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

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Despite consistent interest in sport brands and the multitude of brands in the sport ecosystem, extant knowledge remains fragmented and unstructured. The purpose of this study is to integrate and synthesize extant sport brand research, appraise the current state of knowledge, and suggest future research directions. Following structured literature review guidelines, we coded 179 peer-reviewed articles published in four leading sport management journals between 2000 and 2020. Results reveal increased publications in sport brand research within the four examined journals, as well as opportunities to increase theoretical and methodological rigor. Based on the mapping and critical review of extant literature, we introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem and Environment and discuss two distinct and complementary areas related to *theory and research designs* and *topical domains* to address existent concerns and guide future research directions.

Keywords: brand management, branding, consumer behavior, strategy, marketing, sport organization

Branding, an essential part of marketing and management, is a source of brand equity, competitive advantage, and differentiation from competitors (Kapferer, 2012). The International Organization for Standardization (ISO, 2019) defines a brand as an "intangible asset [. . .] intended to identify goods, services or entities [. . .] creating distinctive images and associations in the minds of stakeholders, thereby generating economic benefit/values." High brand equity is associated with a host of positive organizational and personal outcomes including increased sales, higher consumer loyalty, ability to charge price premiums, and enhanced marketing communication efficacy (Keller, 1993; Kotler & Keller, 2015). Brand equity also benefits consumers through increasing confidence in consumption decisions, facilitating brand-related information processing, and leading to higher user satisfaction (Aaker, 2009). As a result, practitioners and scholars alike have sought to understand brand management.

The quantity of sport brand research published in top sport management journals has seen a dramatic increase over the past decade as scholars seek to understand brand positioning strategies and how brands associated with leagues, teams, athletes, and sponsors influence consumer attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Sport brand research has generated a multitude of results and findings; however, organizing these conclusions to generate meaningful insight is challenging due to the broad nature of the topic and lack of overarching structure. Much of this research can be piecemeal and disjointed, lacking in theoretical grounding or established connections between disparate research streams (Funk, 2017).

To capitalize on an opportunity to synthesize sport brand research in a manner which can help drive theoretical and managerial impact, we conducted a structured review of research focused on sport brands. We position this review in the sport brand ecosystem framework (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020), which was conceptualized to comprise federations, leagues, teams, individual athletes, events, and other sport-related nonprofit and commercial/sponsor brands. This framework was established on the basis of brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), where athletes are defined as sub-brands while their teams are master brands (e.g., Na et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2015) and teams are defined as sub-brands while their leagues are master brands (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2013, 2014, 2017), and provides a starting point from which we can organize the extant literature to identify connections, locate inconsistent conceptualizations and findings, and generate a roadmap for future research directions. Based on the review of existing sport brand research, we developed an overview of past, present, and future research directions and identified patterns within the published literature. These patterns build on the valuable extant work, illuminate the latent structure underlying existing sport brand research, identify (under)utilized theories, and allow us to identify areas that merit greater scholarly attention. We introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem and Environment, and provide theoretical, methodological, and focus-specific recommendations for future of sport brand research.

Literature Review Strategy

Consistent with our goals to synthesize the existing sport brand research, appraise its state, and reflect on the future research directions, we conducted a structured literature review (Page et al., 2021). A structured literature review represents a "method for examining a corpus of scholarly literature, to develop insights, critical reflections, future research paths, and research questions" (Massaro et al., 2016, p. 767), and provided a framework for our search, review, and assessment of relevant studies from the abovementioned publications. Our approach featured structured identification and review of articles, coding, and quantitative analyses, which allowed us to create a broad summary of the state of the field, while also documenting the path of our exploration through predetermined article inclusion and exclusion criteria and detailed decision-making process (Pickering & Byrne, 2014; Thomson et al., 2019, 2020).

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The review focused on existing sport brand-related research published in four prominent sport management and sport marketing journals, namely: *Journal of Sport Management (JSM)*, *Sport Management Review* (SMR), *European Sport Management Quarterly* (ESMQ), and *Sport Marketing Quarterly* (SMQ). Our journal selection criterion was based on the journals' impact within the discipline (Massaro et al., 2015). Each of the four chosen journals represents a major sport management or marketing publication, affiliated with an influential academic association within sport management, and indexed in Clarivate's Social Sciences Citation Index and Journal Citation Reports. We identified the years of 2000–2020 as the timeframe for eligibility of publications for the study because prior work has shown that most of the early major advancements in sport brand research occurred in the early- to mid-2000s (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Developments since 2000 provide the impetus to drive a research agenda over the next two decades and beyond.

Data were collected through a structured approach based on predetermined keywords (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). Specifically, to collect the data, we accessed the archives on the respective websites of all four journals and manually identified and coded all relevant articles. Article identification and analysis comprised three steps: (a) reading of titles, keywords, and abstracts to identify articles that contained the words "brand," "brands," or "branding" in the beforementioned attributes; (b) rereading abstracts to shortlist the articles relevant to the study; and (c) text analysis, thoroughly reading, and coding the shortlisted articles (de Araújo et al., 2017; Shah & Robinson, 2006).

Between the years 2000 and 2020, the four journals collectively published 2,635 publications, which included 2,234 academic articles ($N_{JSM} = 662$, $N_{SMR} = 625$, $N_{ESMQ} = 470$, $N_{SMQ} = 477$), as well as editorial notes, book reviews, commentaries, digests, and practitioner interviews. Of those academic articles, 179 contained the word "brand," "brands," or "branding", in at least one of the title, author keywords, or abstract, and were related to the topic of sport branding. These articles ($N_{JSM} = 42$, $N_{SMR} = 43$, $N_{ESMQ} = 28$, $N_{SMQ} = 66$) represented the sample for our review. While some relevant articles could have been inadvertently omitted, considering the number of papers selected, the sample offered a comprehensive representation of sport brand research conducted over the past two decades (Massaro et al., 2015). The overview of data collection flow is presented in Figure 1.

Descriptive Analyses

As a part of our structured literature review, to provide an outlook on the state of sport brand research and how that literature has evolved, we employed a coding framework to conduct a series of quantitative, descriptive analyses on the identified sample (Massaro et al., 2015). This approach allowed us to identify emerging trends, providing a more comprehensive perspective on the state of research compared to a descriptive-based narrative literature review (Pickering & Byrne, 2014). These analyses included examining how many sports brand-related articles were published in each of the four focal journals over time as well as reviewing the theoretical foundations in which studies were grounded, study context, and patterns in keywords that authors used in describing their research. In addition, we conducted a methodological assessment that determined the prevalence and limitations of the employed research methods.

A careful examination of the research context is necessary to interpret research findings (Funk, 2017). Therefore, we examined the sport brand context along four dimensions. First, we report on the frequency with which each sport appears in our article corpus. Second, we categorized articles based on their primary focus (consumer, organizational strategy, employee/internal branding, or other). Third, we examined the level of the focal brand (e.g., league, team, athlete, or sponsor). Finally, we evaluated how often studies focused on a single brand versus the interactions between multiple brands.

For theoretical foundations, we focused on theories or models explicitly listed by authors as guiding their research. Where authors described academic concepts (e.g., brand equity or brand image), we captured that information even when a reference to a specific named theory or theoretical model was absent. This approach helped to determine the extent to which previous work had been grounded in theory or emerged using logic-driven approaches. To analyze prevalent themes in the collected body of research, we conducted a textual network analysis on the co-occurrence of the author keywords (i.e., how often two keywords were listed in association with the same article) using VOSviewer software (version 1.6.12, Leiden University's Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS); van Eck & Waltman, 2010). A total of 135 articles (75.4%) we reviewed had keywords specified, yielding a total of 577 keywords and phrases (393 unique). Prior to analysis, we combined synonymous terms (e.g., collegiate sport and college athletics), plural and
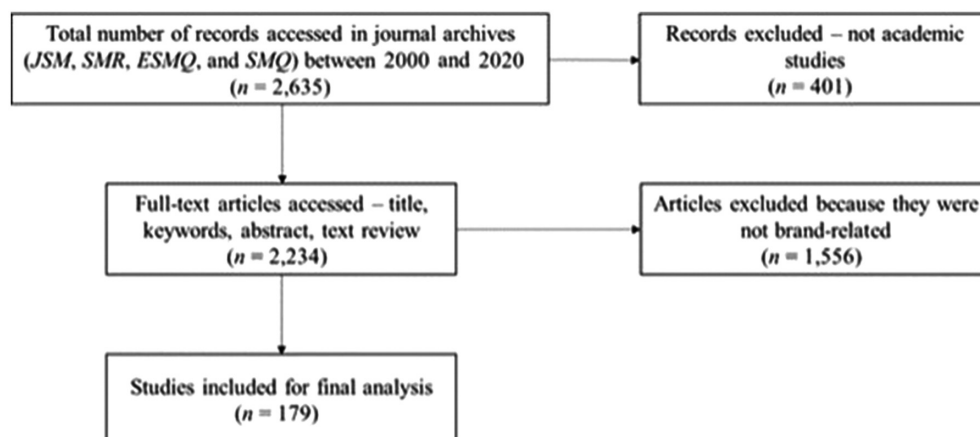

Figure 1 — Data collection strategy. *ESMQ = European Sport Management; JSM = Journal of Sport Management; SMR = Sport Management Review; SMQ = Sport Marketing Quarterly.*

singular forms, and variant spellings (e.g., different English spelling conventions). After combining synonymous terms, plural and singular forms, and variant spellings, we obtained a reduced list of 326 unique words and phrases. We examined how often keywords appeared as well as the keyword co-occurrence network that reflects how often pairs of keywords appeared together.

In examining research methods, we first categorized published articles at a macro level (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, or conceptual). Continuing to examine the statistical approaches to branding research, we further delved into papers that employed quantitative methods (quantitative or mixed methods), and examined their research procedure, and robustness of results (e.g., number of studies, inclusion of power analysis, and effect size). To facilitate our assessment, we classified studies involving quantitative data into five categories: descriptive, cross-sectional, experimental design, mixed method, and longitudinal, considering both the timeframe of the data collection and the purpose of the research design.

Since an important aspect of structured literature reviews is identifying the future research recommendations (Massaro et al., 2015), we conducted a content analysis of the future research directions of articles ($n = 62$) published in the last 3 years of the publication timeframe within the data set (i.e., 2018–2020). We selected 3 years given the fast-changing nature of the modern sports business landscape and the long time it takes for academic articles to go from the inception of the research idea to the initial journal submission, to final publication. We also delimited it to this timeframe as it is logical that articles published later in our defined timeframe (i.e., 2018–2020) would have been at least in part led by the future directions offered in earlier work (i.e., 2000–2017). Results of these analyses are presented in the next sections.

Results

In this section, we present the results of our structured literature review. We begin by reporting the prevalence of sport branding-related research in our four focal journals since 2000. Next, we present results of our analysis of keywords and keyword co-occurrence as a means of understanding which topics are most prominent, and relationships between those topics in the sport branding literature. Third, we examine the research contexts in which sport branding research takes place, including what sports, perspectives, brand level, and whether studies investigated interactions between multiple sport brands. We continue by highlighting the methodological choices made by sport branding scholars, first at a macro level and then looking at specific methods with a focus on quantitative research and analysis. In the next section, we report on the theoretical foundations that authors report using to support their research. Finally, we conclude with results of our analysis of future research directions suggested by authors in articles published in the past 3 years (i.e., 2018–2020) to understand where sport branding researchers recommend the field advance next.

Publication Outlets

Articles included in our review represent approximately 8.0% of those published by the four journals since 2000, ranging from 6.0% of articles in *ESMQ* to 13.8% of articles in *SMQ*. Despite publishing fewer articles overall, *SMQ* led the way with 66 brand-related articles (13.8% of all articles) reflecting the journal's narrower scope and focus on sport marketing topics. *ESMQ* published the

fewest sport branding articles, with just under half (12 of 28; 42.9%) coming in 2020, presumably driven by a special issue on "Exploring new routes within brand research" (Ströbel, & Germelmann, 2020). As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 2, there is an overall increasing trend in the number of sport brand-related articles published, rising to a high of 30 in 2020, the most recent year examined. Interestingly, 2019 was an aberration, with only eight sport branding articles published. This may reflect the impact of two special issues in 2020 attracting submissions and leading to some authors directing their research to one of those issues in preference to regular submission that might lead to publication in 2019. Previous research has found that on average, articles published in special issues have shorter time from submission to publication (Olk & Griffith, 2004). By contrast, research from marketing finds promotions are associated with dips both before and following promotional activity (Macé & Neslin 2004); a similar effect could occur around special issues.

Author Keywords

The quantitative and textual network analyses of the author keywords revealed prevalent research topics and the relationships between them. Keyword count suggested the most common keywords were sponsorship ($n = 23$), brand ($n = 20$), brand management ($n = 16$), social media ($n = 14$), and marketing ($n = 10$). We provide a list of keywords that were associated with more than five articles in Table 2. Furthermore, analysis of author keyword co-occurrence (van Eck & Waltman, 2010) elucidated nuances within focal areas. For example, the keyword athlete brand was closely

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

Journal	ESMQ	JSM	SMR	SMQ	Total
Year					
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

Note. ESMQ = European Sport Management; JSM = Journal of Sport Management; SMR = Sport Management Review; SMQ = Sport Marketing Quarterly.
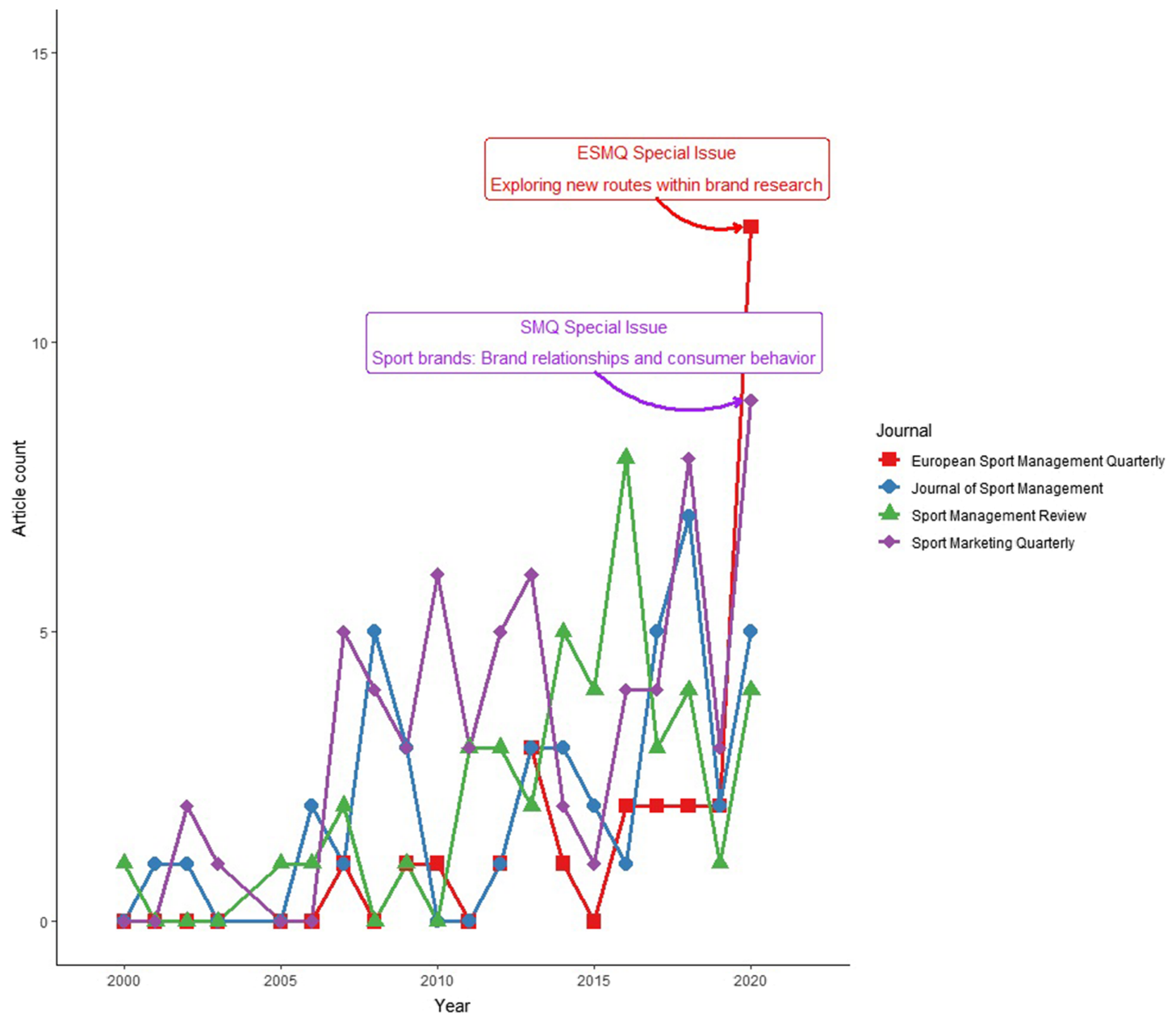
Figure 2 — Count of sport brand research articles by journal and year of publication. *ESMQ = European Sport Management Quarterly*; *SMQ = Sport Marketing Quarterly*.

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

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

associated with social media. Other similar terms such as athlete endorser were paired with concepts such as advertising. These insights reveal the enhanced impact that social media has had on branding at the individual athlete level, and how this has been captured within scholarly research pursuits. Brand-related keywords like brand management, brand development, and brand perceptions were regularly used together, showcasing the importance of considering consumer perspectives (perceptions), in

driving brands forward (development), and guiding overall business strategies (management). Interestingly, keywords related to professional sport (e.g., NFL) were commonly paired with terms like attendance and sponsorship, whereas keywords related to federations (e.g., International Olympic Committee) were more likely to be used in conjunction with social representation, co-branding, and a focus on events. While the use of keywords may be subjective, and restrictions on not using keywords that appear in the title are imposed by some outlets, this analysis provides additional insights into the network of topics concurrently examined within our sample and the state of sport branding research. The results of network analysis are displayed in Figure 3.

Sport Brand Context

Findings revealed the prevalence of research in mainstream sports and a lack of perspectives on nonmainstream, niche, and emerging sports. The most common sport context was soccer ($n = 38$), followed by American football ($n = 18$), basketball ($n = 15$), and baseball ($n = 11$). Furthermore, most articles focused on a consumer perspective ($n = 135$), followed by organizational strategy ($n = 25$). This highlighted the prevalence of consumer behavior research and shortage of strategic brand management perspectives (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Brand level showed a relatively less concentrated pattern. Team-level brands ($n = 64$) were most often studied, followed by sponsors ($n = 46$), athletes ($n = 36$), and events

($n = 30$). Most of the articles ($n = 96$) reported on studies that involved a single brand, while a sizable minority ($n = 81$) included multiple brands, confirming prior observations that scholars tend to study sport brands in isolation (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). There is evidence that the proportion of brand-related articles that assess multiple brands has increased recently, as multibrand studies have been a majority each year since 2018. Detailed results provided in Tables 3–5, and Figure 4.

Theoretical Foundations

Analysis of patterns of usage of theoretical foundations showed the diversity of theories currently used in sport brand research, yet also a strong tendency to gravitate toward heavily drawing on a few selected frameworks. Across the set of papers in the structured review, authors listed more than 40 theories, or theoretical models as the theoretical foundation for their research. Many of these theories were named only once or a few times. Those named relatively frequently included social identity theory (e.g., research on consumer identification with sport and sponsor brands), schema theory (e.g., research on brand relationships and brand personality, including sponsor and sport brands), congruence or congruity theory (e.g., research on implications of sponsor–sponsee brand fit), associative network theory or the associative network memory model (e.g., research on brand co-promotions), and network theory (e.g., research on fan and brand communities). Theories that are
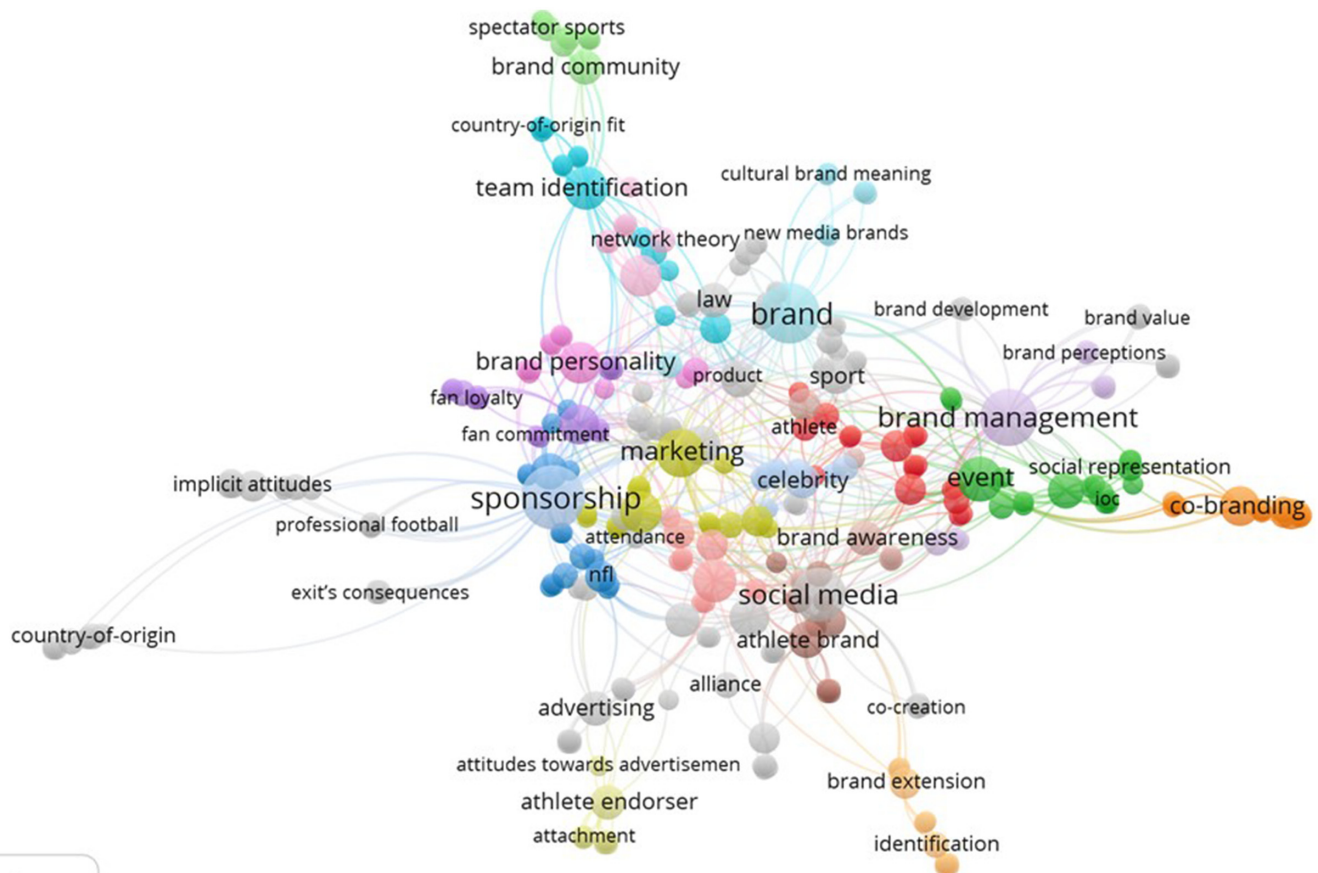

Figure 3 — Visualization of the network of article keyword co-occurrence.

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 (Couvelaere & 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.

commonly referenced in mainstream branding research that were named relatively infrequently in our corpus include signaling theory and balance theory. Authors frequently referred to broad areas that are not specific theories as their theoretical foundation. Common examples include brand equity ($n = 30$), brand association ($n = 14$), brand personality ($n = 10$), brand image ($n = 10$), and human brands ($n = 10$).

Methodological Approaches

Findings highlighted dominance of quantitative methodologies in empirical sport brand research studies. The majority of the articles in our review (95.0%) reported the results of empirical studies, with approximately two-thirds of those articles using quantitative research methods. Overall, 114 (63.7%) of the papers we reviewed were quantitative and 49 (27.4%) were qualitative. Mixed-method approaches that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the same project were relatively infrequent, accounting for only seven articles (3.9%).

We conducted a methodological assessment of 121 papers that incorporated quantitative methods (quantitative or mixed methods). The most common analytics method was analysis of variance (ANOVA, including MANOVA), which was used in 43.8% of the quantitative articles we examined. Other common analysis methods included structural equation modeling (primarily covariance-based) and linear regression. Results reveal that most of the branding research relies on cross-sectional studies. Only two (1.6%) were longitudinal or had longitudinal components.

Research Recommendations

Largely, future directions published in the sample of papers reflected either limitations of the studies reported in the article or general best practices advice for research design. That is, it was overwhelmingly common for authors to suggest replicating their studies and results in different countries, cultural environments, and sport settings. Many authors recommended employing longitudinal data collections, despite longitudinal designs being almost entirely absent from the sport branding literature. Suggesting additional sport contexts, particularly recommending replication in women's sport, was common, although authors rarely provided any indication of why, or in what ways, the specific sport context might advance theory.

While many of the suggested future research directions appeared largely formulaic, we want to recognize that some authors actively engaged with their results to suggest future research designed to build specifically on their conclusions. Such recommendations are necessarily idiosyncratic to a specific research project and thus are numerically dwarfed by generic, anodyne suggestions. Yet, these exceptional cases represent what scholars should do to promote continued theoretical advances and a literature that builds upon itself for incremental knowledge generation.

Discussion

In this section, we first discuss the most common theoretical perspectives and emerging trends in sport branding literature,

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 (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 adapted from "Sport Brands: Brand Relationships and Consumer Behavior," by T. Kunkel and R. Biscaia, 2020, *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 29*(1), p. 8.

then we critically examined the methodological approaches used by sport branding researchers. The state-of-the-art picture on sport branding research reveals prevalent tendencies as well as important gaps in theory building and methodological rigor that require future attention.

Theory

The field of sport brand research is broad, as indicated by the complex sport brand ecosystem, which explains why authors examining sport brands draw on a wide range of literature and theory as the foundation for their research. Sport management scholars have actively differentiated their field from mainstream business and developed their own theories (Chalip, 2006), which may explain why signaling theory or balance theory have not been utilized frequently to examine sport brands. One unique aspect of the sport industry is the connection of brands within the sport brand ecosystem. Therefore, research examining a brand in isolation without considering effects of associated brands provides limited value to sport brand knowledge, as sport brands interact—particularly from a consumer perspective (Kunkel et al., 2013).

There are linguistic differences on the definition of theory and theoretical frameworks, yet commonly a theory describes a general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena (Merriam-Webster, 2021) and theoretical frameworks refer to a systemic and detailed explanation of how and why phenomena

occur and thus form the foundation to formulate theories (Henderson et al., 2004). Our review indicates authors strive to build their research on theoretical foundations, yet often mislabel broad, atheoretical areas as theory. For example, Keller's (1993) foundational article focused on customer-based brand equity that built the foundation for some of the most cited articles in the field of sport brand research (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002) is more a classification than a theory. This shows that sport brand research can be relevant and impactful by examining a phenomenon without contributing to a specific theory or can be used to establish programmatic research focused on knowledge-building as "one study is unlikely to fully explain a sport management phenomenon or address a research question" (Funk, 2019, p. 9).

While Lewin (1945) famously held that "nothing is as practical as a good theory" (p. 129), theory building has become a must-have checkbox in academia, such that authors routinely describe even merely descriptive results as a theoretical contribution. This uncovers either a confusion in relation to what theory is or an aspiration to *sell* as theory something that is not yet theory. Good theory captures causal relationships; that is, the *why* embedded in the relationships between phenomena or concepts (van Knippenberg, 2011). Theorizing, on the other hand, relates to the early, essential stages of theory development (Weick, 1995). Merely describing the relationships between constructs without revealing why these relationships exist is insufficient for adequate theoretical understanding (Doherty, 2013). However, interim
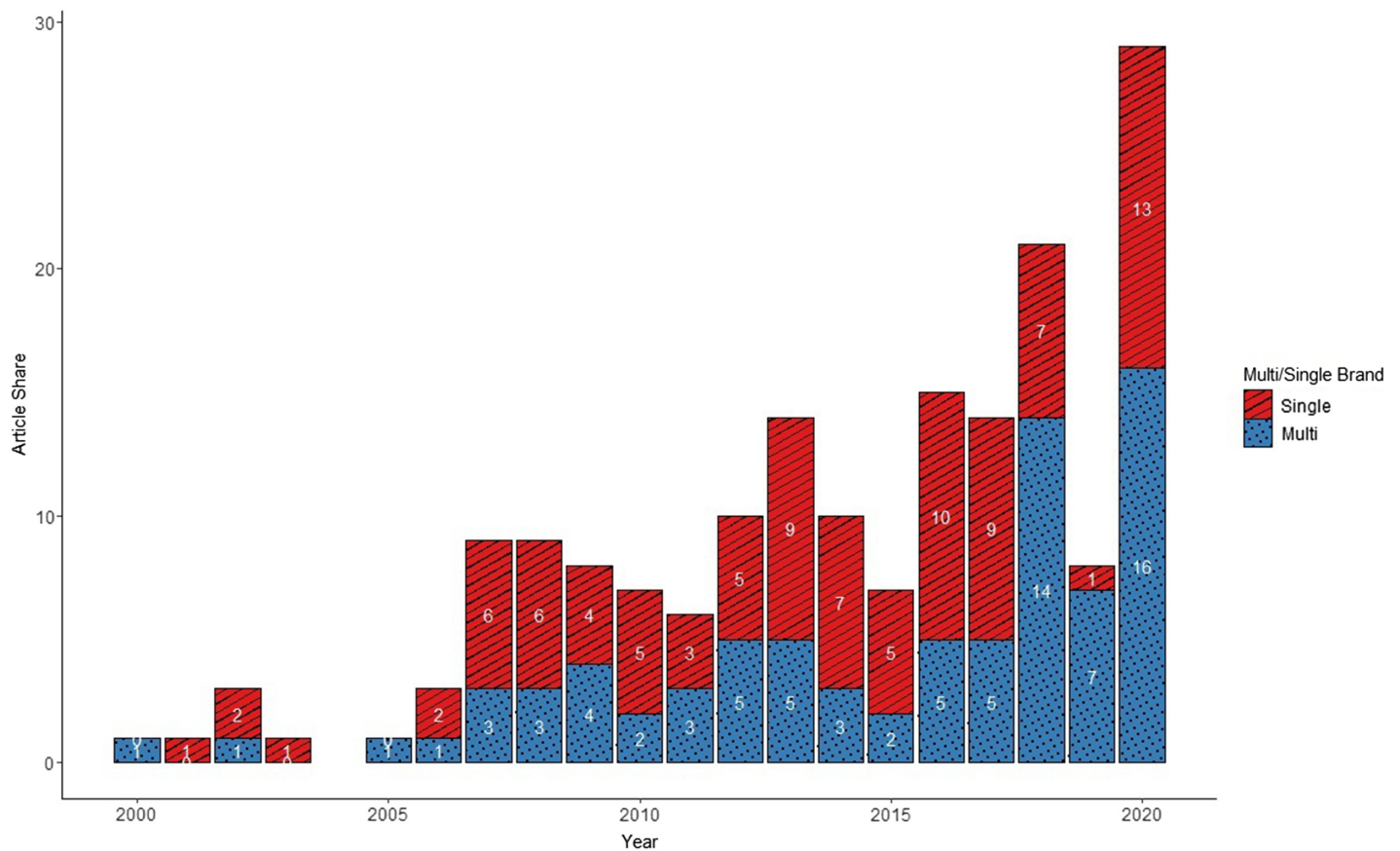
Figure 4 — Count of articles by number of brands considered.

struggles toward mature theories also should not be devalued (Weick, 1995). Chelladurai (2013) observed that theorizing represents a continuum, and although "a classificatory scheme does not have the same status as a full blown and established theory, it is also true that developing a classification of the observed phenomena is fundamental to any form of scientific inquiry" (p. 23). As such, pretheoretical works are a necessity for developing sound theory (Weick, 1995). As a discipline, sport management serves a twin role as both an explanatory science, conducting descriptive and predictive research, and a prescriptive science, conducting diagnostic and prescriptive research to understand causal relationships, and generate recommendations for how to bring about desired outcomes. Therefore, sport branding researchers are in a unique position to build upon logical arguments grounded in observed phenomena, prior experience, and existing knowledge, resulting in meaningful pretheoretical work that will prove useful in addressing the challenges of building our own theory in sport management (Fink, 2013).

Ideally, knowledge building and theory building happen at the same time, when findings are generalizable beyond the context and the research contributes to a higher degree of progress along the contribution continuum (Ladik & Steward, 2008). However, given the rapid development of sport brand practices mainly driven through technological innovation (Ratten, 2020), sport brand researchers, reviewers, and editors should consider the relevance and potential impact of research findings (Levy & Grewal, 2007)—particularly in exploratory research settings as authors may contribute knowledge to the field without fully formulating the theoretical underpinning of the observed findings—to spark knowledge

generation. Following a programmatic research approach, this can lead to a combined effort of the field to develop impactful research. Meanwhile, we encourage authors not to suggest that their research is based on theory when it is not, merely through desire to satisfy academic norms. We further call for authors to carefully embed their research in theory rather than tangentially mention or allude to a theory or theories, so that theoretical contributions become more evidentiary and impactful.

Methodological Approach

Our review reveals several threats to the methodological rigor in sport branding research, especially when examining the dominant quantitative approach. First, the limitation of cross-sectional studies' predictive ability was discussed within some of the papers we reviewed; however, collectively, the prevalence of cross-sectional designs makes it difficult to generalize about dynamic relationships among sport brands and their stakeholders. Specifically, cross-sectional analyses based on linear models cannot provide accurate results as variables are assumed to remain constant over time, thus failing to address chronological variability (Spector, 2019). Moreover, as exogenous variables and outcomes are simultaneously assessed, there is little evidence of temporal ordering necessary to establish causality. It is likely that the relationships measured in sport branding research vary over time, especially since fans' relationships with sport brands are likely to deepen when brands maintain relationships or dwindle over time when facing intense competition. This is particularly relevant when examining sport brands within a network of associations as those relationships are

highly subject to change (Daniels et al., 2019), for example, the transitory nature of a team roster as individual athletes join and depart. As a result, longitudinal data are particularly valuable since they can be used to establish a causal relationship between the factors that determine consumers' desired branding outcomes. To date, longitudinal investigations of sport branding have been centered on the development and change of brand associations and team identity of new teams (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2016; Wear & Heere, 2020). However, other important variables like brand personality, brand loyalty, and brand fit should also be investigated longitudinally. Experimental design has become increasingly popular in recent years, but most of these studies relied solely on a single study design. In 39 experimental studies, only three incorporated three studies, while eight used two studies. Out of these eleven multistudy articles, only four used different stimuli between experiments.

Second, experimental designs were commonly used to test the effectiveness of a sponsoring brand on consumers in sport branding research. Research studies typically examined a specific event and a set of brands as the research context, then tested the hypothesized relationship between the attributes of sponsorship messages and branding outcomes (e.g., brand attitude, purchase intention). The robustness and generalizability of results from a single study seem questionable. It is advantageous to employ experimental designs to minimize the effects of variables other than the independent variable, thus improving the internal validity to determine potential causal effects; however, the external validity of the study must also be considered (Morales et al., 2017). The randomization elements embedded in online surveys or in laboratory settings limit the generalizability of consumer responses to specific stimuli. It should be noted that the goal of researchers should not be to increase external validity rather than to assess external validity to understand where findings may apply and where they might not (Lynch, 1999). Given that mediated sport consumption occurs in a complex, crowded marketplace, the ecological validity of the experiment design should be seriously considered.

In summary, this assessment points to the need for sport branding research that moves beyond cross-sectional study designs and a more transparent manner of reporting the results. Power calculations appeared in less than 20% of the papers, yet only one paper reported the effect size. Sport branding studies that use quantitative methods should also pay more attention to statistical issues that arise when assumptions in the standard linear regression model are violated. Heteroscedasticity is of particular concern given that online user-generated data (e.g., number of likes and comments) is an emerging source of data as well as user-generated data. In addition, given the limited number of mixed-method studies, future researchers should also consider more mixed-methods studies for improved data triangulation.

One more limitation that ought to catch researchers' attention is selection bias. Both qualitative and quantitative research can suffer from distortions in sample selection, which may be the result of researcher decisions or self-selection decisions made by agents in the study (Zaefarian et al., 2017). Moreover, any information that pertains to the design or method of the study, such as the point in time, the setting, and eligibility criteria was normally implicit but not explicitly available. It was not always possible to know from the published article when or how participants were recruited and how this may have affected the results of samples or surveys. Sport branding research is largely concerned with fans' reactions, so selection bias is more apparent since researchers are likely to have predetermined preferences for finding fans as well as those who are willing to participate in sport branding research. On top of that, most of the data gathered by sport brands' social media or online forums come from highly engaged fans, which is not always representative of the total target audience. Overcoming selection bias is of vital importance as sport branding research bolsters effects in areas of inclusion and diversity (Melton & MacCharles, 2021) and seeks to better understand how sport can engage with new individuals and sectors of society.

Contribution and Recommendations for Future Research Directions

By remapping the sport brandscape, the current research synthesizes extant knowledge to offer directions to advance the literature. Specifically, we advance two distinct and complementary areas which require attention and should be integrated into future research examining the sport brand ecosystem. First, we advocate for improved research design to examine underrepresented aspects identified that have been limiting the generalizability of findings and likely contributing to ad hoc management decisions. Second, we reconceptualize the sport brand ecosystem framework and encourage the investigation of new topical domains for scholars to derive insights benefitting both those brands within the sport ecosystem and to wider society.

Theory and Research Design

To start with, the evergrowing importance of social media in the sport ecosystem (Filo et al., 2015) has led to a growing number of studies examining how sport brands can leverage social platforms (e.g., Doyle et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). Although researchers acknowledge that the brand consumer dynamic varies depending on the platform and its embedded uses and functions (e.g., Weimar et al., 2020), further studies which consider multiplatforms are warranted. Similarly, the new ways digital technologies allow brands to interact with consumers (e.g., virtual reality; Kunz & Santomier, 2019) and the integration of esports into team branding strategies (Bertschy et al., 2020) is progressively entering the research agenda and offers new branding research routes which should be explored (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Given that the credibility of scientific claims is established with evidence of replicability using new data (Nosek & Errington, 2020), the development of replication studies and the provision of open data and preregistered studies (Standen, 2019) are encouraged to deepen the understanding of how social media and new technology is shaping the sport branding landscape.

Despite the common acknowledgement that longitudinal approaches are critical to advance sport branding theory (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2020), cross-sectional studies continue to saturate the literature. Similarly, there is a lack of experimental designs and most brand-related research is either purely qualitative or quantitative. Also, as opposed to most branding studies in leading marketing journals, multistudy approaches are scarce. While we do not dispute the value offered by studies utilizing cross-sectional and wholly quantitative or qualitative approaches, longitudinal and mixed-methods work is pivotal to advance the field and contribute to wider academic and professional conversations with neighboring fields (Ko & Lee, 2018). Thus, we echo Funk et al.'s (2016) call for more rigorous methodological work to advance knowledge on the relationships between consumers and brands involved in the sport ecosystem. Specifically, we encourage sport management scholars to move beyond cross-sectional research designs and single-source (particularly self-report) data,

or merely acknowledging the weaknesses in research designs in article "Limitations" sections and suggesting that future scholars do better. Wide-spread adoption of this recommendation will enhance the quality of sport brand research, increase the theoretical and practical impact, and improve the credibility and status of sport management research. Similarly, as the field matures, we argue that it is important to shift from scholarly metrics based on the number of articles published to an approach that considers actual impact of the research on the sport ecosystem and beyond.

Lastly, as our review indicates, most branding studies published in the sport management and marketing literature use convenience samples, with data collection typically occurring in a single cultural environment (e.g., United States or Australia), sport (e.g., basketball or soccer), or setting (e.g., professional or amateur sports). While the examination of the idiosyncrasies of each context often provides useful insights for practitioners, we encourage researchers to adopt more diverse data collection methods to further drive theory and enhance the generalizability of their findings. Thus, moving forward, researchers should gather representative samples and collect data from different sports, brands, and countries to develop multistudies exploring the similarities and differences of brand management in different contexts and provide a better understanding of the global impact of sport brands in contemporary societies. Studies assessing perceptions of men's and women's sport brands concurrently and acknowledging that these co-exist within the same sport ecosystem, rather than seeing these as two separate research streams are strongly encouraged.

Sport Ecosystem and Beyond

We introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem and Environment (see Figure 5) as a basis for organizing future sport brand research. The framework consists of the inner brand ecosystem that accounts for the vertical brand architecture of sport brands and the event brand ecosystem that is connected horizontally as event brands interact with the inner brand ecosystem, as indicated by the double-headed arrow. The gray boxes surrounding these individual, yet connected ecosystems indicate the enclosed brands are also structurally connected—not just based on consumer perceptions. The updated framework accounts for the outer brand ecosystem, where external brands can temporarily enter the brand ecosystem of sport brands horizontally. While athletes are nested within teams, and teams within leagues, solely conceptualizing sport brands according to this hierarchy risks mischaracterizing a collaborative partnership (athletes playing on behalf of a team) with an ownership relationship (traditional brands within a brand architecture) and may not reflect the reality of consumer perceptions of brand relationships. In the modern sport brand ecosystem, some of the most powerful brands represent individual athletes, who have been empowered by mainstream and social media to take control of and build their personal brands independent of their respective team, league, or federation affiliations (Kunkel et al., 2021).

The Sport Brand Ecosystem and Environment provides researchers with guidance on their future research. For example, leagues, teams, athletes, and sponsors co-exist within the same ecosystem and spillover effects impact these brands due to a transfer of meaning in consumers' minds (McCracken, 1986). However, despite some recent attempts to examine brand-to-brand relationships (e.g., Su et al., 2020), most previous studies are focused on single-brand studies. The brand architecture governing sport brands differentiates the field due to the numerous vertical, and horizonal hierarchies present in the sport ecosystem. Future research should examine the implications of brand interactions within the sport ecosystem and changes in brand portfolio on consumers.

The impact of social media empowering athletes to govern their own branding strategies independent of (yet still impacting on) their team, league, event, or association affiliations provides a particularly interesting aspect to examine as technology continues to provide further opportunities in this regard. Similarly,
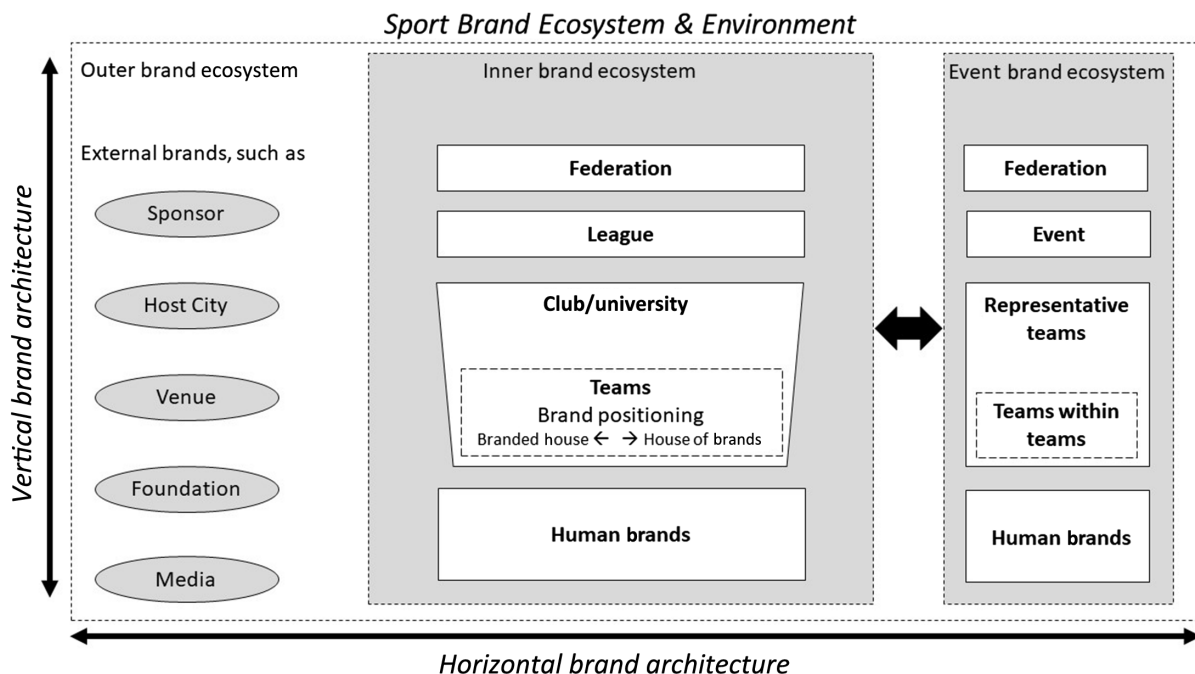

Figure 5 — Sport Brand Ecosystem & Environment.

changes to legislation allowing student-athletes to benefit from their name, image, and likeness necessitates further work on how individual athletes can build their brands alongside how these changes impact related brands (Kunkel et al., 2021). In addition, the increasing demand for brands to create shared value (Menghwar & Daood, 2021; Su et al., 2021) calls for additional research to explore how brands can work together to create value not only from fans, but also to fans and the wider society (Cook et al., 2021). Studies advancing a transformative sport service research (Inoue et al., 2020) approach, which continue to explore how sport intersects with individual and collective well-being, are particularly encouraged.

Second, social media is a dynamic environment that allows two-way communications between fans and brands in the sport ecosystem (e.g., Filo et al., 2015). The development of web-based technologies has provided opportunities to monitor and manage how fans engage with sport brands on social media. Our review indicates that there is still much to be discovered about sport brands and social media, with impacts on actual consumption, one such important area for scholars to examine. Future studies should extend the existent body of knowledge by examining how both transactional (e.g., purchase of game tickets, branded merchandise), and nontransactional fan behaviors (e.g., frequency of web visits, electronic word-of-mouth, content liking, posts and comments; Yoshida et al., 2014) impact brand management practices and vice versa. The use of predictive analytics to explore fan reactions to brand messages may also represent a fruitful research line to advance research and practice for brands in the sport brand ecosystem. Research tracking new social media platforms, technologies, and modes of consumption as they emerge and considering how these platforms can be used collectively within a broader communications strategy will also be important.

Third, our review identifies that little is known about how brand management is impacted by the various stages of the brand lifecycle, nor how such effects impact other brands within a portfolio. For instance, the growth in women's professional sport in recent years has provided increased opportunities for organizations, and sportswomen to build their brands. However, men's sport has long profited from numerous social, historical, and economic conditions which have not been equitably extended to women's sport (Delia, 2020). Similarly, women's sport brands which are parallel to the same men's brand within a portfolio in some cases are 100 years younger (e.g., Doyle et al., 2021). Research is needed to determine how sport brands can grow across various stages of their lifecycle to produce impacts at the brand and portfolio level, as well as how introductions, changes, or removals of brands from within a portfolio impact consumers (Hasaan et al., 2021). This lifecycle perspective may also be applied to contexts examining how sport brands adopt new technologies (e.g., nonfungible tokens or cryptocurrencies) into their brand strategies.

Fourth, despite the wide variety of theories directly or indirectly used in previous studies in the branding literature, our review indicates that research is conducted with a practical perspective, and sound theoretical underpinnings are not evident in many studies. This may lead to a limited application of work in which sport brand researchers speak only to themselves and results are not deemed relevant to other fields (Funk et al., 2016). As sport brands can capitalize on the emotional connection shared with fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005), additional research is encouraged to draw from various theories and to build new theories to highlight the interdisciplinary nature and show the potential of the sport ecosystem to act as a platform for other service brand environments (Underwood et al., 2001).

Limitations

The present study provides an overview of the sport brandscape and outlines important directions to advance knowledge, However, we acknowledge that it is not without its limitations. We delimited the scope of our literature review to four prominent English language sport management journals to capture the discourse on sport brand research occurring in these influential outlets. Research on sport brands and sport branding has been published in venues beyond these four journals, notably including mainstream business, management, and marketing journals that may reach a broader audience than discipline-specific publications. Incorporating a review of sport brand research in other journals could provide a more comprehensive perspective on the current state of the literature and serve to differentiate work published within such outlets with that published within the traditional outlets targeted by sport scholars. Similarly, we focused on a 21-year period from 2000 to 2020, restricted to the most prominent sport management and marketing journals, and a set of defined keywords to help with our inclusion criteria. Although these decision criteria were justified for the purposes of conducting a structured review of the literature, it is likely that changes to these criteria may have added to or excluded some of the 179 research articles that we systematically analyzed. To the extent that sport brand research published in our four focal journals differs from that published in other outlets; our choice of publication outlet as an inclusion criterion may have excluded important perspectives. Overall, we encourage further research, discourse, and perspectives to forward knowledge governing the sport brand ecosystem.

Interpretation of our results is, naturally, influenced by our perspectives as researchers active within sport branding. While we remain sensitive to our individual and collective relationships with our research topic, it is impossible to discount the near certainty that our conclusions have been impacted by our personal and professional backgrounds and training. Our research team has an international background, representing six nationalities, currently working on three different continents. While this provides diversity in cultural and personal perspectives, our professional experience is relatively more homogeneous. Similarly, our assessment of the methodological approaches in the extant sport brand literature and related concerns regarding statistical inferences and conclusions that could be supported by typical research designs was focused almost exclusively on quantitative research. While this represents the majority of sport brand research, it necessarily presents a partial picture of the state of the field. Additional investigation of the methodological strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in qualitative research of sport brands is warranted, as is future work examining how the field is shaped by research published after this review, in 2021 and beyond.

Conclusion

In our article, we focus on a crucially important and emerging topical area. Sport brands are a contemporary issue as the emergence of social media has enabled all individuals within the sport industry to brand themselves, and many examples exist where individuals within the sport ecosystem have used their

status to achieve personal, societal, or economic gain. Brand development and management are practically relevant to many stakeholders, and provide an opportunity to theoretically contribute to the sport management literature. The focus of the present review was to challenge sport brand scholars, including the authors of this paper, to elevate the field by taking bold steps forward both theoretically and methodologically. We hope this work encourages the academy to tackle the limitations often spoken about in research, but rarely addressed due to various constraints. We expect our article to produce valuable and much-needed theoretical knowledge pertaining to how sport brands can be effectively managed, alongside practical implications for stakeholders in the sport industry. To guide future research, we introduce the Sport Brand Ecosystem and Environment and provide theoretical, methodological, and focus-specific recommendations for future research. Our article establishes a strong foundation for future sport brand research.

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