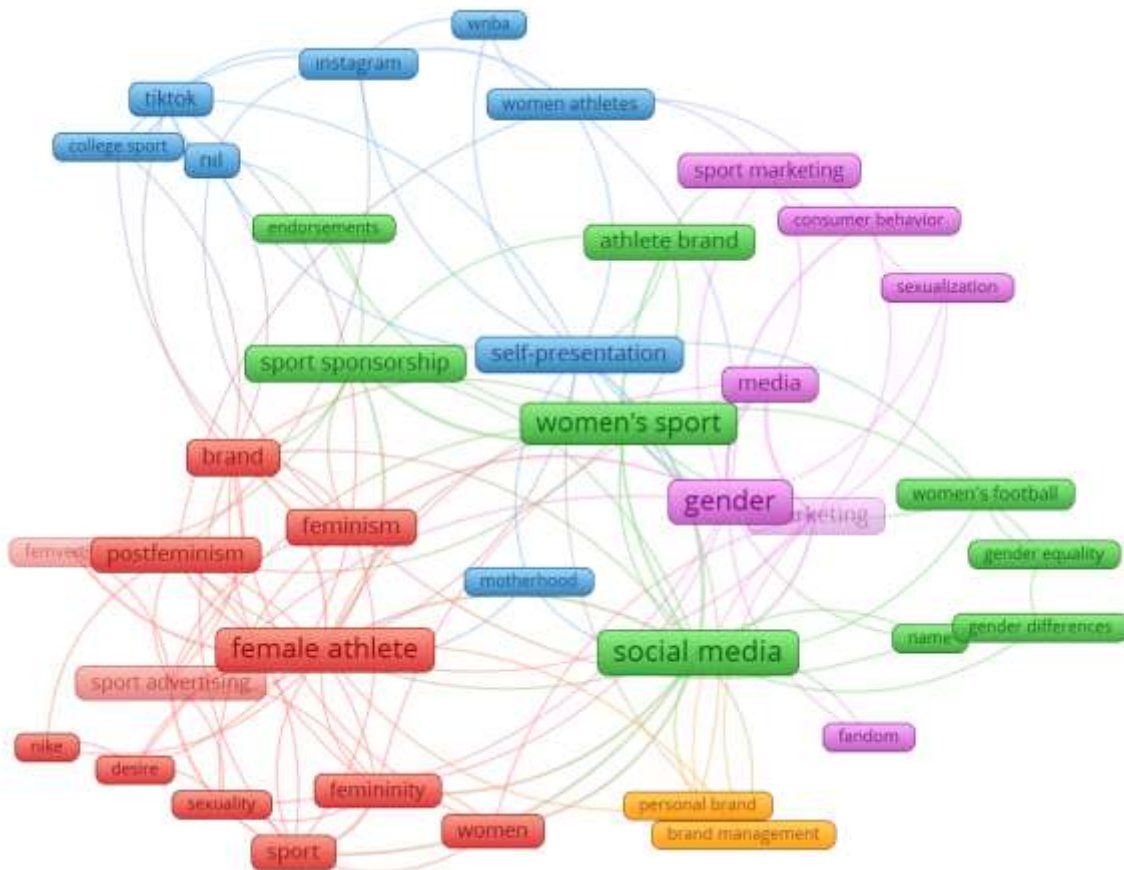


Figure 2.Co-occurrence network map

The co-occurrence network map presents the structural relationships among 38 author keywords consolidated into five thematic clusters. Each distinct color represents a specific thematic pillar, and connecting lines illustrate co-occurrence relationships between keywords. The visual dominance of each keyword is conveyed by the size of its framed label (node), which directly reflects its frequency within the dataset.



States Supreme Court's ruling in *NCAA v. Alston*, redrew the commercial landscape for collegiate athletes in ways that had no precedent. For female athletes, NIL amounted to a fundamental reordering of visibility and economic agency, one that no prior regulatory framework had made possible. Sailofsky (2025) has shown that women's basketball emerged as the primary beneficiary of this transformation, with collegiate stars attracting major brand endorsements and generating institutional and media attention at levels that earlier cohorts of women athletes had not experienced. The scholarly response was rapid. The cluster of NIL-related keywords in Cluster 3 of the co-occurrence analysis, encompassing terms such as TikTok, Instagram, self-presentation, and WNBA alongside NIL itself, captures a research community working to catch up with a phenomenon that had outpaced it almost from the moment it emerged.

Two years later, the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup supplied a second and equally consequential disruption. For the first time in the competition's history, FIFA unbundled the commercial rights to the women's tournament from those of the men's, a structural decision that opened the sponsorship ecosystem to brands that had previously lacked an entry point calibrated specifically to women's football (Desjardins, 2021). The prize money pool, which had stood at 30 million dollars in 2019, reached 110 million in 2023, and the tournament's annual sponsorship valuation exceeded 300 million US dollars across a portfolio of 20 main partners (GlobalData, 2023). Figures of this magnitude carry institutional weight well beyond their face value: they function as signals to corporate partners and, in turn, create the conditions under which scholarly attention tends to follow commercial interest. That 2023 stands as one of the two most productive single years in the entire corpus, with ten publications indexed in that calendar year, is consistent with this dynamic.

Yet the more analytically revealing feature of the temporal pattern is not the acceleration itself but the prolonged stillness that preceded it. The early and middle periods of the corpus, covering 1993 to 2021, produced output that Staley (2025) and Thomson et al. (2023) both characterized as insufficient relative to the commercial significance of the domain. Cooky et al. (2021), drawing on longitudinal data spanning 1989 to 2019, documented that women's sport occupied a consistently marginal position in mainstream broadcast media across three decades, rarely exceeding five percent of total coverage time. In fields adjacent to communication and marketing, scholarly attention tends to follow media salience, and when women's sport remains institutionally invisible in the media environment, it also tends to remain peripheral in the research imagination. Lebel et al. (2021) identified the deeper structural consequence of this dynamic: women's sport research had long operated in a reactive mode, responding to the rare moments when women's sport broke through the ceiling of mainstream coverage without developing the sustained programmatic infrastructure needed to hold ground between those moments. The post-2022 acceleration coincides not with the gradual maturation of a research community that had been quietly building capacity, but with a cluster of high-profile external events that rendered the field impossible to ignore, and whether the surge represents a durable reorientation of research priorities or a further iteration of that reactive pattern is a question the structural evidence of this analysis cannot itself resolve.

There is at least partial evidence for cautious optimism. The post-2022 output is not only larger in volume but also more thematically differentiated, as the co-occurrence structure



discussed in subsequent sections of this analysis suggests. Hammerschmidt et al. (2024), in their bibliometric overview of sport management research across the decade from 2011 to 2020, found that the field had historically been shaped by a strong gravitational pull toward commercially oriented generic management research, sometimes at the cost of the conceptual distinctiveness the sub-discipline required to establish genuine autonomy. The emergence in this corpus of thematic clusters spanning feminist advertising critique, institutional governance, digital identity, and personal branding suggests that marketing and sponsorship research in women's sport is beginning to develop a more differentiated intellectual profile. Whether that profile consolidates or fragments as output continues to grow is a question that only subsequent bibliometric work will be positioned to answer. What the present findings establish is that the conditions making such a question worth asking are now firmly in place.

The journal profile in Table 2 rewards closer reading than a simple ranking invites. Communication & Sport leads the corpus with seven articles, followed by Sport in Society and Sport Management Review at six each, with the International Journal of Sport Communication and the International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship each contributing five. Taken together, the ten most productive outlets span at least three distinct disciplinary traditions: communication, sociology, and sport management. For a corpus defined by its commercial and marketing focus, the relative prominence of sociological and communication journals is a finding that merits explanation rather than summary.

The pattern is, in one sense, familiar. Shannon (1999), in an early examination of sports marketing publication practices, documented that sports marketing manuscripts were routinely published outside mainstream marketing journals, finding a home instead in service marketing, management, and interdisciplinary outlets. What that study identified as a structural tendency of the broader sports marketing field appears, in this corpus, to take a specifically gendered inflection. Bodin et al. (2022) demonstrated through a scoping review of critical social science in sport management research that scholarship adopting feminist or critical perspectives routinely migrates to journals outside the sport management domain, in part because the epistemological commitments of those perspectives sit more comfortably in sociological and communication outlets than in the commercially oriented journals that anchor sport management as a discipline. The figures reported by Staley (2025) sharpen this point considerably: research on women's sport has historically been concentrated in the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology, with conspicuously little representation in management and economics journals. Thomson et al. (2023), arriving at a compatible finding through a systematic review of scholarship on women's professional sport leagues, noted that only 15 of the 57 articles in their sample appeared in sport management journals, while the majority found outlets in sociology and related fields.

Valenti et al. (2018), in an integrative review of women's football studies, found the literature dispersed across 117 different journals classified into 26 thematic areas, with economic and marketing research appearing only in more recent years. Read against this backdrop, the journal distribution in Table 2 reflects something deeper than disciplinary accident. It captures a field whose commercial dimensions have historically been treated as secondary concerns in the broader scholarly conversation about women's sport, and whose primary intellectual home has consequently remained in the critical social sciences rather than in the applied management literature.



Doherty (2013) argued that monodisciplinary research in sport management tends toward a narrowness of focus that limits both the range of questions the field can ask and its capacity to generate findings of genuine practical consequence. From that vantage point, a corpus that draws simultaneously on the theoretical vocabularies of feminist sociology, media studies, and commercial sport management is potentially richer than one confined to a single disciplinary tradition. Evans et al. (2022) pressed this argument further, observing that sport marketing research has remained anchored in a behavioral, consumer-focused paradigm that rarely interrogates the sociocultural conditions shaping the commercial landscape it studies. The presence of *Communication & Sport*, *Sport in Society*, and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* among the leading outlets suggests that scholarship on marketing and sponsorship in women's sport has, at least partly, resisted that narrowing.

The position of the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship* in the corpus warrants specific attention. With five articles, it ranks fifth among the top ten outlets, a position that acquires sharper meaning when placed alongside the broader sponsorship literature. Varea-Calero et al. (2025), in a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of sports sponsorship research from 1993 to 2024, found that the journal accounted for nearly 16 percent of total publications in that literature, making it the dominant outlet by a considerable margin. Its comparatively modest share in this corpus is not, therefore, simply a reflection of journal size or indexing scope. It points to a substantive divergence in where researchers choose to publish when women's sport and its commercial dimensions are the primary subject. That divergence is consistent with what Evans et al. (2022) identified as a structural tension between the behavioral orientation of sport marketing journals and the critical, gender-attentive perspectives that scholarship on women's sport tends to require. The field occupies, in this reading, multiple disciplinary homes simultaneously, and the intellectual consequences of that arrangement remain a question that journal distribution data alone cannot resolve.

The citation data in Table 3 invite a more layered reading than the ranking itself provides. Fink (2015) leads the corpus with 271 citations, followed by Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) with 222 and Kane et al. (2013) with 170. Six of the ten most cited works were published after 2013, and the remaining four predate 2010. What this distribution does not reveal on its face is whether the concentration of intellectual weight around a small number of articles reflects a field consolidating around shared theoretical foundations, a field still too nascent to have diversified its reference points, or something more structural than either of those explanations alone can account for.

Merton (1968) identified the tendency of already-visible scientific contributions to attract disproportionate subsequent recognition, a dynamic he termed the Matthew effect, whereby accumulated prestige rather than conceptual novelty often drives citation accumulation. Applied to this corpus, that framing raises a question the raw counts cannot settle: how much of Fink's (2015) citation dominance reflects the genuine foundational character of the work, and how much reflects the self-reinforcing logic of a small field converging on a manageable set of shared reference points? The two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and the likely answer involves both. Fink's argument that the sport media commercial complex has structurally suppressed the visibility and commercial valuation of women's sport remains theoretically generative and broadly applicable across the thematic clusters identified in this analysis. Its citation volume is, in that sense, earned. At the same



time, the concentration of attention on three articles from a narrow six-year window suggests that the broader literature has not yet developed the theoretical diversity that a genuinely mature field would display.

Keathley-Herring et al. (2016), in a framework for assessing the maturity of research areas through bibliometric indicators, identified citation concentration around foundational works as characteristic of fields in their early or consolidating phases, rather than of fields that have reached theoretical saturation. By their criteria, a maturing field would be expected to show not only growing publication volume but also an expanding and diversifying citation base, with newer works beginning to attract influence comparable to the foundational texts they build upon. The pattern in Table 3 is more consistent with the earlier phase: the top three articles alone account for a combined citation count that vastly outweighs anything published in the post-2020 period, and the works appearing in the lower half of the top ten attract citations measured in the dozens rather than the hundreds. This is the profile of a field that has identified its intellectual anchors but has not yet built extensively around them.

A partial explanation for this pattern lies in the structural properties of citation accumulation itself. Lyu et al. (2023), in a meta-bibliometric analysis of citation dynamics, documented that citation counts are strongly time-dependent: articles require years of circulation before their citation potential is realized, and works published recently will systematically appear less influential than older contributions regardless of their actual theoretical contribution. This observation is particularly salient for this corpus, given that nearly half of all publications appeared after 2022. Hammerschmidt et al. (2024) reached an analogous conclusion in their bibliometric analysis of sport management research, noting that recently published articles had not yet had sufficient time to reach their full citation potential. In practical terms, this means that the apparent dominance of Fink (2015), Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016), and Kane et al. (2013) may be as much a function of temporal privilege as of theoretical centrality. The works that will eventually reshape the citation landscape of this field are, with reasonable probability, already in the corpus; they simply have not yet accumulated the recognition their contributions may warrant. Whether the post-2022 surge in output will produce new theoretical anchors or continue to orbit the existing ones is a question the current data can pose but not answer.

The five thematic clusters identified through the co-occurrence analysis do not form a simple taxonomy. Read carefully, they describe a field in the process of negotiating several unresolved intellectual tensions, and the most productive way to engage with them is to examine where they pull against each other rather than to treat each as a self-contained domain.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the relationship between Cluster 1 and Cluster 4. Cluster 1, centered on postfeminism, commodity feminism, femvertising, and the branding of female athleticism, operates from a critical normative tradition that treats the commercialization of women's sport as an ideological problem requiring interrogation. The keywords that anchor it, including "desire," "sexuality," "Nike," and "femvertising," point to a body of work concerned with how corporate sport advertising co-opts feminist language while simultaneously reproducing the structural conditions that constrain women's visibility and commercial value. Gill (2007) identified postfeminism as a cultural sensibility defined by the



internalization of the male gaze, the foregrounding of individual choice over structural critique, and the commodification of feminist ideals, and it is precisely this sensibility that the scholarship in Cluster 1 applies to the sport advertising context. Toffoletti (2016) extended this framework to sport media specifically, showing how female athletes are positioned as simultaneously "sexy and strong," a construction that grants visibility while relocating responsibility for sexualized representations onto the athletes themselves. Sharifzadeh & Brison (2024), analyzing the femvertising campaigns of major sports brands, found that postfeminist discourse intensified in corporate advertising after 2018, with commodity feminism and self-surveillance emerging as the dominant rhetorical modes. Cluster 4, by contrast, is oriented around consumer behavior, fandom, marketing effectiveness, and the measurement of gender-related outcomes, a positivist tradition that tends to treat the commercial landscape of women's sport as a given and asks how it can be navigated or optimized rather than questioned. The corpus contains both traditions in roughly comparable proportions, and their coexistence within a single intellectual space is itself a finding. It suggests that the field has not yet resolved whether its primary obligation is diagnostic or applied, and that this unresolved question will continue to shape how future research is framed and where it is published.

A related but distinct tension runs between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3, mapping onto the structure-agency divide that has long animated feminist sport scholarship. Cluster 2 addresses the socio-institutional conditions of women's sport commercialization: sponsorship retention patterns, gender equality motivations, the governance of women's football, and the organizational logics through which commercial decisions about women's sport are made. Stenling&Fahlén (2009) identified commercialization and result orientation as dominant institutional logics in contemporary sport governance, logics that tend to marginalize forms of value that cannot be easily quantified or marketed. Applied to this corpus, their framework illuminates why sponsors of women's sport have historically been motivated less by commercial calculation than by normative commitments, as Morgan (2019) found in the Australian Rules context, and why the shift toward commercially rational sponsorship renewal documented by Jensen & Smith (2024) represents a meaningful institutional development rather than a minor incremental shift. Cluster 3, by contrast, foregrounds the agency of individual athletes navigating these structural conditions. The keywords that define it, encompassing NIL, TikTok, Instagram, self-presentation, and WNBA, describe a research community tracking how female athletes use digital platforms to construct commercial identities that partially circumvent traditional media gatekeeping. Sailofsky (2025) captured the productive ambiguity of this development in the NIL context, showing that the same regulatory shifts that opened new commercial space for women athletes also reproduced existing inequalities in who could access that space and on what terms. The relationship between Cluster 2 and Cluster 3 therefore traces a live theoretical problem about the extent to which institutional structures determine the conditions of individual commercial agency, and whether the expansion of platforms for self-branding represents a genuine redistribution of commercial power or a more sophisticated iteration of the structural constraints Kolnes (1995) identified three decades ago, when she demonstrated that heterosexuality functioned as an organizing principle in women's sport that both enabled and delimited the terms of female athletic visibility.



The two tensions described above do not operate in isolation. Digital platforms function as the point where both axes intersect. The rise of Instagram and TikTok as commercial spaces for female athletes means that the ideological critique of Cluster 1 and the agency analysis of Cluster 3 must now be read together: the same platforms through which athletes exercise self-representational autonomy are also the primary sites through which postfeminist commodity culture is reproduced and circulated. Geurin-Eagleman & Burch (2016) and Geurin (2017) documented the gendered dimensions of this self-presentation logic in the earlier Instagram context; the subsequent emergence of NIL and TikTok as research objects in Cluster 3 suggests that the field has continued to track these dynamics as the platforms themselves have evolved. What the co-occurrence structure does not yet reveal is whether this tracking has been accompanied by adequate theoretical innovation, or whether the same conceptual vocabulary that Fink (2015) applied to television-era sport media is simply being extended to new technological contexts without sufficient recalibration.

Cluster 5, grouping "brand management" and "personal brand" as its only two keywords and accounting for two articles in the corpus, warrants separate comment. That so little scholarship examines personal branding as a strategic management problem in its own right, distinct from the sociological or representational analyses that dominate Clusters 1 and 3, is the most telling gap the co-occurrence map reveals. Personal branding as a commercial practice has become one of the defining phenomena of the NIL era and of women's sport more broadly, yet the corpus has barely begun to address it on its own terms. The gap is not incidental. It reflects the broader pattern, documented in Staley (2025) and Thomson et al. (2023), whereby the commercial and operational dimensions of women's sport remain systematically undertheorized relative to their cultural and sociological dimensions. Scholarship that can interrogate both the ideological dimensions of athlete branding and its strategic management logic simultaneously remains conspicuously rare, and the thinness of Cluster 5 is the clearest evidence that this synthesis has not yet been achieved.

Conclusion

This study establishes a structural and interpretive baseline for a body of literature that, despite its recent acceleration, has lacked the kind of field-level synthesis that makes cumulative scholarly progress possible. The analysis contributes on several planes simultaneously. At the most immediate level, it establishes baseline metrics for publication output, journal distribution, citation patterns, and keyword co-occurrence, providing a reference point against which future trajectories of the field can be assessed. More consequentially, it situates the field's current configuration within the broader dynamics of academic legitimacy, disciplinary identity, and theoretical maturation, offering a framework for understanding why the field looks the way it does rather than merely confirming that it exists. The identification of five thematic clusters and the tensions between them maps the intellectual terrain with sufficient precision to guide targeted scholarly investment, pointing toward the areas where theoretical consolidation is most urgently needed.

The study's scope carries constraints that shape how its findings should be read. Data were drawn exclusively from the Web of Science Core Collection, whose indexing standards, while rigorous, do not capture the full range of scholarship produced in this domain. Research published in regional journals, book chapters, and non-English outlets remains outside the scope of the analysis, a restriction that almost certainly underrepresents contributions from



geographic contexts where women's sport is developing rapidly but where the English-language academic infrastructure is less established. The search query, though carefully designed to maximize relevance while minimizing sport-specific bias, necessarily involves definitional choices that another researcher might make differently, and the resulting corpus should be understood as a principled sample rather than an exhaustive inventory. Bibliometric analysis as a method yields structural patterns rather than interpretive depth; the cluster configurations and citation maps produced here describe the architecture of the field without adjudicating the intellectual quality of the work that populates it, a task that requires the complementary tools of systematic review and content analysis.

Several directions for future research emerge directly from these findings. Methodologically, replication using Scopus or a combined multi-database approach would test the robustness of the patterns identified here and expand the geographic and linguistic scope of the evidence base. Periodic bibliometric updates, conducted on a three to five year cycle, would allow scholars to track whether the post-2022 acceleration represents a durable reorientation of the field or a transient response to a cluster of catalytic events. Thematically, the most pressing need is for scholarship that addresses the commercial and operational dimensions of women's sport marketing on their own terms, a deficit that Cluster 5's thinness makes unmistakable. The structure-agency tension visible between Clusters 2 and 3 calls for integrated frameworks capable of holding institutional constraints and individual commercial agency in productive analytical tension rather than treating them as separate objects of inquiry. The normative-positivist divide between Clusters 1 and 4 similarly points toward the value of research designs that combine critical cultural analysis with empirical measurement of commercial outcomes, a methodological synthesis that the field has so far approached only in isolated instances. As the commercial landscape of women's sport continues to evolve at a pace that academic research has historically struggled to match, the capacity to ask both diagnostic and applied questions within a single coherent research program may prove to be the most consequential intellectual development the field can pursue.



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