Global Research Trends in Sports Law: A Bibliometric Analysis of Athlete Rights and Sports Governance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines global research trends in sports law with a particular focus on athlete rights and sports governance using a bibliometric approach. A total of 401 peer-reviewed articles published between 2001 to 2025 were retrieved from the Scopus database and analysed using the biblioshiny interface of the bibliometric package. The findings indicate a significant rise in the number of publications especially after 2015, and the growing scholarly interest in governance, regulation and athlete welfare in sports. Citation analysis reveals a different research impact, with the earlier studies cited more due to the longer exposure. The keyword co-occurrence analysis reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field, highlighting core themes such as sports law, governance, regulation, doping and human rights. The thematic map also shows governance and athlete-related issues as well developed and central research areas, while emerging themes are centred on inclusivity, ethics and changing regulatory challenges. The results also reveal that the research is focused on particular journals and the contribution is primarily from developed countries. The current study provides an in-depth view of the intellectual landscape of sports law and highlights the need for future research on policy implementation, inclusivity and technological progress in governance systems.

Keywords: Sports law, Athlete rights, Sports governance, Bibliometric analysis, Research trends.

INTRODUCTION

The sports law has become an important interdisciplinary field of research, combining legal, ethical and governance dimensions of modern sports systems. The growing commercialisation and globalisation of sports has raised issues such as athlete rights, rules and regulations and governance transparency to the forefront of academic and policy discourse. The field of sports law covers a wide range of legal issues including contracts, disputes resolution, anti-doping and human rights, all of which are essential to the maintenance of fairness and integrity in sports (Gardiner et al., 2012).

The concept of ‘athletes’ rights’ has become a hot topic in the field of sports governance in recent years. Athletes are now seen as more than just participants in competitions, but as key stakeholders who must be protected and treated fairly by sports organisations. Issues such as gender equality, the participation of transgender athletes, anti-doping policies and protection from exploitation have increased the need for strong legal and governance mechanisms (Anderson, 2010; Parrish, 2019). These developments are indicative of a shift in sports governance practices, with greater emphasis on accountability, transparency and ethical responsibility.

As global sport becomes increasingly complex, governance mechanisms at both the national and international levels have also expanded. International organizations such as the International Olympic Committee and the World Anti-Doping Agency play a crucial role in formulating policies to regulate sporting activities and

protect the rights of athletes. However, challenges such as instability in policy implementation, administrative failures and legal disputes continue to raise concerns about the effectiveness of these systems (Geeraert, 2016).

Given the expanding nature of research in this area it is vital to thoroughly map and analyse the existing literature to determine major trends, influential contributors and emerging issues. The bibliometric analysis has been recognised as a methodological way to assess huge amounts of scientific data, enabling investigators to recognise patterns of publishing output, citation structures and topic development (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). Contrary to conventional literature assessments, bibliometric studies provide a quantitative and visual depiction of the intellectual structure of a research field.

There are still few thorough bibliometric studies that concentrate especially on athlete rights and governance frameworks, despite the growing amount of research on sports law and governance. The previous research frequently focuses on discrete elements like legislation, ethics or doping without offering a comprehensive picture of the sector. The disparity emphasises the necessity of a methodical examination that takes into account the multifaceted character of sports legal study.

Thus the current study uses a bibliometric approach to examine worldwide trends in sports legal research with an emphasis on athlete rights and governance. This study aims to provide a thorough knowledge of the intellectual environment of sports law and highlight important areas for future research by looking at publishing trends, keyword networks and thematic structures.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines global developments in sports law, with a particular focus on athletes' rights and governance, using a bibliometric research method. The Scopus database, known for its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed studies, was used for data collection. 401 articles published between 2001 and 2025 were selected using predefined criteria such as language (English) and document type (articles). The search process used keywords such as "sports law", "athlete rights", "sports governance", and "sports policy" to ensure that relevant studies were included. After converting the data to CSV format, the analysis was performed using the bibliometric package in R with the 'Biblioshiny' interface.

The analysis included performance analysis-scientific mapping methods such as annual scientific production, citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and three-field plot visualization. These methods helped identify research trends, important topics, and the intellectual structure of the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Overview of the Dataset

A total of 401 articles (406 documents) published between 2001 to 2025 were analyzed to examine global research trends in the areas of sports law, athletes' rights, and governance. This dataset reflects a multidisciplinary research area that combines legal, ethical, and policy perspectives in the field of sports studies.

Table 1. Main information of the dataset

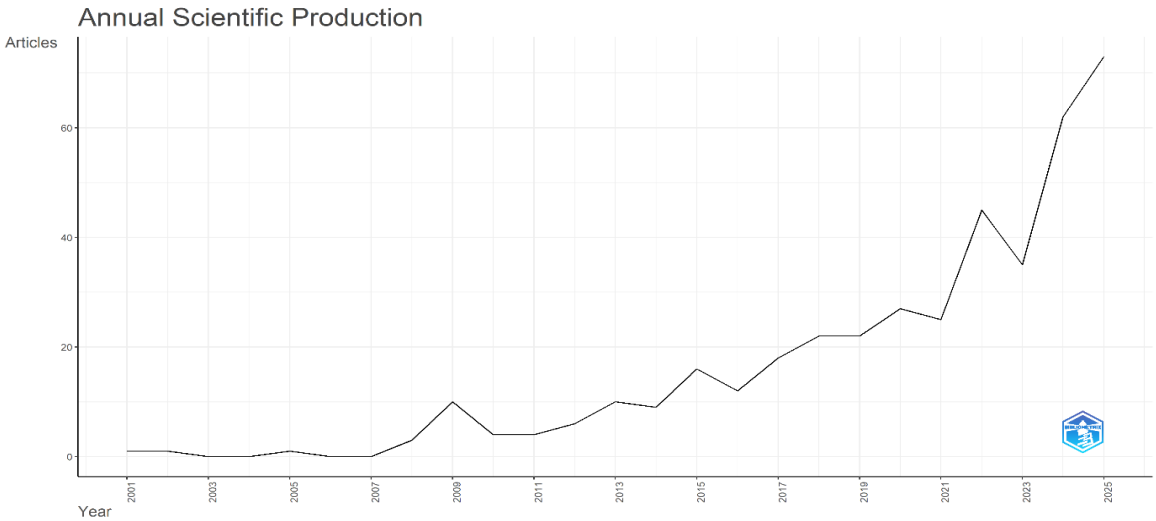
Indicator	Value
Time span	2001–2025
Total documents	406
Articles	401
Authors	1017
Author’s Keywords (DE)	1397
Sources (Journals)	195
Authors of single-authored documents	115

References	34,481
International co-authorship (%)	18.72%
Document average age	5.66 years
Annual growth rate	19.57%
Co-authors per document	2.76
Average citations per document	11.63

Annual Scientific Production

The annual distribution of publications provides insight into the growth of research in sports law over time.

Figure 1. Annual scientific production of sports law research (2001-2025)

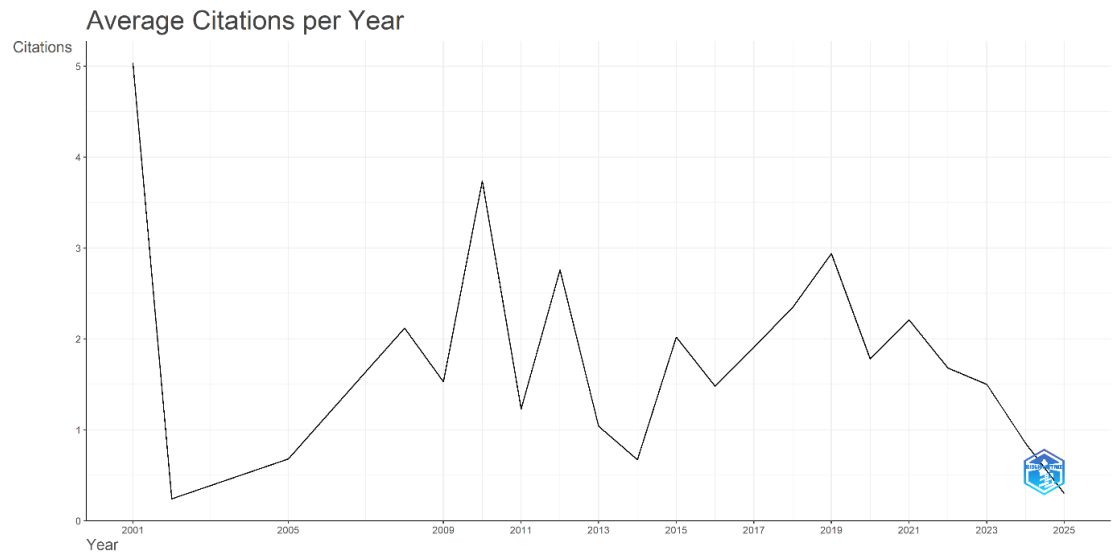


The figure demonstrates a steady growth in research output over time. The publications remained relatively low during the early 2000s but began to increase significantly after 2015. A sharp rise in recent years particularly after 2020, indicating growing academic and policy interest in sports governance, regulation and athlete rights.

Citation Analysis

The citation trends help to understand the impact and influence of research over time.

Figure 2

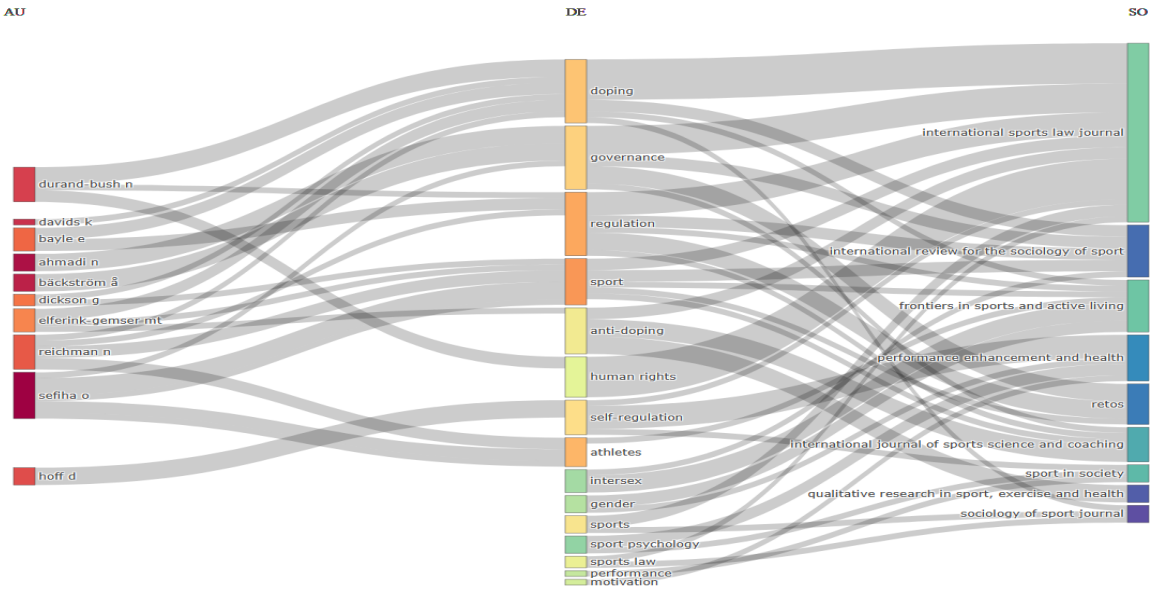


Analysis of the average citations received per year reveals fluctuations in the impact of research publications. Older studies tend to have higher citation rates because they have been available for a longer period of time; while more recent publications tend to have relatively lower average citations. This trend reflects the ongoing evolution of the research field and the way citations increase over time.

Three-Field Plot Analysis

The relationships between authors, Keywords and sources are illustrated using a three-field plot.

Figure 3. Three-field plot

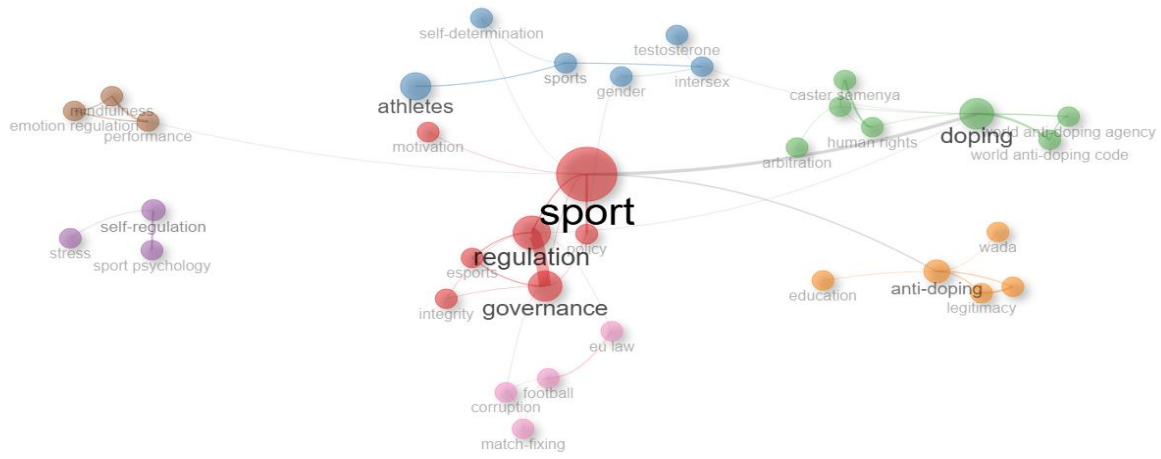


This analysis shows that key research topics such as governance, doping, regulation, and human rights are strongly associated with leading journals. This suggests that research related to sports law is concentrated in important subject areas and disseminated through specific academic forums.

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

This analysis reveals the core research themes and their interconnections.

Figure 4. Keyword co-occurrence network

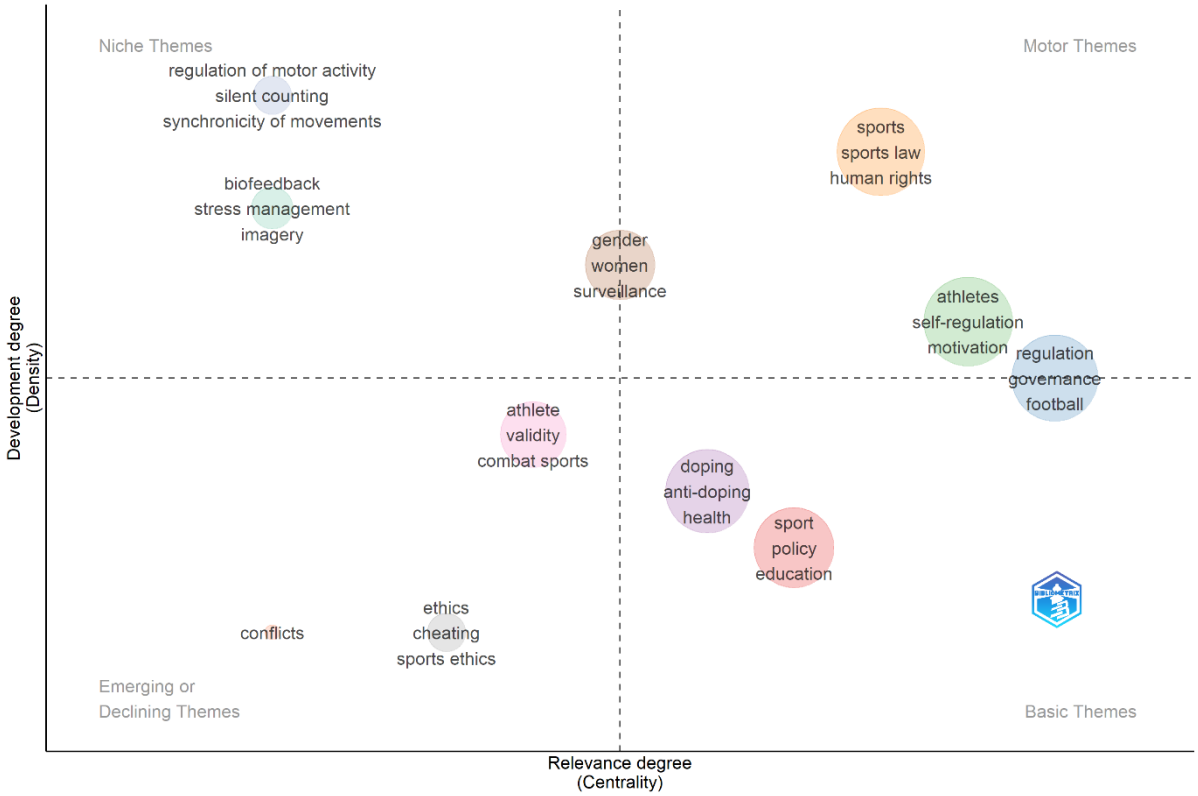


The keyword co-occurrence network identifies key research topics in the field, including sports law, governance, regulation, doping and human rights. The strong correlations between these keywords illustrate the interdisciplinary nature of sports law research, integrating legal, ethical and policy aspects. New topics such as gender and inclusivity also indicate a shift towards socially relevant topics.

Thematic Map Analysis

The thematic map provides a conceptual overview of the structure and development of research themes.

Figure 5. Thematic map



This thematic map categorizes research topics into four categories: motor themes, niche themes, basic themes, and emerging themes. Governance, regulation, and athlete-related topics fall under the 'motor themes' category; this indicates their centrality and high level of development. While 'basic themes' include broader areas such as sports policy, 'emerging themes' highlight the growing importance of ethical aspects and an inclusive approach to sports governance.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a comprehensive bibliographic analysis of global research trends in sports law, with a particular focus on athletes' rights and governance frameworks. The results of the review of 401 articles (406 documents) published between 2001 and 2025 show a notable increase in scholarly output, particularly in recent years, demonstrating the growing interest in the legal and regulatory aspects of sport among academics and policymakers. The findings show that the subject is dominated by key research topics such as governance, regulation, doping, and human rights, reflecting the continuing difficulties in maintaining integrity, fairness, and openness in sports systems. The keyword and thematic analysis, which covers legal, ethical, and policy perspectives, further illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of sports law. Emerging themes, including gender concerns, inclusion, and ethical governance, suggest a gradual trend towards more socially responsive frameworks in sport.

Despite the growing body of knowledge on the representation of developing countries and the actual application of governance initiatives, the study finds significant gaps. Future studies should focus on these

issues and how digital governance and technological developments have influenced contemporary sports law-making.

All things considered, this study advances knowledge about the intellectual framework and development of sports law research and provides insightful information for scholars, decision-makers, and practitioners striving for more equitable and efficient sports governance structures.

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