
The Evolution and Knowledge Structure of Sport-Based Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): A Bibliometric Analysis using Scopus Database

Trisha Aryanti Septina¹, Tommy Apriantono¹, Muhamad Fahmi Hasan¹

¹Magister Keolahragaan/Sekolah Farmasi, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

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Abstract

Research on sport-based Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has developed rapidly and is no longer understood merely as a social activity but also as part of a sports organization's sustainability strategy. This study aims to map the development, knowledge structure, and main themes in sport-based CSR research. The study employs a bibliometric analysis method using data from the Scopus database consisting of English-language journal articles from 2009 to 2025. The analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and VOSviewer to identify publication trends, productive authors, leading journals, and keyword network visualizations. The results indicate that publications on sport-based CSR have seen a significant increase, particularly after 2015, in line with growing attention to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The most dominant research themes relate to environmental sustainability, sports organization management, consumer behaviour, and organizational governance. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that sport-based CSR research is dominated by developed countries and focuses on sustainability issues within the sports industry. The study's conclusions suggest that sport-based CSR research is evolving toward a more strategic and sustainability-oriented approach. This study is expected to serve as a reference for future sport-based CSR research.

Keywords: bibliometric analysis, SDGs, sport-based CSR, sport management, VOSviewer.

INTRODUCTION

Today's sports industry is not only focused on entertainment and economic gain, but also plays a vital role in social, cultural, and environmental spheres. Sports organizations such as clubs, leagues, and federations are increasingly viewed as strategic actors capable of driving social change, promoting positive values, and supporting sustainable development. In its evolution, sports are no longer understood merely as competitive activities but also to support issues related to

health, education, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (Babiak, 2010).

These developments have prompted sports organizations to integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices into their organizational strategies. CSR in sports is now understood not merely as a one-off social activity but has become an integral part of organizational management and stakeholder relations (Sheth & Babiak, 2010). Sports organizations utilize CSR programs to strengthen their reputation, increase fan loyalty, and build sustainable relationships with communities and society (Walzel et al., 2018).

The growing global attention to sustainability issues has also influenced the development of sport-based CSR. The introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), United Nations, (2015) has encouraged sports organizations to contribute more actively to social and environmental issues, such as carbon emission reduction, waste management, public health, and community empowerment. Therefore, sports are seen as having great potential as a medium for spreading sustainability values because they can reach a wide audience (Lu, 2024).

As the implementation of CSR in the sports industry has grown, academic interest in the study of sport-based CSR has also increased. Previous research has largely focused on the motivations of sports organizations in implementing CSR, its impact on fan loyalty, organizational reputation, and environmental sustainability (Trendafilova et al., 2013). However, the rapid growth in publications has also created challenges in the form of a wide range of research topics that are scattered and overlapping. Therefore, a comprehensive literature review is needed to understand the development of knowledge, key themes, and research opportunities in the field of sport-based CSR.

A bibliometric study by Chiu et al., (2023) has mapped the knowledge structure regarding CSR in sports management. The study indicates that research on sport-based CSR is growing rapidly and is dominated by themes such as sustainability, sports marketing, and organizational relationships with stakeholders. However, the study remains limited as it relies solely on the Web of Science (WoS) database covering publications from 2008 - 2021. Therefore, an updated analysis using the Scopus database which offers broader journal coverage, particularly in

the fields of social sciences, management, and sports is necessary. Additionally, the emergence of post-pandemic issues has driven shifts in research focus, such as environmental sustainability, social welfare, and digital transformation in sports.

Based on this, this study aims to conduct a bibliometric analysis using the Scopus database to map the development and structure of knowledge regarding sport-based CSR. This study is expected to provide an overview of publication trends, the evolution of research themes, and research opportunities that can be further explored in the future.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs quantitative bibliometric analysis to examine the development of the literature on sport-based CSR. Bibliometric analysis is a method used to identify research trends, scientific productivity, collaboration patterns, and the evolution of knowledge structures within a field of study through the analysis of scientific publications (Raaijmakers, 2003). In this study, bibliometric analysis is used to evaluate performance analysis and science mapping on the topic of sport-based CSR.

Data Source

The research data was obtained from the Scopus database because it has a broad coverage of international literature, particularly in the fields of social sciences, business, management, and sports (Waltman et al., 2010). The data search process was conducted using keywords related to the research topic, namely (“Sport” OR “Athlete”), (“CSR” OR “Corporate Social Responsibility”), and (“Impact” OR “Sustainability”). The search was conducted on publications from 2009 - 2025, yielding a total of 160 documents.

This study only utilized peer-reviewed English language journal articles and review articles. Meanwhile, documents such as conference papers, editorials, notes, and book chapters were excluded from the analysis. After the selection process, data was exported from Scopus in CSV format, including information on authors, publication year, article title, journal, citations, affiliation, country, abstract, and author provided keywords. Subsequently, a data verification and cleaning process

was conducted to reduce duplication and metadata inconsistencies.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and VOSviewer. Microsoft Excel was used to analysed annual publication trends, prolific authors, leading journals, and articles with the highest number of citations. Meanwhile, VOSviewer was used to visualize relationships among bibliographic elements through keyword co-occurrence analysis. This analysis was used to identify thematic cluster patterns and the development of research topics in the study of sport-based CSR. With this approach, the structure of knowledge and the direction of research development can be understood more comprehensively.

RESULTS

Publication Year Trends

The following is a trend in the publication years of research focusing on sport-based CSR 2009-2025, as shown in Figure 1.

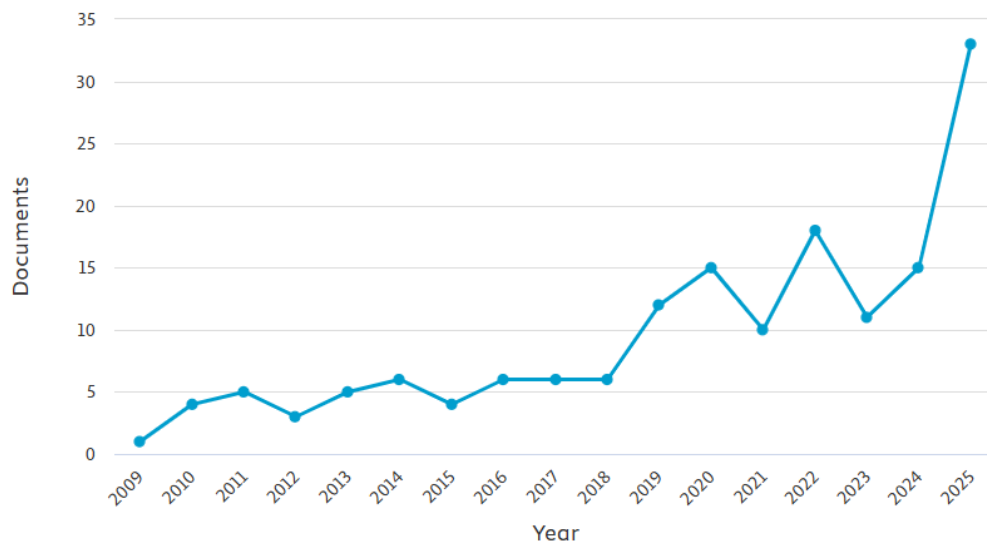


Figure 1. Document by Year

Research on the topic of sport-based CSR began in 2009 and continued through 2025, with a total of 160 publications. In 2009, the number of publications

was still relatively low, with only 1 article. From 2010 to 2015, the trend showed relatively stable growth, with the number of publications ranging from 27 articles to an average of 4 articles per year.

From 2016 to 2018, the research trend saw a gradual increase, averaging 6 articles per year. A significant increase began to be evident in 2019, with 12 articles. The number of studies fluctuated again in 2020, reaching 15 articles, and slightly decreased in 2021 to just 10 articles. In 2022, publications saw a significant increase, reaching 18 published articles, then slightly decreased in 2023 to just 11 articles, before rising again in 2024 to 15 articles. Publications peaked in 2025 with approximately 33 articles, indicating that the topic of sport-based CSR has been increasingly studied by researchers in recent years.

Countries Conducting Research

The countries conducting research on sport-based CSR can be seen in figure 2.

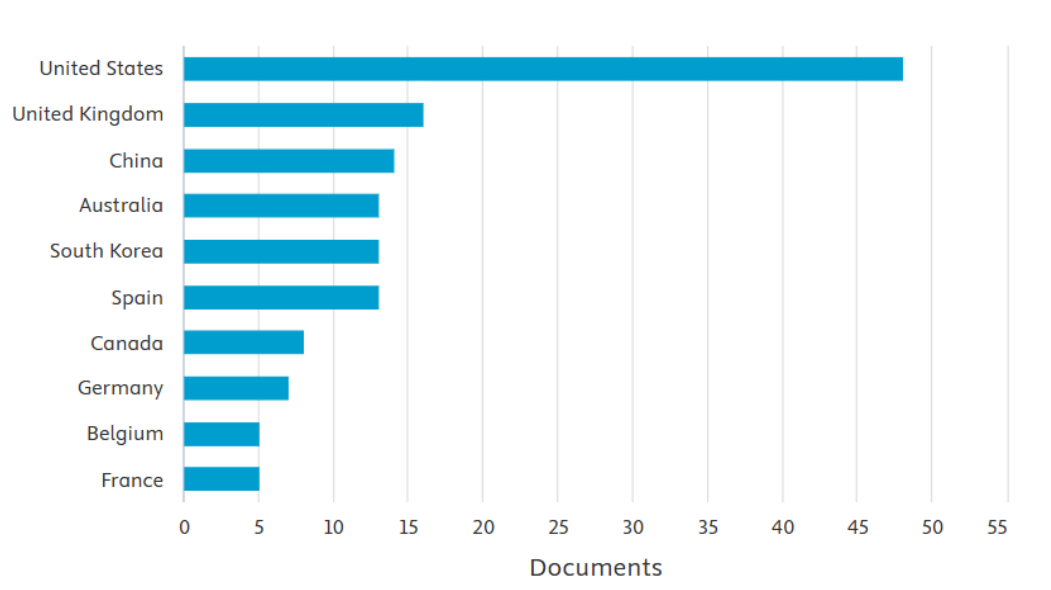


Figure 2. Documents by Country or Territory

Research on sport-based CSR has been conducted by various countries worldwide, with a total of 46 countries conducting research between 2009 and 2025. Based on Figure 2, the following are the top 10 countries that have published articles on sport-based CSR research. The United States is the country with the highest number of articles, totalling 48. This dominance indicates that the United

States has a strong academic focus on sport-based CSR studies. The United Kingdom ranks second with 16 articles.

Next, China ranks third with 14 research articles. Australia, South Korea, and Spain also made significant contributions, with relatively similar publication counts an average of 13 research articles per country. Additionally, Canada and Germany contributed to the development of sport-based CSR research, although the number of articles was lower compared to the previous countries, at around 7 to 8 articles. Belgium and France were the countries with the lowest number of publications in the top 10 list, with 5 articles each.

Overall, the data indicates that research on sport-based CSR is more prevalent in developed nations with robust sports industries and strong CSR awareness. The distribution of this research also demonstrates that social responsibility issues in the sports sector have become a global concern.

Authors with the Most Articles

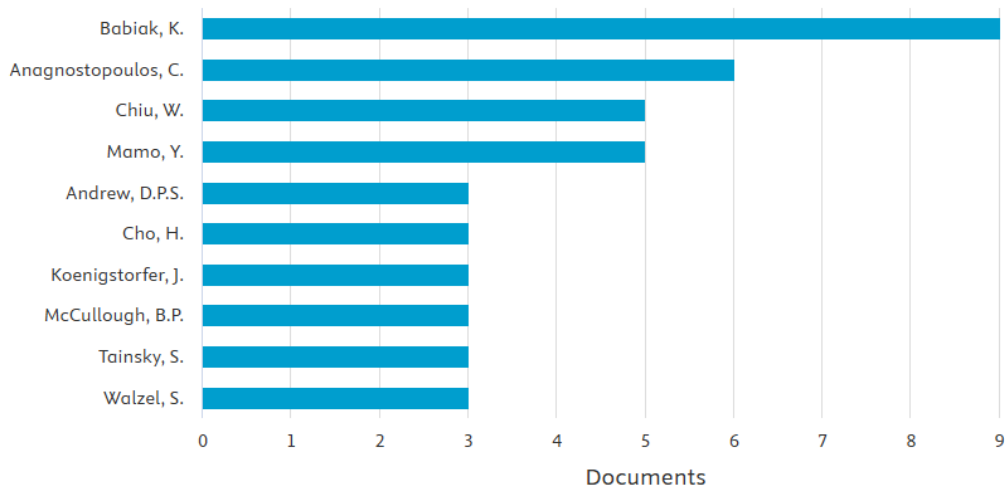


Figure 3. Document by author

Based on Figure 3, the author with the most significant contribution to research on sports-based CSR is Babiak, K., with a total of 9 publications. This figure indicates that Babiak, K., plays a dominant role in the development of sports-based CSR and serves as a key reference in the field. The second position is held by Anagnostopoulos, C., with approximately 6 publications. Next are Chiu, W. and Mamo, Y., who are in the following positions with a relatively similar number of

publications, namely around 6 articles.

Additionally, several other authors such as Andrew, D.P.S., Cho, H., Koenigstorfer, J., McCullough, B.P., Tainsky, S., and Walzel, S. have also contributed to research on Sport-based CSR. Each of these authors has approximately 3 publications. Overall, the data indicates that research on Sport-based CSR is conducted by several authors whose research focuses on the fields of sports, social responsibility, sustainability, and sports organization management. The dominance of certain authors also suggests the existence of a group of researchers who consistently develop.

Articles Most Cited

The following are the 5 articles with the highest citation trends. First is the article written by Babiak K. & Trendafilova S. in 2011 titled “CSR and Environmental Responsibility: Motives and Pressures to Adopt Green Management Practices”, published in the journal *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* with 778 citations. This article serves as a cornerstone in the sport-based CSR literature. The discussion in this article focuses on the motivations and pressures from stakeholders that drive U.S. professional sports leagues to adopt environmentally friendly practices. The high number of citations for this article indicates that the early foundations of CSR research were significantly influenced by institutional theory.

The second most cited article is by Trendafilova S., Babiak K., & Heinze K. in 2013, titled “Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Sustainability: Why Professional Sport Is Greening the Playing Field,” published in the journal *Sport Management Review*, with 184 citations. Building on previous research, this article explores why professional sports are becoming increasingly eco-friendly. The discussion highlights the phenomenon of isomorphism, where sports clubs mimic each other’s environmentally friendly practices due to industry pressure and fan expectations.

The third most cited study is by Lacey R. and Kennett-Hensel P.A. in 2010, titled “Longitudinal Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility on Customer Relationships,” published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, with 163 citations. Unlike the two studies above, which focus on organizations, this study-applies CSR

to the level of consumer behaviour. Through a longitudinal approach, this article demonstrates that a strong commitment to CSR can enhance trust, strengthen fan identification, and build long-term customer loyalty.

The next most-cited article is the one written by Walzel S., Robertson J., & Anagnostopoulos C. in 2018 titled “Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Team Sports Organizations: An Integrative Review” in the Journal of Sport Management, with 138 citations. This article provides a summary of prior literature and establishes an integrated framework regarding the CSR process in professional sports teams, ranging from antecedents (causes) and implementation to outcomes.

Finally, an article written by McCullough B.P., Orr M., & Watanabe N.M. in 2020 and published in the Journal of Sport Management, with 106 citations. Titled “Measuring externalities: The imperative next step to sustainability assessment in sport,” the article critiques CSR practices in the sports sector, which often amount to little more than greenwashing.

Most Published Journals

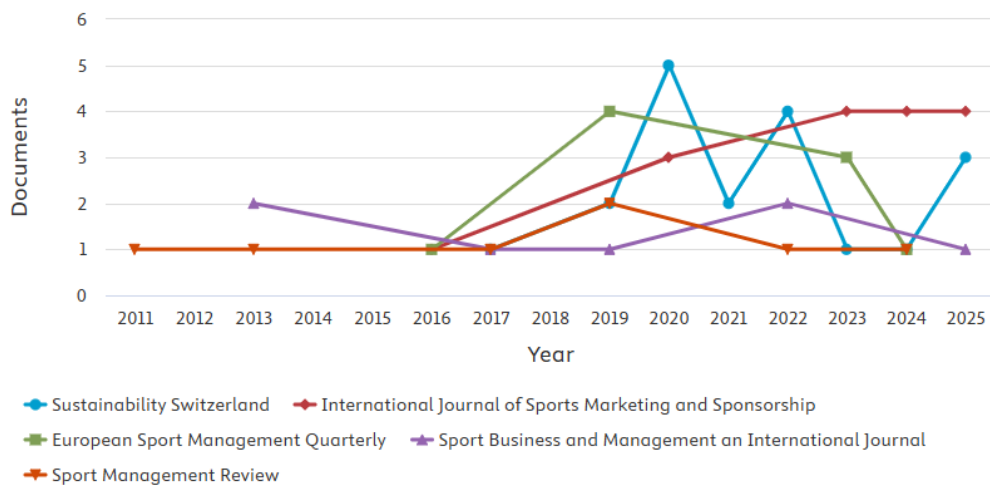


Figure 4. Document per year by source

As shown in Figure 4, the largest number of articles on sport-based CSR research have been published in various international journals year after year. The graph illustrates the growth in publications across several journals that focus on sustainability, sports management, and sports marketing. Sustainability Switzerland has become one of the most active sources for publishing sport-based CSR articles.

The number of publications in this journal has seen a significant increase, particularly in 2020 with 19 articles, and has continued to rise in 2022 and 2025.

The International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship has shown a consistently rising publication trend from 2017 through 2025. The number of articles in this journal has reached approximately 17 in recent years, indicating a high level of interest in sports marketing and social responsibility research. The European Sport Management Quarterly has also made a significant contribution with an increase in the number of publications during the 2018–2020 period. After reaching a peak of around 9 articles in 2019, the number of published articles has tended to decline gradually in subsequent years.

Meanwhile, Sport Business and Management: An International Journal shows a relatively stable publication trend, with an average of about 8 articles published per year. Overall, the data indicates that research on Sport-based CSR is published in various internationally reputable journals and has shown growth year over year. This suggests that the topic of Sport-based CSR is gaining increasing attention in academic research, particularly in the fields of sports management, sports marketing, and sustainability.

Keyword Analysis

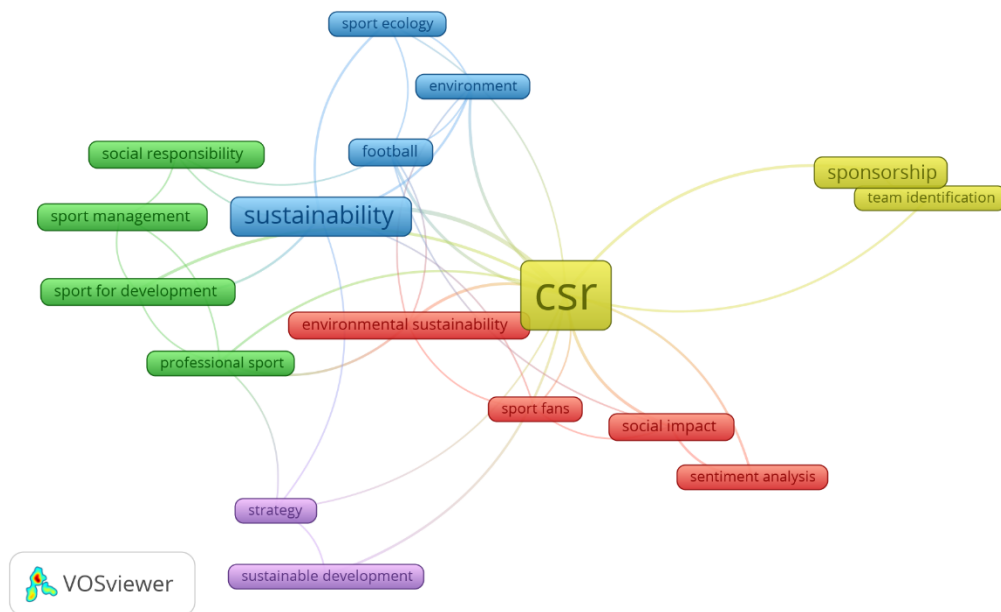


Figure 5. Keyword Analysis Results

Figure 5 is a keyword network created using VOSviewer. The keyword “CSR” appears as the largest central node connecting various other research topics within the sport-based CSR field. This network visualization yields four main clusters distinguished by color, illustrating the direction of research development. The first cluster, marked in red, focuses on strategic management and marketing aspects. Keywords dominating this cluster include “management,” “sustainability,” “public relations,” “marketing,” “perception,” and “sustainable development.” The dominance of these keywords indicates that sport-based CSR research is frequently examined as a strategy for sports organizations to build a positive image, strengthen relationships with the public, and support sustainable development goals.

The second cluster, shown in blue, represents the context of professional sports and environmental sustainability. Keywords such as “professional sports,” “sports,” “athletes,” and “soccer” are closely linked to “environmental protection” and “environmental sustainability.” This indicates that professional sports, particularly soccer, is one of the sectors actively developing environment-based CSR programs.

Next, the third cluster, marked in green, focuses on demographic aspects, consumer psychology, and research methodological approaches. Keywords such as “human,” “male,” “female,” “adult,” and “psychology” indicate that many studies examine the psychological responses and behaviours of stakeholders toward the implementation of sport-based CSR. Additionally, the emergence of keywords such as “questionnaire,” “cross-sectional study,” and “article” indicates that research in this field is dominated by quantitative, survey-based empirical approaches.

The fourth cluster, coloured yellow, is a cluster with a more specific scope that focuses on measuring environmental impact. Keywords such as “carbon footprint” and “environmental impact” indicate a trend in research that is beginning to focus on the quantitative measurement of environmental impact in the sports industry. In essence, the network visualization in Figure 5 shows that sport-based CSR research is developing in a multidisciplinary manner by integrating aspects of organizational management, marketing, consumer psychology, and environmental sustainability. This indicates that sport-based CSR studies continue to evolve and are gaining increasing attention in modern sports research.

Analysis of Theme and Topic Trends

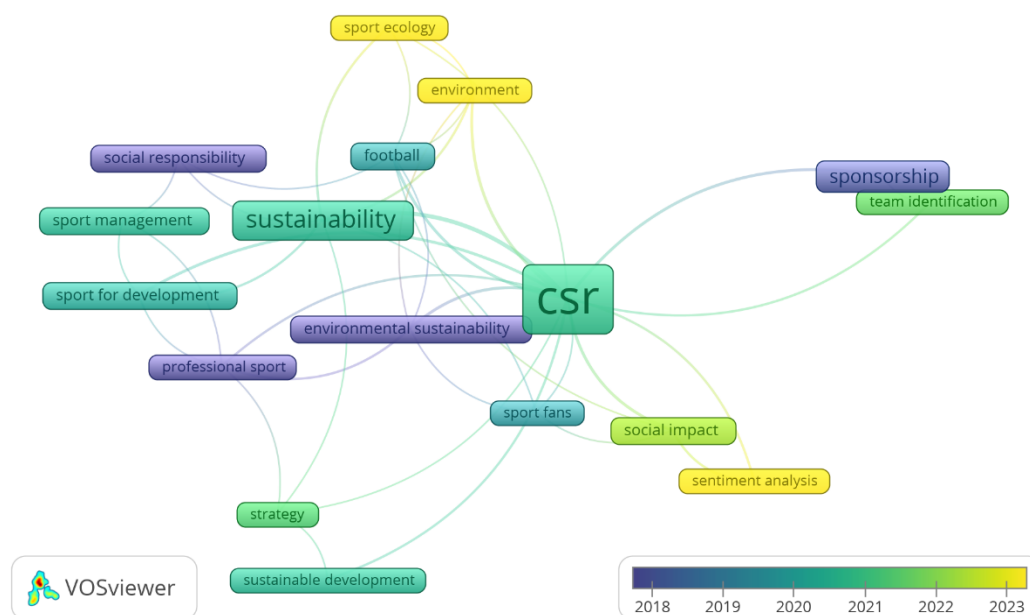


Figure 6. Overlay Visualization

Based on the results of the overlay visualization analysis using VOSviewer in Figure 6, an evolution of themes and research topics in sport-based CSR over time is evident. This visualization illustrates the temporal dimension of keyword emergence, where the colour gradient from blue to yellow represents the average publication year for each research topic. Blue indicates earlier research themes, while yellow indicates newer themes that have emerged in recent studies.

In the early phase, marked by the colour blue, research on sport-based CSR focused primarily on the contexts of professional sports and marketing. Some of the keywords that dominated this phase included “corporate social responsibility,” “professional sports,” “marketing,” “soccer,” and “environmental protection.” This indicates that early research placed greater emphasis on the use of CSR as a marketing strategy for sports organizations, particularly within professional sports leagues such as soccer. Additionally, environmental protection issues began to emerge as part of CSR implementation within the sports industry.

Furthermore, in the development phase marked by the colour green, the focus of the research began to shift toward organizational management and sustainability. Keywords such as “management,” “environmental sustainability,”

and “human” began to appear prominently in the visualization network. This shift indicates that CSR is no longer understood merely as an external promotional activity but is beginning to be integrated into the management systems of sports organizations in a more strategic and sustainable manner.

On the other hand, the latest phase, marked in yellow, reflects the emergence of more contemporary research themes. Keywords such as “sustainability,” “sustainable development,” “environmental impact,” and “carbon footprint” are increasingly being explored in recent research. This indicates that academic attention is shifting toward more concrete and quantitative measurements of environmental impact within the sports industry. Additionally, the emergence of the keywords “athletes” and “perception” indicates that recent research is also beginning to highlight the role of individuals particularly athletes in driving social and environmental initiatives through sport-based CSR activities.

Generally, the overlay visualization in Figure 6 indicates that the research theme of Sport-based CSR has undergone significant development. Research that initially focused on marketing and professional sports has expanded to include issues of sustainability, measurement of environmental impact, and individual involvement in the implementation of sport-based CSR. This suggests that the field of sport-based CSR continues to evolve dynamically and holds great potential for further research in the future.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the bibliometric analysis, the development of publications on sport-based CSR shows a significant increase year over year. This development can be divided into several phases: the early research phase, the growth phase, and the phase of increased publications in recent years. In the early phase before 2010, the number of studies on sport-based CSR was still relatively limited. However, after 2015, there was a significant increase in the number of publications.

This increase indicates that the issue of sport-based CSR is gaining greater attention in global academic research. This development is also in line with the growing global focus on the SDGs. In this regard, sports organizations are being encouraged to focus not only on the business and competitive aspects of sports, but

also on social responsibility and environmental sustainability (Tavares et al., 2023). In addition, research developments have also been influenced by growing attention to environmental issues within the sports industry. Several highly cited studies have extensively addressed green management, environmental sustainability, and the efforts of sports organizations to reduce the ecological impact of their operational activities (Jin & Mirza, 2024). This indicates that environmental issues have become one of the main themes in the development of research on sport-based CSR.

The prominence of environmental issues is also evident in the sources of these publications, many of which come from journals focused on sustainability and sports management. This indicates that sport-based CSR is no longer viewed merely as a social initiative of sports organizations, but also as an integral part of a multidisciplinary approach to organizational sustainability and governance (Lu, 2024; Walzel et al., 2018).

Based on the results of keyword co-occurrence mapping, the knowledge structure in sport-based CSR research is divided into several main themes. The first theme relates to environmental sustainability. This theme indicates that sports organizations are beginning to prioritize environmental issues as a crucial component of their CSR implementation. Research on this theme extensively addresses environmental impacts, sustainability, and the efforts of sports organizations to mitigate the ecological impacts of their activities (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; McCullough et al., 2020).

The second theme relates to consumer behaviour and relationships. In this theme, research primarily examines the impact of CSR implementation on public perception, fan loyalty, and the relationship between sports organizations and their stakeholders. This indicates that CSR is viewed as a strategy capable of strengthening the image and reputation of sports organizations in the eyes of the public (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010; Sheth & Babiak, 2010).

The third theme relates to governance and organizational learning. This theme emphasizes the importance of good organizational governance in supporting the successful implementation of sport-based CSR programs (Breitbarth et al., 2015). In addition, sports organizations also need to have internal commitment and organizational learning processes so that CSR programs can run sustainably and not

merely be temporary (Zeimers et al., 2019).

Overall, the results of the thematic mapping indicate that research on Sport-based CSR is developing in a multidisciplinary manner by integrating aspects of environmental sustainability, consumer behaviour, and sports organization governance.

The results of this study indicate a paradigm shift in the study of sport-based CSR. CSR in the field of sports is no longer understood merely as a philanthropic activity or a public relations strategy (Babiak, 2010) but has evolved into an integral part of organizational governance and environmental sustainability (Lu, 2024).

Theoretically, this study indicates that research on sport-based CSR is evolving toward a more strategic and sustainability-oriented approach. Meanwhile, practically, the findings of this study can serve as a basis for consideration by sports organizations, sponsors, and policymakers in designing more structured and sustainable CSR programs.

Additionally, sports organizations need to enhance transparency and accountability in implementing CSR programs, particularly those related to environmental impacts. This is crucial because sustainability issues and environmental impact reporting are increasingly drawing public attention and the focus of various stakeholders (McCullough et al., 2020).

This study still has several limitations, particularly regarding the scope of the data and the bibliometric visualization results used. Some research topics still have relatively small node sizes in the VOSviewer visualization, indicating that there are subtopics that have not been extensively studied in sport-based CSR research.

Given these circumstances, future research is expected to explore several topics that have received limited attention. One such topic is the impact of technology and digitalization on supporting the implementation of sport-based CSR programs. Additionally, future research could also examine the effectiveness of sports-based CSR programs in the post-COVID-19 era, particularly in addressing the changing economic and social conditions of sports organizations.

Furthermore, the development of the esports industry could also present new research opportunities within the field of sport-based CSR. The integration of the

e-sports industry with social responsibility is still relatively under explored, offering significant potential for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to map the development and structure of the literature on sport-based CSR through bibliometric analysis using the Scopus database. Based on the analysis results, research on sport-based CSR has shown significant growth year over year, particularly since 2015. The mapping results also indicate a paradigm shift in the study of sport-based CSR. CSR in the sports sector is no longer understood merely as a philanthropic activity or a public relations strategy but has evolved into an integral part of sustainability management, consumer behaviour, and the governance of sports organizations.

In addition, the results of the bibliometric visualization indicate that environmental sustainability is one of the main focuses of research on sport-based CSR. Themes such as sustainability, environmental impact, carbon footprint, and consumer behaviour are emerging topics in current research. This suggests that the study of sport-based CSR is evolving in a multidisciplinary manner and is gaining increasing attention in modern sports research.

Nevertheless, this study still has several limitations. The research data relied solely on the Scopus database and was limited to English language journal articles. Therefore, the findings of this study do not yet provide a comprehensive representation of all publications on sport-based CSR. Furthermore, it is possible that other publications, such as books, conference proceedings, or articles indexed in other databases, were not included in this study.

Based on the results of the network visualization and the evolution of research themes, there are still several topics with relatively low research density but with potential for further development in future studies. Future research could examine the relationship between sport-based CSR and digitalization, particularly in the e-sports industry, which has received relatively little attention. Additionally, research on more specific environmental impact measurements, such as the carbon footprint of sports activities, as well as the role of athletes as agents of social change, also holds significant potential for development in future studies of sport-based CSR.

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