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Mapping review on the study of brand loyalty in the sports industry

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Abstract

Brand loyalty is not merely a buzzword in the sports industry; it is a crucial factor for the sustainability of sports organizations. Sports managers do not just create brands that stand out in the market; they craft experiences that resonate with consumers, fostering strong and lasting relationships. This study aims to synthesize accumulated evidence on brand loyalty in the sports industry, identifying trends and emerging research areas. A mapping review was conducted following five steps, identifying 195 relevant documents. The scientific output has shown a significant increase since 2010. Results highlight the need for a holistic approach and suggest exciting future research opportunities in underrepresented contexts and regions. Satisfaction, service quality, and robust digital strategies are crucial for fostering brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

In the sports industry, the brand has become an essential component for ensuring the sustainability of its organisations [1]. Sports managers have significantly focused their efforts on developing and managing brands that not only provide a lasting distinction in the market but also create memorable experiences for their consumers, including fans and supporters, thus fostering a continuous and solid relationship with them [2]. Under this context, it is recognised that building brand loyalty in the sports industry is complex Smith and Stewart [3] for two reasons. The first reason is the unique nature of the sports industry; the second relates to the variables that influence brand loyalty construction.

Given the nature of the sports industry, it encompasses organisations dedicated to offering goods, services, or a combination of both Smith and Stewart [3] and Rincón, et al. [4] making it evident that it is not always possible to standardise strategies to create brand loyalty in this industry. Therefore, brand management must be adaptable and specific to each

organisation's context to effectively develop a lasting connection with consumers. An outstanding example of this complexity is found in the world of football, where the product offering goes beyond the game itself, including club merchandising, participation in sports events, and player presentations, among others [5-7].

The complexity surrounding the variables that explain brand loyalty in the sports industry is due to the multicausality involved in its construction [8]. Predominant research in this industry has suggested that brand loyalty is built upon four main variables: satisfaction, quality, commitment, and trust [4, 8]. Regarding satisfaction, studies like those of Laroche, et al. [8]; Sousa and Vieira [9] and Dionísio, et al. [10] demonstrated a direct and positive correlation with brand loyalty. Quality, defined as the discrepancy between consumer expectations and actual perception after a specific purchase, influences both satisfaction and brand loyalty, potentially having a direct or indirect positive impact on the latter, as suggested by Rincón, et al. [4] and Castillo-Rodríguez, et al. [11]. On the other hand, commitment and trust variables, although not as extensively studied as satisfaction and quality Laroche, et al. [8] have shown a direct positive relationship with brand loyalty. This is observed in both for-profit and non-profit organisations [9, 12, 13]. Additionally, emerging variables explaining brand loyalty construction in the sports industry include symbolic consumption Rincón, et al. [4] brand personality Choi, et al. [13] and emotional experience [14].

Considering the inherent complexity of building brand loyalty in the sports industry and the growing academic interest, as demonstrated by research from Rincón, et al. [4]; Laroche, et al. [8]; Mohammadi Argi, et al. [2]; Choi, et al. [13]; Sousa and Vieira [9] and Pan and Phua [12] there is an imperative need to synthesise accumulated evidence through systematic reviews; however, these are still scarce. Laroche, et al. [8] made a significant contribution by not only addressing this topic but also exploring whether variables traditionally associated with loyalty in other sectors have an equivalent role in the sports domain.

Despite this significant advance, there remains a lack of a general mapping of research on brand loyalty in the sports industry. This limitation hinders a comprehensive understanding of how the study of this topic has evolved. The present review aims to address this gap by offering a detailed analysis, including the evolution of scientific production, thematic cores of research, and emerging study areas of brand loyalty in the sports industry. To this end, the following research questions were posed:

- RQ1: How has scientific production on brand loyalty in the sports industry evolved?
- RQ2: How is research on brand loyalty in the sports industry clustered?
- RQ3: What are the relationships and emerging areas of study on brand loyalty in the sports industry?

Answering these questions has implications for both the academic community and the business sector. It offers academics an opportunity to advance theoretical and methodological knowledge by identifying historical and emerging research trends. In the business sector, understanding the evolution and current trends in brand loyalty is crucial for developing more effective marketing strategies and adapting to changing consumer expectations. Additionally, this understanding can lead to innovations in products and services within this industry.

This article is structured into four main sections. The first pertains to the conceptualisation of brand loyalty; the second describes the methodology used for this mapping review; the third presents the results emphasising each research question; and the fourth includes the discussion and main conclusions.

1.1. Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has been extensively studied in the marketing field (e.g., [8, 15-21]). With its study in the sports industry being more recent (e.g., [4, 12, 22-24]). It is recognised that loyalty is not limited to repeatedly acquiring a good or service but involves the consumer's predisposition to continue intending to purchase a specific brand [25]. For the purposes of this study, Table 1 presents some of the most relevant conceptualisations of brand loyalty.

Table 1.
Loyalty definition.

Author	Concept
Oliver [26]	It is a sustained commitment to purchase goods or services repeatedly and consistently in the future.
Oliver [25]	It is the sustained commitment to consistently re-purchase a product or service in the future, from the same brand or set of brands, despite situational influences and marketing effort that may provoke switching behaviour.
Aaker [27]	It is the idea that, regardless of the actions of competitors, customers will buy products or services of their preferred brand.
Senić and Marinković [28]	A customer's intention to give exclusive patronage to a particular product or service for a sustained period of time.

Under these conceptualisations, studies divide brand loyalty into two main streams. The first, behavioural loyalty, refers to observable consumer actions such as repurchase, consistency in brand choice, and habitual consumption patterns [29-31]. This loyalty stream manifests in concrete and measurable behaviours, providing a tangible view of consumer commitment to the brand [31, 32].

The second stream is attitudinal loyalty, related to the psychological and emotional dimension of the consumer-brand relationship [33, 34]. This form of loyalty is characterised by a positive relationship and genuine commitment to the brand

that extends beyond repeated purchases [28]. This loyalty stream focuses on aspects such as feelings of affection, connection, and trust towards the brand, recommendations to others, and sustained preference over time.

It is essential to highlight that these two streams are not mutually exclusive but often interact and influence each other [35-37]. Behavioural loyalty can be a precursor to attitudinal loyalty, and strong attitudinal loyalty can lead to more consistent and predictable behaviour patterns like repurchase [35, 38]. Together, these two dimensions provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how and why consumers remain loyal to certain brands over time.

2. Methodology

The EPPI-Centre developed mapping reviews to characterise available evidence through descriptive maps of information [39]. These maps aim to create smaller subsets of studies that answer specific research questions. Following this goal, the present review adopted the five-step methodological proposal described by Oakley, et al. [39] including planning, evidence search, study selection, data coding, and description and visualisation of findings. Each of these steps is described below.

2.1. Planning

The planning phase of this mapping review was conducted and registered in the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-analysis Protocols (INPLASY), an international and interdisciplinary database for review registration. Elements used in this planning included objectives, background, fundamental justification, data synthesis strategies, eligibility criteria, and sources of evidence for screening and selection, among others. Team members independently reviewed the protocol to verify its completeness. The final protocol version is available under code INPLASY202390026.

2.2. Evidence Search

A search was conducted in SCOPUS, Web of Science (WOS), and EBSCO to identify relevant study documents. These databases were chosen for their extensive coverage and prestige in the academic community, ensuring exhaustive access to quality publications pertinent to the research field. SCOPUS and WOS were used as interdisciplinary databases, guaranteeing the inclusion of studies from social sciences, sports sciences, and business studies. EBSCO was selected for its more disciplinary focus, providing access to specialised journals in marketing and business management as well as sports.

A search equation was proposed using both truncated symbols and Boolean operators. Terms included in the equation were based on keywords used by previous specialised articles on brand loyalty in the sports industry (e.g., [2, 4, 8-10, 12, 13]). The search in each database was conducted on March 12, 2024. The theoretical search equation is presented below:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(("brand loyalty*") AND (sport*) AND (industr* OR market* OR compan* OR business* OR association* OR corporation* OR firm* OR institution*))

2.3. Study Selection

Inclusion criteria for study selection were established and verified through various processes described later. The first inclusion criterion required studies to be directly related to brand loyalty in the sports industry. The second criterion, explicitly applied to the EBSCO database, was that documents had to be peer-reviewed; this led to the exclusion of grey literature such as newspapers, non-academic magazines, reports, and reviews, among others. The third criterion referred to the language of the documents, including only those written in English and Spanish.

As a first process, duplicate documents identified in each database search were eliminated using the Zotero bibliographic manager. Subsequently, titles, abstracts, and keywords were read to determine whether articles met the established inclusion criteria. This initial review allowed the exclusion of works that, although present in the databases, did not focus on the specific theme of brand loyalty in the sports industry. This step was conducted by evaluating two peers and reviewing a third in case of disagreement. After this preliminary stage, a more detailed reading (full text) of the selected documents was carried out to ensure they met all inclusion requirements.

2.4. Codification

Data coding involved automated document metadata extraction and manual extraction for categories requiring in-depth analysis. Metadata fields included: document type, publication year, authors, title, publication title, ISBN, ISSN, abstract, keywords, and 78 other fields. Manual extraction focused on substantiating the results of the maps created to answer the research questions presented in the introduction. During manual extraction, special attention was paid to each document's methodology, results, and discussion sections to understand better how each study specifically addressed brand loyalty in the sports industry.

All collected information was organised in a structured database, enabling efficient data manipulation and analysis crucial for the next review phase.

2.5. Description and Visualisation of Findings

Description and visualisation of findings were conducted in three phases. The first phase addressed RQ1 through a bibliometric analysis, including document typology, number of documents per year, number of citations per year, most cited authors, study themes, and number of publications per country. The second phase created keyword relationship maps to address RQ2, identifying thematic relationships in brand loyalty. This analysis used the VOSviewer software specialising in

network analysis and data visualisation. The third phase addressed RQ3 by finding relationships and emerging study areas from the keyword relationship map.

3. Results

The study selection process is presented in Figure 1. The search yielded 375 documents, with 94 duplicates removed, leaving 311 for screening. After this, two articles were excluded for not being in English or Spanish, and 114 were excluded for not focusing on the study theme. A total of 195 documents were included for literature mapping.

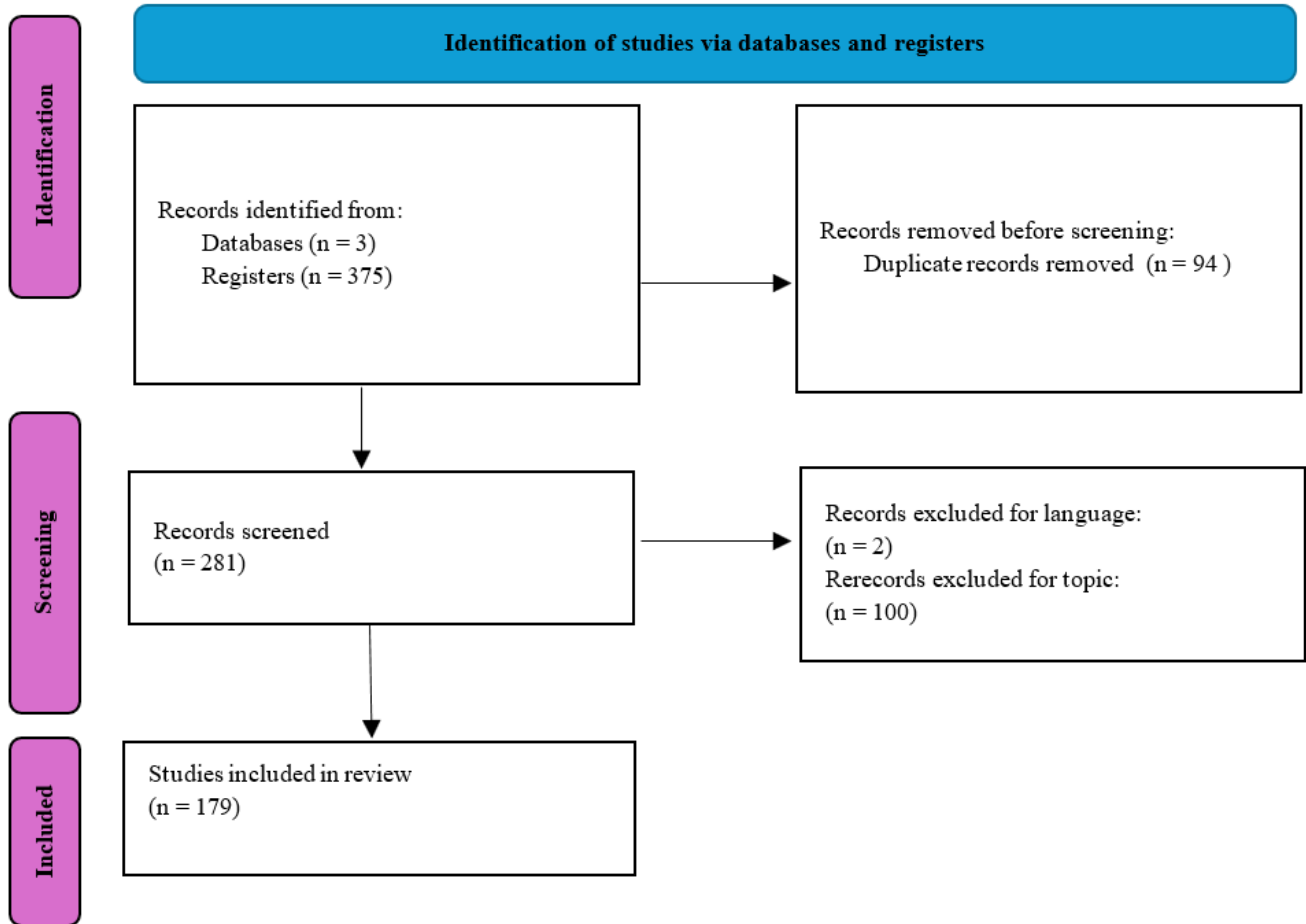


Figure 1.
Document Identification Process.
Source: Page, et al. [40].

RQ1: How has scientific production on brand loyalty in the sports industry evolved?

The analysis of scientific publications on brand loyalty in the sports industry revealed several key trends over time (see Figure 2). Firstly, there is a general upward trend in the annual number of publications, reflecting increasing interest in the topic. When divided into five-year intervals, it was observed that some periods were more prolific than others, with a notable increase in publications over the last ten years. The year with the most publications was 2020, with 15, while the years with the least scientific activity were before 2000, with only one publication annually. Before 2010, there were a total of 30 publications, whereas after that year, 149 publications were registered. Figure 2 presents the annual count of publications.

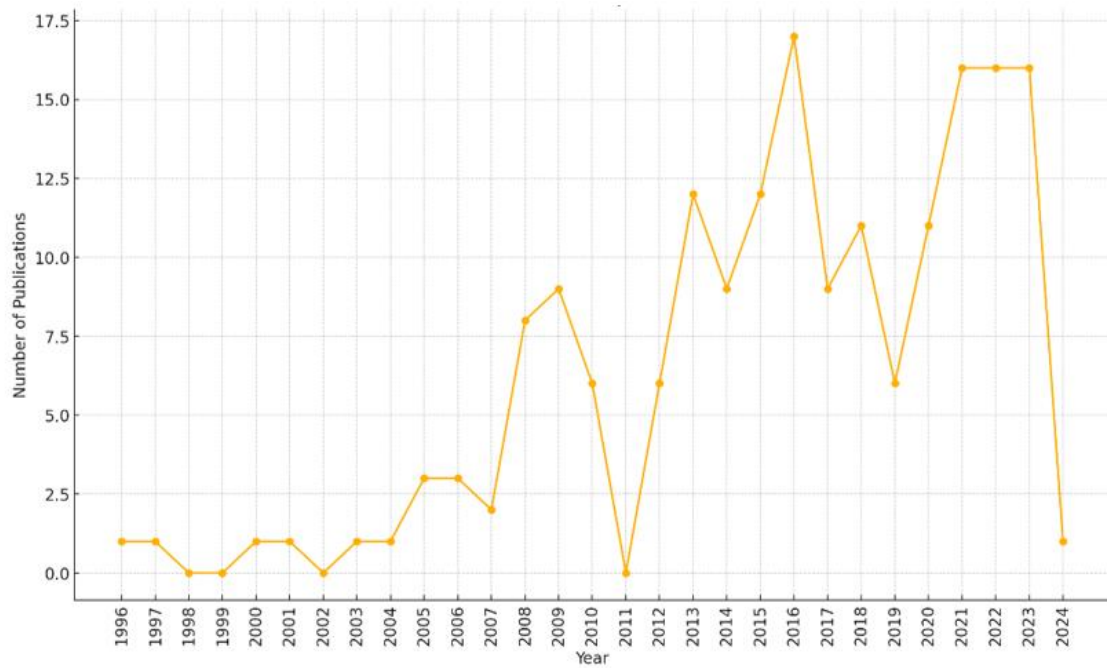


Figure 2.
Annual count of publications.

Regarding document types, most were published in academic journals, representing 92.17% of the sample. Chapters of books and research results accounted for 5.58%, while books and conferences constituted 2.23%. Table 2 shows the number of published documents by type.

Table 2.
Number of documents by typology.

Type of document	Quantity
Articles	165
Book Chapters investigation	10
Books	1
Conferences	3

Figure 3 shows the trend of citations over time. The increase in recent citations suggests that research on brand loyalty in the sports industry is becoming increasingly relevant and gaining recognition in the academic community. Analysis of publications by authors in the field highlighted [41, 42] each with two publications. Geographically, the distribution of publications on brand loyalty in the sports industry showed concentrated research activity in developed countries. Figure 4 presents the number of documents by country.

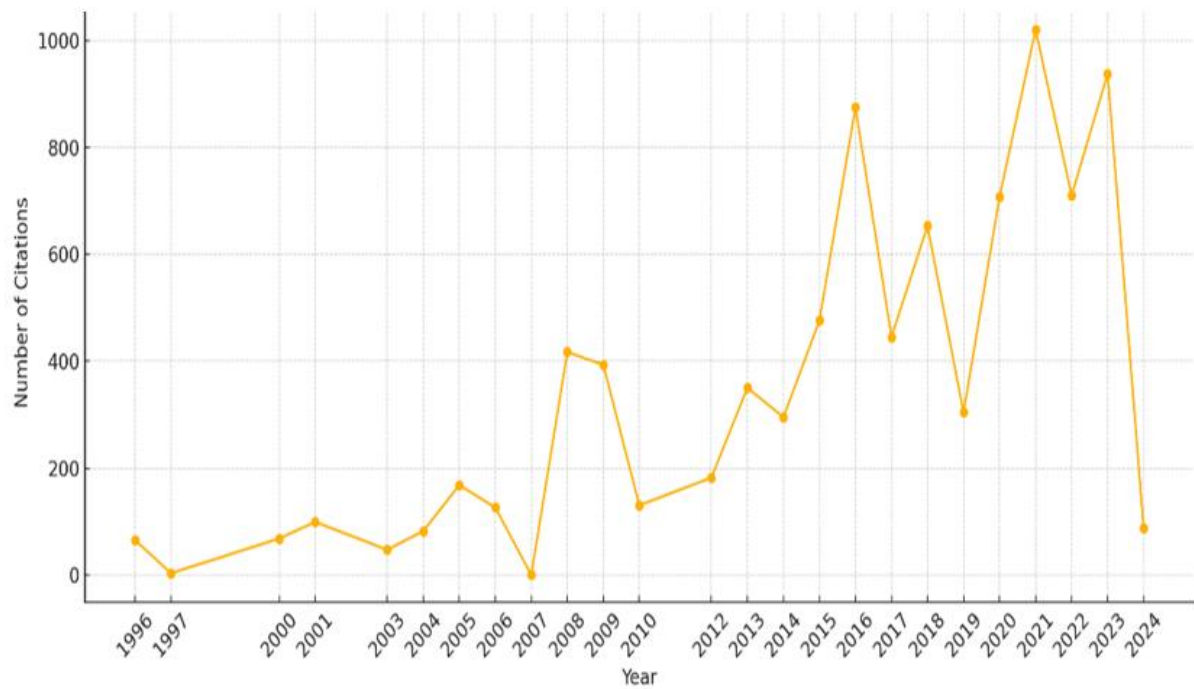


Figure 3.
Annual Citation Count.

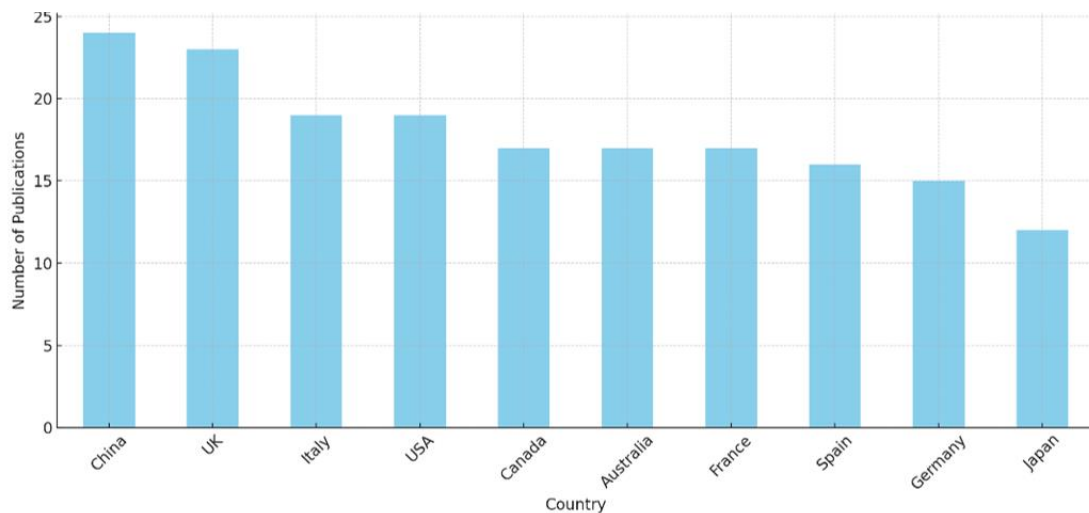


Figure 4.
Number of Documents by Country.

RQ2: How is research on brand loyalty in the sports industry clustered?

The keyword co-occurrence map (Figure 5) showed four clusters around brand loyalty in the sports industry. The first cluster (red) related brand loyalty to marketing and consumer behaviour disciplinary themes, including terms like brand loyalty, consumer behaviour, marketing, brand trust, brand awareness, and sports marketing. The second cluster (green) focused on the relationship between consumer loyalty and satisfaction, including terms like loyalty, customer satisfaction, service quality, and consequences. Satisfaction and service quality are key components of this cluster, highlighting how these factors directly impact customer loyalty to sports brands, consistent with Laroche, et al. [8].

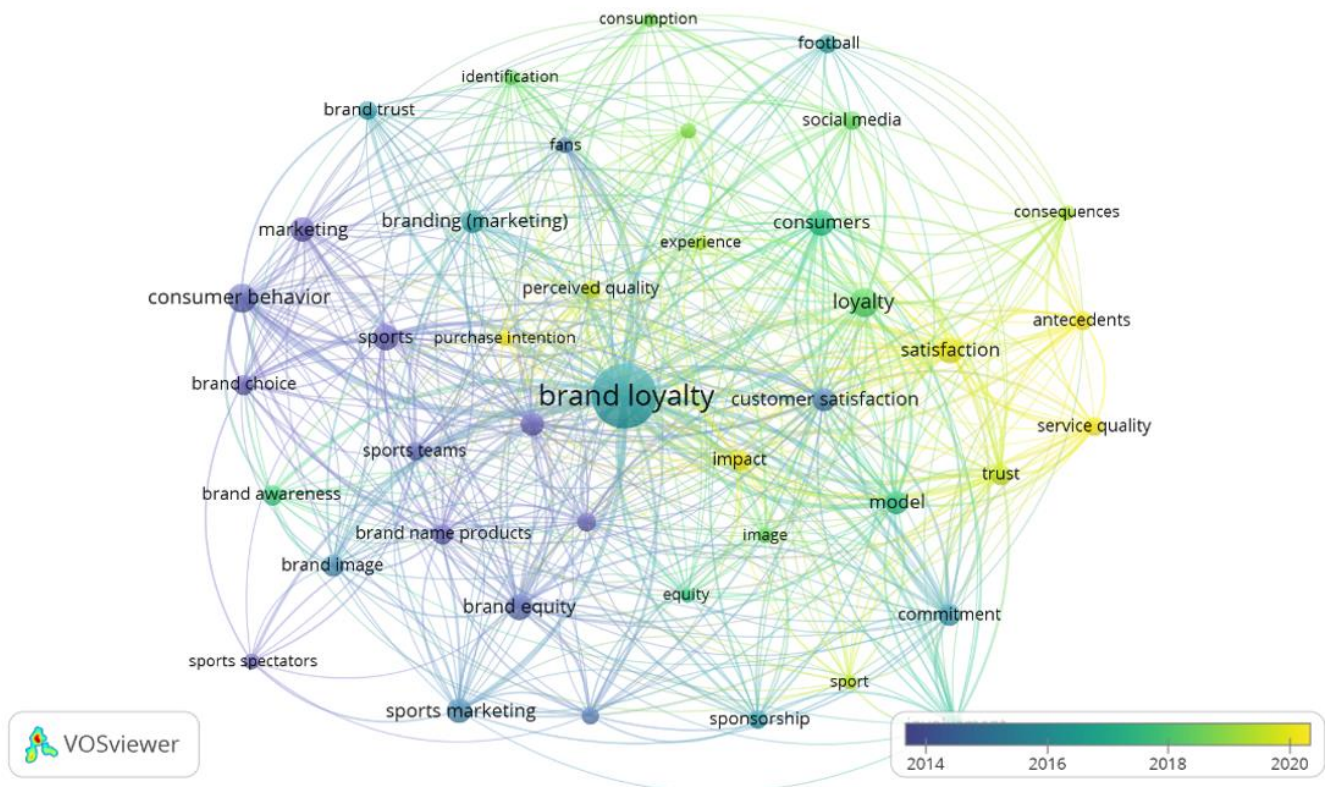


Figure 6.
Keyword Co-occurrence Map.

The first notable relationship is between brand loyalty and its construction in specific sports. Approximately 28.49% ($n=51$) of documents emphasised this relationship, with 35 studies in soccer (e.g., [4, 43, 44]), six in basketball (e.g., [45, 46]), five in golf (e.g., [47]), three in baseball (e.g., [48, 49]), and one in tennis (e.g., [50]). In football, positive brand experiences and team identification strengthen consumer loyalty [43, 51]. While marketing strategies emphasising authenticity and values also increase loyalty [52]. In basketball, strong team identification and innovative marketing strategies were crucial for building loyalty [45, 53]. In golf, service quality and brand image were determinants of consumer loyalty [47]. In baseball, fans showed notable loyalty to their teams, especially when engaging in experiential marketing activities [48, 49]. Finally, in tennis, perceived quality and positive brand associations significantly influenced consumer loyalty [50].

Regarding brand attributes, studies have examined the relationship between brand loyalty in the sports industry and brand image, brand choice, branding, and brand equity. The influence of brand image and brand equity on consumer loyalty is notable, as a strong brand image and positive brand associations have been shown to significantly increase consumer loyalty to a sports team or product [43]. Additionally, brand equity has been identified as a critical factor in the influence of sports sponsorships on brand loyalty [44, 46]. Brand choice is closely related to perception and brand equity, influencing consumer purchase decisions in the context of sports apparel and related products. Effective branding, including strategies like reintroducing community brands and optimising online channels, is crucial in enhancing consumer loyalty in the sports industry [43].

Regarding the relationship between brand loyalty in the sports industry and explanatory variables, customer satisfaction's influence on consumer loyalty was notable. Heo, et al. [54] found that customer satisfaction with product quality and athlete sponsor performance was closely linked to brand loyalty. Satisfied consumers were more likely to repeat purchases and recommend the brand to others. Additionally, customer satisfaction affected brand loyalty in event marketing contexts. Chen and Wang [55] found that customers satisfied with experiences at brand-sponsored events showed higher levels of loyalty and brand engagement. Read and Smith [56] found that customer satisfaction from positive data handling and personalised service experiences played a crucial role in building brand loyalty. Similarly, Kalynets and Krykavskyy [57] identified that customer satisfaction with brand interactions and online user experiences was strongly correlated with brand loyalty.

Regarding quality as an explanatory variable for brand loyalty, high perceived quality significantly increased consumer loyalty to a product or service in the sports industry [54]. Perceived product quality directly influences brand loyalty in the sports footwear market Heo, et al. [54]. Chen and Wang [55] investigated product quality's influence on brand loyalty in event marketing contexts, showing that the high perceived quality of products and services offered at brand-sponsored events significantly increased consumer loyalty.

Other studies explored various dimensions of brand loyalty and consumer experience in the sports industry. A growing trend in content marketing applications in the sports fashion industry was observed, highlighting its relevance for building solid brand loyalty. Additionally, the collaboration between sports footwear and apparel brands to create experiences revealed that these partnerships could strengthen consumer loyalty [54]. Marketing solutions were proposed to promote branding in esports, emphasising the importance of tailored strategies for this growing sector [57].

Finally, studies addressed crucial aspects like trust and commitment in brand loyalty in the sports industry. One study analysed content marketing applications in the sports apparel industry and their impact on consumer trust, emphasising the importance of generating relevant and authentic content to build solid customer relationships [55]. Collaboration between sports footwear and apparel brands was also identified as a factor that could increase both consumer trust and commitment, as these partnerships were perceived as quality and reliability indicators [54].

4. Discussion

This study has revealed several key trends in the scientific production of brand loyalty within the sports industry. Firstly, a significant increase in annual publications in this area has been observed, especially since 2010, suggesting a growing academic interest in brand loyalty in the sports context [4, 8]. Additionally, most of the reviewed studies were published in academic journals, representing 92.17% of the total sample, highlighting the topic's relevance and recognition within the academic community. The analysis of publications also revealed a dispersion in author contributions, with most authors having only one or two publications in the field. This phenomenon can be attributed to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, where researchers from different areas collaborate or publish sporadically [9]. The geographical concentration of research shows more significant activity in developed countries, reflecting a stronger interest in these regions [22].

Moreover, the concentration of research in developed countries suggests potential gaps in the literature regarding the dynamics of brand loyalty in emerging markets. Sports industries in these regions often operate under different cultural, economic, and social conditions that may influence consumer behavior in unique ways. The lack of diverse geographical representation limits the generalizability of current findings and calls for future studies to explore underrepresented contexts. This would not only enrich the theoretical framework but also offer practical insights for sports organizations operating in diverse environments, allowing them to develop more tailored marketing strategies that resonate with local audiences.

Regarding relationships and emerging study areas, the results highlighted the importance of customer satisfaction and service quality as recurrent themes in the literature [12, 13]. Studies like those by Moyo, et al. [58] and Singh, et al. [59] also emphasized how quality and satisfaction are crucial factors for customer retention and brand loyalty creation in the sports industry. Additionally, trust and customer commitment play significant roles in building brand loyalty [8]. Further research has explored emerging variables such as symbolic consumption. Finally, robust digital strategies and online presence have been identified as critical factors in strengthening the emotional connection and customer engagement with the brand [12].

Expanding on these findings, it becomes evident that the digital transformation of the sports industry has redefined traditional brand loyalty paradigms. Social media platforms and digital marketing strategies have created new opportunities for direct interaction between brands and consumers, fostering deeper emotional connections and real-time engagement. This shift has also introduced challenges, as brands must continuously innovate to maintain consumer interest in an increasingly competitive digital landscape. The integration of technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and personalized content strategies has the potential to enhance brand loyalty by offering unique and immersive experiences. Future research should focus on understanding how these digital innovations influence consumer perceptions and loyalty behaviors, particularly among younger demographics who are more digitally native.

5. Conclusions

The findings presented here have important theoretical implications that significantly contribute to the existing body of knowledge on brand loyalty in the sports industry. First, identifying four main clusters in brand loyalty research reinforces the notion that it is not a unidimensional construct but is influenced by multiple interrelated factors [4, 12, 13]. These results suggest that future research should adopt a holistic approach to better understand how these variables interact and affect brand loyalty, while also incorporating other unstudied variables. Additionally, the dispersion in author contributions and the geographical concentration of research reveal the need for greater interdisciplinary collaboration and expansion into less-studied geographical contexts, which could provide a more diverse and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon [9, 22].

From a practical perspective, the results of this study offer valuable recommendations for brand managers in the sports industry. The identification of the importance of service quality and customer satisfaction suggests that marketing strategies should continuously focus on improving these aspects to foster greater brand loyalty [58, 59]. Additionally, the significant impact of social media and online presence indicates that sports organizations should invest in robust digital strategies that promote customer engagement and strengthen the emotional connection with the brand [12]. Finally, the need to adapt to specific contexts suggests that brand strategies should be flexible and personalized to respond to the unique characteristics of each market segment, allowing for more effective management of consumer loyalty in various sports environments [4].

Despite significant findings, this study presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the mapping review methodology used, although systematic, may have excluded certain relevant studies due to inclusion criteria restrictions such as language and availability in specific databases like SCOPUS, Web of Science, and EBSCO. Additionally, although four main clusters were identified in brand loyalty research, the keyword co-occurrence

analysis may not capture all the complex and dynamic relationships between the studied variables. Automated tools used for coding and visualization, while useful, may overlook important nuances present in the reviewed studies [60]. Complementary qualitative methods are recommended to deepen the understanding of consumer interactions and perceptions regarding brand loyalty in the sports industry.

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