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Mapping the global research landscape of community sports development (2016–2025): A Scopus-based bibliometric analysis

Endi Rustandi^{abcde,*} , & Davi Sofyan^{abc} 

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ABSTRACT

Background: Community sport has increasingly been examined in relation to physical activity, youth development, social inclusion, health, and public policy. However, the global intellectual and thematic development of research on community sport development remains insufficiently mapped. **Objectives:** This study aims to map and analyse global research trends, collaboration patterns, and thematic developments in community sports development between 2016 and 2025. **Methods:** This study examined 408 journal articles on community sports development that were published between 2016 and 2025 using a bibliometric analysis based on Scopus. ScientoPy and Biblioshiny (Bibliometrix) were used to analyse bibliographic data obtained just from the Scopus database in order to look at publishing trends, cooperation networks, citation patterns, keyword co-occurrence, and topic progression. **Results:** There were 408 articles in the dataset, with a 5% yearly growth rate and a high of 54 publications in 2025. Sport (174 articles), physical activity (126), and sports involvement (89) were the most popular terms. In 2024-2025, most recent studies focused on youth-related concerns (> 35%), well-being (50.0%), and mental health (55.6%). Four clusters encompassing social integration and capital, youth development and sport participation, mental health and talent development, and emergent issues including community sport and disabilities were found using thematic mapping. **Conclusions:** Research on community sport development has become increasingly interdisciplinary, with sport participation increasingly connected to broader social, health, educational, and policy outcomes. Future research should strengthen longitudinal, comparative, and program-evaluation approaches to determine whether the themes identified in the bibliometric landscape translate into measurable community-level outcomes.

Keywords: Community sports development; sports; physical activity; sport participant; sport policy

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Authors' Contribution: a – Study Design; b – Data Collection; c – Statistical Analysis; d – Manuscript Preparation; e – Funds Collection

INTRODUCTION

Community-based sport is emerging as an important domain of concern in the context of contemporary sports science, public policy initiatives and social development. Within the public policy framework, the

community must be involved as an essential factor in attaining national sports goals (Wulandari et al., 2024). The management of urban public sports spaces makes full use of collective social capital among citizens, networks and communal ties are optimised (Xinze et al., 2023). Community sport has a far higher rate of participation than individual sports (Hakim, 2022), and organised club contexts (Jeanes et al., 2024; Nibbles Núñez et al., 2023). Sport is also seen as not just an individual physical pursuit but something social and part of community connections (Wibowo et al., 2023), social cohesiveness (Pitt et al., 2024; Bogale & Kibret, 2023). In addition, engagement in team sports by adolescents has been associated with lower levels of depressive symptomology and higher social competence (Breedvelt et al., 2022; Jones, 2024), as well as psychological benefits (Fernandes et al., 2023), civic action and local productivity (Fraser et al., 2025). Involving the same groups, such as individuals with disabilities, in adaptive sport activities may enhance social inclusion and facilitate empowerment (Kurniawan & Samudro, 2024). The social and economic significance of community sport transcends personal benefits (Chepkemei, 2023; Daya et al., 2023; Schallhorn et al., 2022), local identity pride, and enhancing the interconnections between community members (McCarthy et al., 2024; Navitas et al., 2024) or can influence local social capital (Falla et al., 2022). Community sport is an important meeting point for the three areas of sport science, public policy and social development that contribute to healthier and more socially connected communities.

Such programmes play an important role in supporting social inclusion, particularly for individuals at different levels who have limited access to sports opportunities (Djobova & Kirilova, 2022). Sports programmes can provide non-formal and inclusive settings for refugees and other ethnic groups, thereby promoting social interaction and integration (Kölbel, 2025). The sustainability of youth sports depends on continuous program assessment and development (Saizew et al., 2022). The need for community-based sports policies implemented at the grassroots level highlights the importance of well-designed sports programs in supporting youth development objectives (Ramadhan et al., 2022). Youth sports not only improve physical skills but also foster positive values, including leadership and teamwork, which are essential for individual and social well-being (Ravichandren et al., 2023). Sport can also serve as a driver of employment creation and preservation, while strengthening community cohesion and civic pride (Corvino, D'Angelo et al., 2023).

Bibliometric analyses provide an appropriate method to tackle such problems. With the help of quantitative mapping of publication patterns, citations and scholarly collaborations, bibliometric analysis is helpful to reveal research trends, intellectual structures and hot and emerging themes (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). In the community sport context, bibliometric analysis is valuable for uncovering the intellectual landscape of the research field—core and peripheral themes, collaborating ties or collaborative networks, hotspots or frontiers of studies guiding the direction of future research. In contrast to narrative reviews based on subjective opinions and preferences, bibliometric methodologies offer objective and systematic approaches to describe the research of a subject discipline in the world. However, the worldwide research landscape of community sports development has not been precisely and methodically documented by any bibliometric assessment.

Despite the growing body of research on sport and community development, existing bibliometric studies have largely examined adjacent fields, including sport management, sport entrepreneurship, sport innovation, sport sustainability, and sport-for-development (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2020; González-Serrano et al., 2020; Haq et al., 2026; Peachey et al., 2020). These studies have contributed substantially to understanding the development and intellectual structure of specific sport-related domains. However, community sport development represents a broader and more multidimensional field that intersects with sport participation, physical activity, social inclusion, health and well-being, education, governance, and community development. Previous reviews of sport-for-development, for example, have demonstrated the expanding role of sport in relation to public health, youth development, social inclusion, and broader community outcomes (Peachey et al., 2020; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Nevertheless, these dimensions have not yet been sufficiently conceptualised within a dedicated global mapping of community sport development. This gap is significant, although being under-represented in mainstream sport-development literature, community sport occupies a special nexus between grassroots involvement, participatory governance, social inclusion, and local development. Therefore, a thorough bibliometric evaluation is required to determine the field's intellectual

structure, uncover new research areas, and offer evidence-based insights for both academic study and policy formulation.

Related subjects including sports policy (Moradi et al., 2023), sports entrepreneurship (González-Serrano et al., 2020), sports innovation (Ferreira et al., 2020), sport for sustainable development (Dong et al., 2025), and also in the field of sports diplomacy (Jeong et al., 2024), have all been the subject of several bibliometric studies. Similarly, research on sport development and participation has produced a wealth of data about participation patterns, governance, and the application of policies. However, these research streams often use a single discipline lens such as policy, participation behaviour, elite development, or organisational management to study sport. Because it incorporates several aspects at once, such as grassroots involvement, community governance, social inclusion, local capacity building, public health, volunteering, and sustainable community development, community sports development is a unique field of study. Community sports development explores how sport operates as a community-based system that produces wider social, educational, economic, and health outcomes through local organisations, clubs, municipalities, and civil society, rather than concentrating solely on sport participation rates or policy mechanisms.

This study explicitly maps the knowledge structure of community sports development by integrating publication performance, collaboration networks, conceptual structure, thematic evolution, and emerging research fronts within a single comprehensive framework, in contrast to earlier bibliometric studies that concentrated on a single thematic area (e.g., sport policy or sport participation). A greater understanding of how community sport research has progressed beyond participation or policy studies toward more general concerns of social cohesion, community resilience, and sustainable local development is made possible by this integrated viewpoint.

In several sport-related domains, such as sport policy, sport development, and physical activity research, bibliometric studies are becoming more and more prevalent. This implies that establishing uniqueness requires more than just a traditional performance analysis. This study combines quantitative mapping with interpretive theme analysis utilising ScientoPy and Biblioshiny outputs, in contrast to other sport-related bibliometric studies that mostly concentrate on descriptive performance analysis. The study looks at conceptual progression, prevailing themes, and new research approaches in community sports development in addition to detecting publishing and cooperation patterns. This technique offers a more thorough knowledge of the intellectual evolution of the topic by delivering deeper theoretical and methodological insights. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to use bibliometric analysis to investigate and evaluate global research trends in community sports development. This study specifically aims to: (i) identify publication trends, key journals, institutions, countries, and influential authors in the field; (ii) uncover the intellectual framework and thematic clusters that underpin community sports development research; and (iii) identify emerging topics and future research directions. The following research questions serve as a guide for the study based on these objectives:

1. RQ1. How has scientific production on community sport development evolved globally from 2016 to 2025?
2. RQ2. Which authors, institutions, countries, and journals have made the most substantial contributions to community sport development research, and how are they connected through collaboration networks?
3. RQ3. What are the dominant and emerging research topics in community sport development based on keyword co-occurrence and thematic mapping?
4. RQ4. How has the thematic structure of community sport development research evolved between 2016 and 2025?

METHODS

Research Design

In order to investigate the evolution and conceptual framework of international research on Community Sports Development (CSD), this study used a bibliometric analysis with a quantitative descriptive methodology. In order to provide an objective overview of research performance and thematic evolution within a field, bibliometric methods are widely used to systematically evaluate scientific literature through publication patterns, citation analysis, and collaboration mapping (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Mukherjee et al.,

2022). In this study, publishing patterns, significant contributors, networks of collaboration, and new research topics pertaining to community sports development were found using bibliometric analysis.

Data Source and Search Strategy

One of the biggest international databases of peer-reviewed scientific literature, Scopus, is where the data were obtained. Because of its extensive interdisciplinary coverage, standardised indexing methodology, and interoperability with bibliometric software programmes, Scopus was chosen. Because of its extensive multidisciplinary coverage, standardised indexing, and interoperability with bibliometric tools, Scopus was chosen. Scopus was chosen because it offers one of the most comprehensive interdisciplinary collections of peer-reviewed literature, covering a wide range of publications in public health, education, sport sciences, social sciences, and policy studies (Donthu et al., 2021). Scopus was deemed suitable for the goals of this study because it offers thorough coverage of interdisciplinary while upholding consistent indexing standards, even though databases like Web of Science (WoS), Dimensions, and Google Scholar also contain valuable scientific literature (Mukherjee et al., 2022). On July 26, 2026, data collecting was place. Keyword combinations associated with community sports development were used to build the search strategy. In order to keep the focus on community sport as a socio-cultural, policy, and participation-related phenomena rather than biological or elite sport performance views, the study was restricted to the Social Sciences topic area. To guarantee data quality, consistency, and trustworthy citation analysis, only peer-reviewed journal papers were included. Because they frequently include preliminary findings and less standardised indexing metadata, conference papers, book chapters, and grey literature were omitted. The search query is presented in Table 1 to guarantee openness and reproducibility.

Table 1. Search String Used in Scopus Database

Component	Search Query
Main Query	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("community sport* development" OR "community-based sport*" OR "grassroots sport*" OR "local sport*" OR "amateur sport*" OR "recreational sport*")
Publication Year	PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2026
Subject Area	Social Sciences
Document Type	Article
Publication Stage	Final
Source Type	Journal
Language	English

Scope and Document Selection

In order to preserve conceptual compatibility with the topic of this analysis, which primarily looks at community sports growth as a social, community, policy, participation, and inclusion-related issue, the search was limited to the Social Sciences subject area (SUBJAREA = SOCI). Because this study mainly focuses on the social and community aspects of sport development, such as sport participation, social inclusion, community involvement, governance, and community-level growth, the Social Sciences topic area was chosen. The SUBJAREA(SOCI) restriction was used to preserve conceptual and disciplinary coherence and to exclude studies that primarily focused on biomedical, physiological, or sport-performance aspects, despite the fact that community sport development is interdisciplinary and interacts with public health, education, psychology, sport science, and policy. The results should be viewed as reflecting the social sciences-oriented research landscape of community sport development, since we recognise that this constraint may omit pertinent studies from other topic areas.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To improve the dataset and preserve the applicability of the bibliometric analysis, the study used a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Peer-reviewed journal papers about community sport, grassroots sport, leisure sport, or sport participation in relation to social and community development were included. Only English-language articles that were indexed in Scopus between 2016 and 2025 were taken into account. Conversely, non-English articles, book chapters, editorials, reviews, conference proceedings, and notes were

not included. In order to preserve disciplinary coherence, articles that were not related to the Social Sciences were also excluded. During the screening phase, incomplete metadata entries and duplicate records were also eliminated. Initially, 408 entries were extracted from Scopus. To guarantee openness in the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases, the research selection procedure adhered to the PRISMA framework. The item selection process flowchart is shown in Figure 1.

Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive bibliometric indicators were analysed using ScientoPy (Abdullah & Sofyan, 2023; Khasanah et al., 2024; Ruiz-Rosero et al., 2019; Sofyan et al., 2022), a Python-based bibliometric tool designed to generate quantitative publication metrics. The analysis included: (i) Annual publication trends; (ii) Research growth rates; (iii) Distribution of publications by country and institution; (iv) Author and journal productivity; (v) Citation impact analysis. These indicators were used to identify the temporal development and geographical distribution of community sports development research.

To examine the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of the field, Biblioshiny from the Bibliometrix R-package was employed (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The analyses included: (i) Co-authorship analysis to identify collaboration networks among authors and countries; (ii) Co-citation analysis to reveal influential references and theoretical foundations; (iii) Keyword co-occurrence analysis to identify dominant research themes and conceptual clusters; and (iv) Thematic evolution analysis to trace changes in research priorities over time. The results were visualized using bibliometric network maps to facilitate interpretation of relationships among topics, authors, and emerging research trends in community sports development.

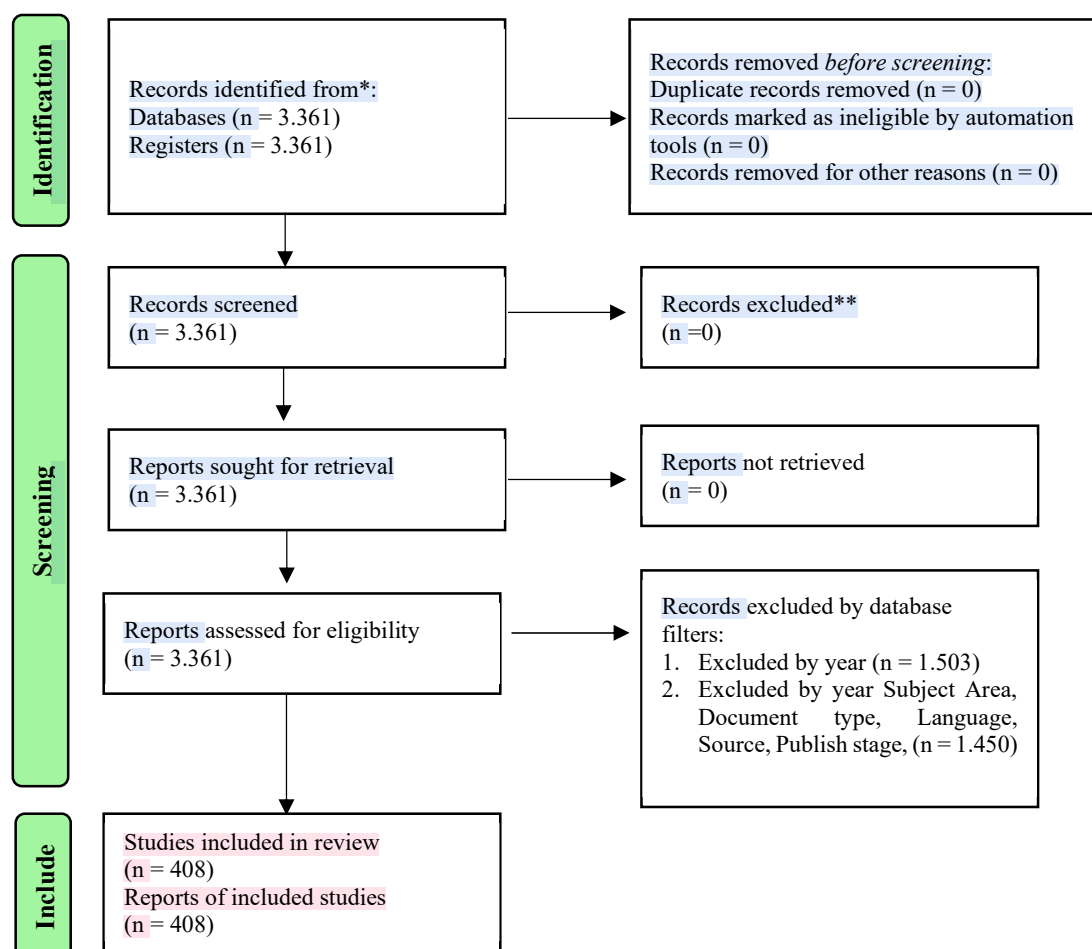


Figure 1. Flowchart Research

The analytical parameters for the bibliometric mapping were maintained in line with the Biblioshiny settings from the initial study. The counting technique adhered to the analysis's default setting, while the keyword analysis made use of the keyword field found in the retrieved Scopus entries. There was no manual imposition of a minimum-occurrence criteria for keywords or a minimum-document requirement for writers and nations. There was no usage of an external thesaurus. Keyword preprocessing was restricted to standardising phrases that were clearly redundant or similar when needed, including single and plural forms like “sport” and “sports.” In order to protect the original dataset and guarantee that the thematic findings were based on the retrieved records rather than on selection criteria that were imposed after the fact, these methods were followed consistently throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Publication Trends

The yearly publishing patterns of 408 Scopus-indexed works on community sport development between 2016 to 2025 are shown in **Figure 2**. Over the course of the research, the number of publications varied, rising from 39 in 2016 to 54 in 2025. 2018 had the fewest publications (26 papers), while 2025 had the most (54 papers). Despite variations between particular years, the publishing trend generally shows a steady rise in scholarly attention to community sport development. **Figure 2** shows the trend of publications.

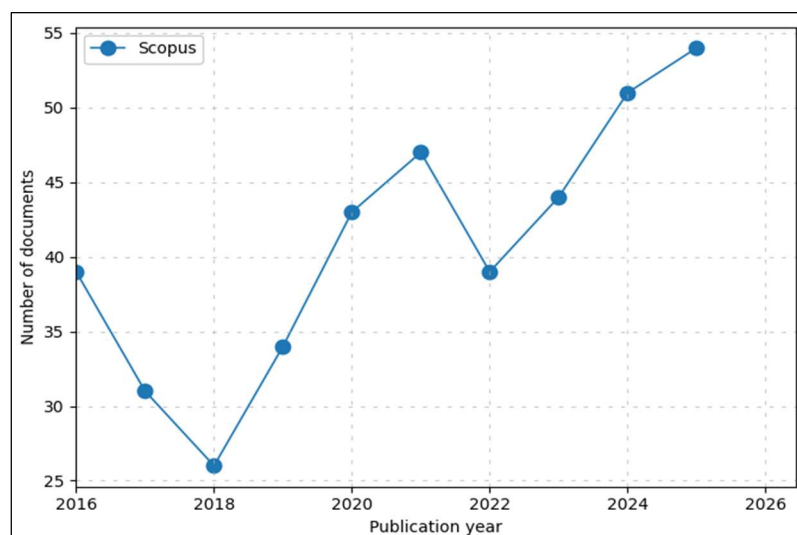


Figure 2. Publication Growth for the Period 2016-2025

Countries with the Highest Growth Rate of Publications in the Last 2 Years

The publication across countries is shown in **Figure 3**. Countries such as the United States (23%), the United Kingdom (23%), Australia (24%), and Canada (26%) remain major stakeholders, with consistently high-quality research. **Figure 3** shows the distribution of publications per nation. Rather than the overall worldwide proportion of publications, the percentages shown in this study relate to the increase rate of publications over the previous two years of observation (2024-2025). As a result, the figures are not meant to add up to 100% and do not reflect cumulative percentages. Nevertheless, moderate rates of publication growth suggest a phase of research development in the area, rather than an exploration of child policies, and provide evidence about the effort required for its conceptualisation. The rise in the number of publications is much more significant in Greece (67%), Indonesia (57%), Finland (44%), China (43%), and Germany (35%), as well as Indonesia (57%—the country with the strongest growth over the past two years between 2024-2025). This represents a geographical shift on the science production map, with Asia and the global south becoming dynamic new poles of growth. Both Indonesia and China have seen rapid increases due to national-level policies promoting international cooperation between countries, the digitalisation of research, and a greater

focus on the role of community sports in social development and public health. These results show a significant shift in the field of community sport development studies worldwide. Asian and Global South nations are contributing more and more to the increasingly decentralised nature of scientific output. This change suggests that different socio-cultural settings and local policy experiences from fast growing regions are increasingly influencing the creation of knowledge in community sport, rather than Western nations alone.

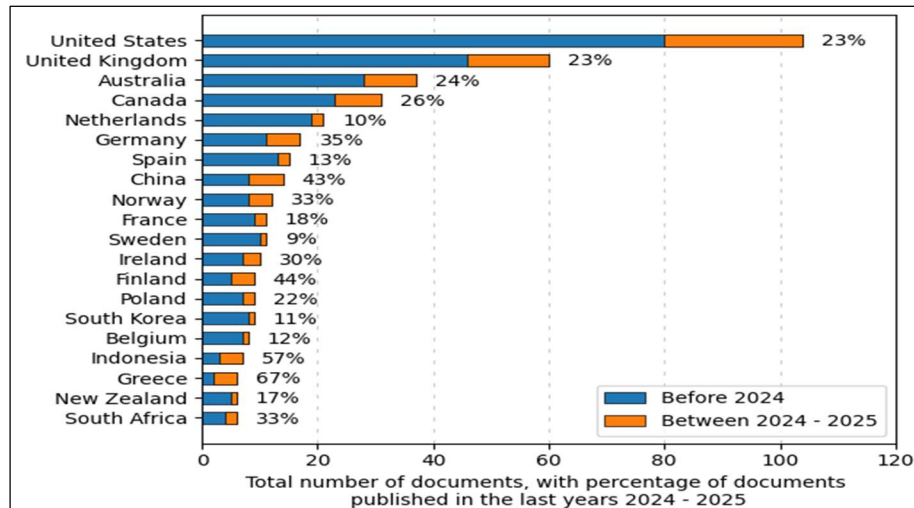


Figure 3. Countries with the Highest Number of Publications in the Last 2 Years

Most Productive Journals

The analysis of publication sources (source titles) focuses on research papers on CSD published in internationally renowned journals with diverse characteristics in terms of thematic focus and growth trends. **Figure 4** depicts this perspective. The journal *Recreational Sports Journal* is ranked in first place, with 30 publications, the highest AGR (-1.5%), and the highest PDLY (13.3%) over the last two years, indicating it is a dynamic and vigorous information centre for community sports, especially since 2021. *Sport in Society* (20 publications) and *International Journal of the History of Sport* (20 publications), which point to the high emphasis on social discourse on sport and its policy framings. In the meantime, the *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* (15), *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* (10), *Leisure Studies* (10), have been crucial in shaping theoretical conceptualisations of menstruation in and/or sport, as well as its relationship with education/training institutions/society and its social identity. These have mapped the evolution of CSD research from a policy and sociological concern to a broader emphasis on sustainability, education, behaviour change and social innovation in community sport.

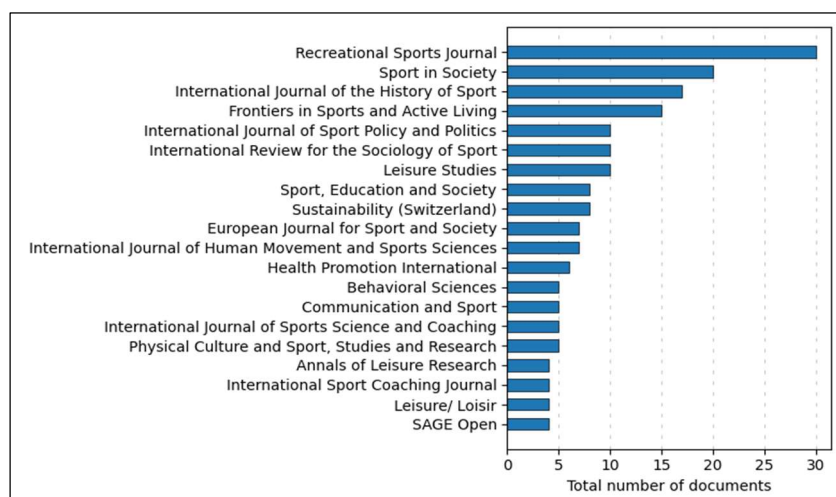


Figure 4. Most Productive Journals

Productivity of Author

The examination of the author productivity in **Table 2**, reveals that a few prolific academics have heavily influenced the theoretical and empirical trends in this research area so far. Anderson A.R. 6 publications and highest h-index (4) indicate his significant contributions to community sports theory and policy development, with a focus on social issues and inclusion through sport. Ramos W.D. (5 publications, PDLY 40%) and Crisp P. (4 publications, h-index 3) follow, who are also extensively researching community participation in sport and the social impact of sport on gender and public health. **Figure 5** represents the relative maximum contribution of authors on article writing and publication from 2024 to 2025. This data confirms that research in the field of community sport development is undergoing a phase of scientific regeneration. However, new ones with an interdisciplinary approach are also beginning to widen research horizons towards social inclusion, participatory education, and community-based innovation.

Table 2. Productivity of Author

Pos.	Author	Total	AGR	ADY	PDLY	h-Index
1	Anderson A.R.	6	-0.5	1	33.3	4
2	Ramos W.D.	5	-0.5	1	40	3
3	Crisp P.	4	-1	0.5	25	3
4	Hull K.	4	0	0	0	3
5	Knee E.	4	-0.5	1	50	3
6	Spaaij R.	4	0	0	0	4
7	Carroll P.	3	0	0	0	3
8	Flint A.	3	0.5	0.5	33.3	2
9	Hoekman R.	3	0	0.5	33.3	2
10	Kim J.	3	-0.5	0.5	33.3	2



Figure 5. Authors' Productivity

Latest Keyword Trends

The findings from the publication and keyword trend analysis in Scopus database (2016-2025) in **Figure 6** clearly indicate a growing number of researchers have studied the sports and physical activity as a tool for social development, education, and public health. "Physical activity" (126 Documents, AGR 5%), "sports participation" (89 Documents, AGR 3.5%), and "sport" (174 Documents) as the lead word show 3% AGR and an h-index of 27, demonstrating its relevance as a lead conceptual domain. At 24.7%, 35.7%, and 36%, respectively, these three terms have the greatest PDLY, indicating that almost one-third of current research output was published during the previous two years. These three keywords have the highest PDLY, at 24.7%, 35.7%, and 36%, respectively, meaning that more than one-third of recent research output was published in

the last two years. In **Figure 3** (right), the size and the dominant colours of orange, blue, and green (representing sport, physical activity, and sports participation) indicate an intersection between a high average number of publications (> 15 documents yearly) and a proportion of recent publications > 30%. This indicates that these three subjects have been the core clusters in sports studies for the past decade. “Mental health” (PDLY 55.6%), “well-being” (50%), “basketball” (54.5%), and “performance” (55.6%) were other themes that also began to emerge between 2024 and 2025. Although most of them are few in number (9-27 documents total), high PDLY values suggest an emerging trend for psychosocial-related topics and sport-specific performance. These nodes cluster at a secondary level in relation to challenges of mental well-being and resilience post-pandemic. Moreover, themes such as “youth” (44), “physical education” (36) and “motivation” (30) construct the cluster related to education and development of young people with h-index 8-12 and PDLY > 35 %, pointing to the importance of physical activity in shaping character as well as lifetime health. Terms like “policy,” “social capital,” or “positive youth development” enhance connections between the social and policy dimensions of sport activities. A global shift in research priorities on sports and physical activity points towards a move from a performance-oriented paradigm to one that is holistic, inclusive and socially responsive. Importantly, mental health at the core of a healthy development (and public health) agenda, alongside other social welfare and participation-oriented policies, is among the most dynamic fields of research in the last two years, as is the rise and increased relevance of sports in connection with sustainable development (sport for development and peace).

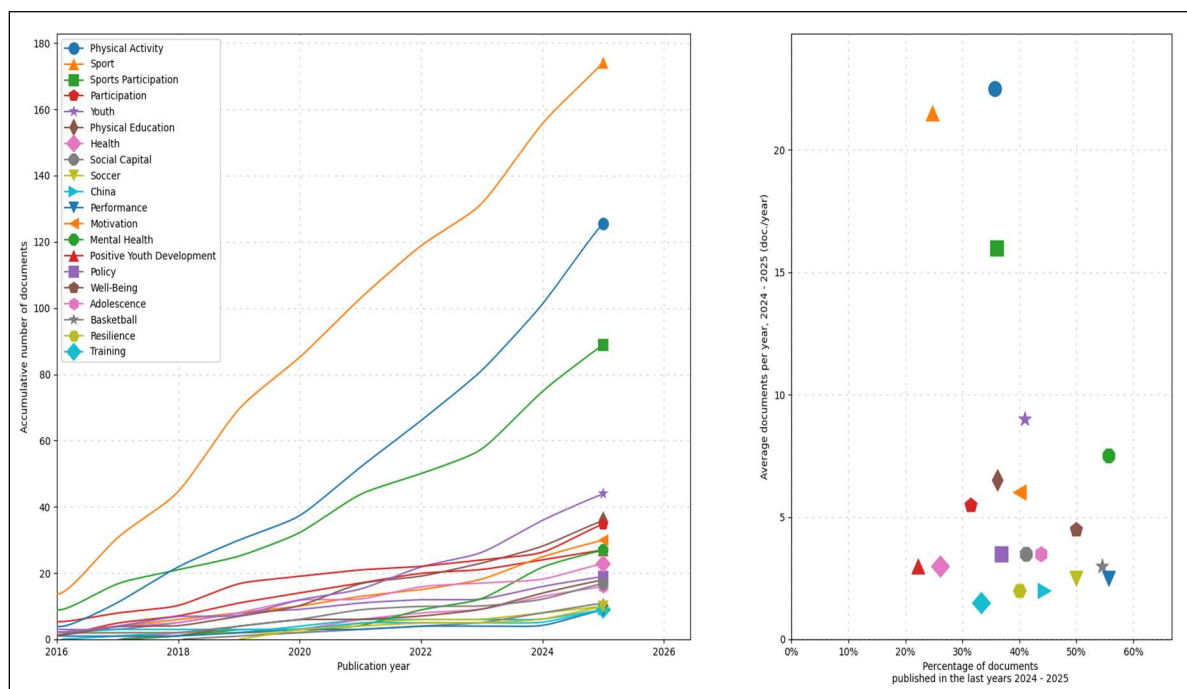


Figure 6. Trend Analysis

The results of the Thematic Mapping analysis in **Figure 7**, reveal four major clusters of research themes, which represent the conceptual development and future trends in sport studies within social, educational, and health contexts. Interestingly, although community sport constituted a core concept in the search strategy, the term appeared in the emerging or declining themes quadrant rather than among the motor themes. This apparent disparity may suggest that community sport has not yet evolved into a well-integrated thematic core within the larger body of literature covered in the dataset, rather than necessarily being contradictory. Rather, its conceptual growth seems to be dispersed across related subjects, such as involvement in sports, physical exercise, social inclusion, youth development, disability, policy, and community-oriented activities. Community sport development is still a growing study topic with prospects for deeper conceptual integration

in future research, as evidenced by its location in the emerging/declining quadrant, which may represent the field's changing and rather scattered character.

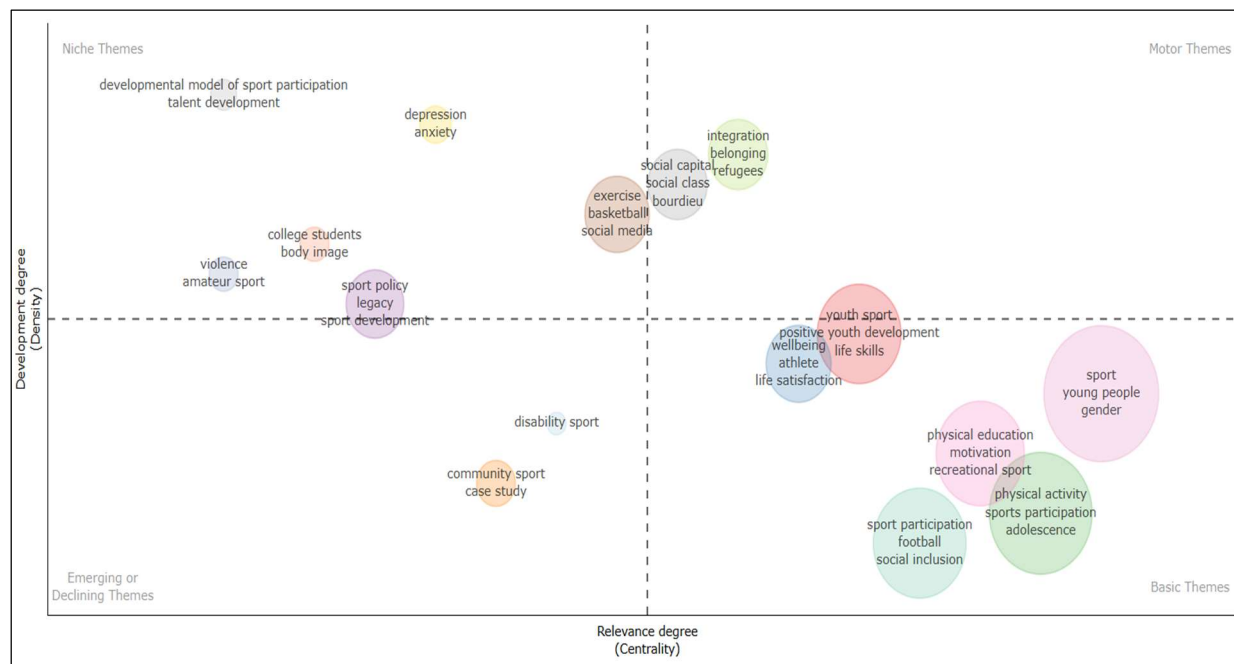


Figure 7. Thematic Map

The map of the thematic evolution in **Figure 8** analyses how centre point themes have evolved throughout almost a decade (2016-2018; 2019-2021; 2022-2024; 2025) in sport research. The analysis emphasises a redirection of scientific interest, from fundamental aspects of sports policy and participation to the integration of motivation, physical education, and physical-psychological health in a broader global/social context. The pilot phase, which spanned from 2016 to 2018, provided an initial basis for the study, with Sport and Policy serving as the primary discourse. In the early days, research on sports participation and sports policy focused on fundamental theories. Programme themes, such as sport, sports policy, sport participation, and positive youth development, emerged most strongly. This points to a research field geared towards understanding how sport is structured and the manner in which it is used to enable young people to develop character. Affiliation with football and athletic themes, in contrast, shows that the early research emphasised the contexts of competitive sports. At the same time, positive youth development represents the advent of a social and educational perspective—that sport is a vehicle for teaching values, discipline, and life lessons.

The 2019-2021 period saw a shift in focus to education and social welfare. During this time, the focus of research changed from macro-policy to education and youth welfare. Emerging themes in higher education and adolescence indicated a growing emphasis on the academic and psychosocial development of young people in sport. The strong bond between players, youth sport, and player retention signals the development of intero-penetrative studies, which include pedagogy in the sport management discourse. We also consider how this phase represents a shift from a competitive to a participatory orientation, particularly in the manner in which sport is being used as an instrument of inclusion and its effect on adolescents' social identities.

Phase 2022-2024 reflects the globalisation and diversification of research environments. "Globalisation and interdisciplinarity (1952-1968)." These years were characterised by a global, multidisciplinary expansion. Topics such as Australia, refugees, and motivation demonstrate the integrated nature of socio-cultural and humanitarian aspects in sport studies. Now, research is expanding beyond the official education system and is beginning to address aspects of sport as a factor for integrating disadvantaged groups and migrants. While football continues to provide a theme that runs through distance sports, sport and sporting experience are themes in their own right, and as connectors between disciplines. The emergence of motivation as a theme

suggests that mental components are being increasingly encouraged within individuals to facilitate their ongoing participation in both recreational and competitive sports.

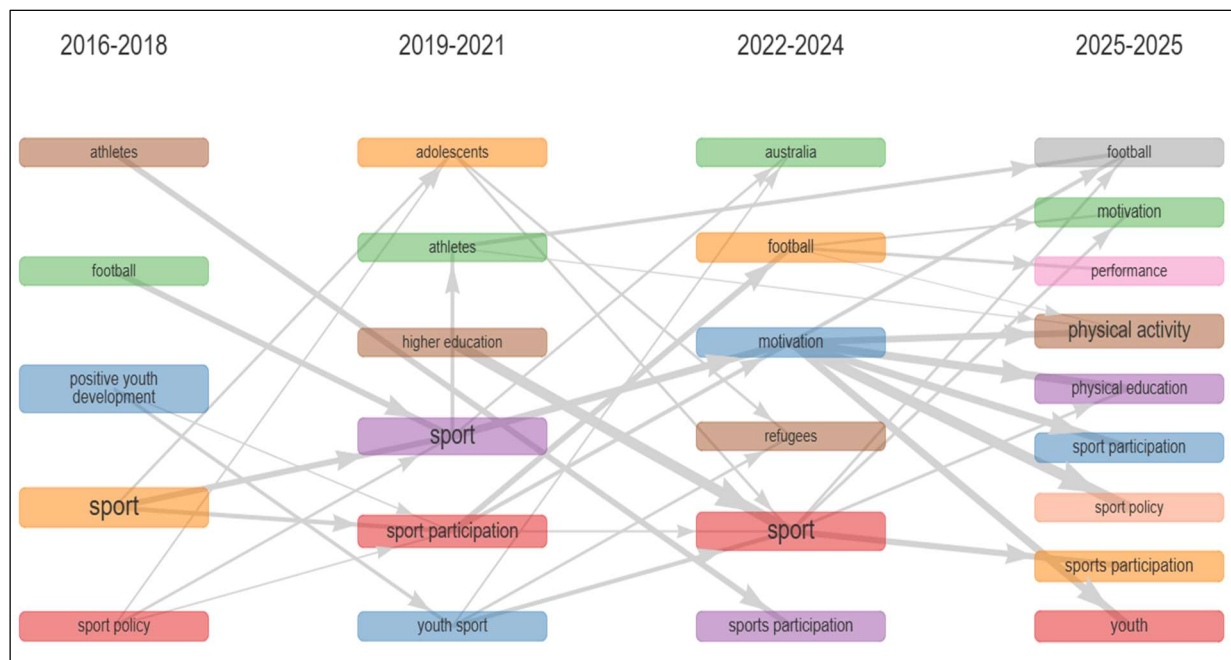


Figure 8. Thematic Evolution

The 2022-2024 phase integrates health, education and inclusion. In this recent example, the thematic structure is evident, with a consolidation of research concentration on the integration of sport, health, and education. Physical activity and physical education are new focal points replacing the earlier preoccupations, consistent with this issue's emphasis on sport in policy and youth sport. This represents a departure from research in the policy dimension towards its pragmatic effects on physical and mental health. The interrelationship between these three elements—motivation, performance, and youth—also signals a new research trend focused on enhancing personal talent through psychological and pedagogical practices. Meanwhile, sport participation continues to be used as a thematic bridge linking policy-focused research with social participation issues. The theme of football reaffirms the prevalence of research with popular sports as the primary empirical context.

The most recent stage of scientific progress is represented by the year 2025, which had the highest publication output (54 articles). The theme trend points to ongoing diversity in the areas of health, mental health, social inclusion, disability, community involvement, and policy. This suggests that most recent research on community sports is focused on social and health consequences that go beyond participation. However, rather than being a clear long-term trend, the 2025 theme pattern should be seen as a sign of new research orientations during a single year.

Discussion

Community sport is increasingly seen as a social infrastructure that enables the pursuit of health, inclusiveness, education, social cohesion, and community development rather than just a place for individuals to engage in physical activity. The focus on active lifestyles (Gani et al., 2022; Wyk et al., 2025), mental health (Liddelow et al., 2022; Tahira, 2023; Vella et al., 2022), besides inclusive sports policies (Belton et al., 2022). This rise is also in conjunction with the expanded role of schools and governmental organisations in advocating for physical literacy and social sportsmanship (She et al., 2023). Previous research demonstrates that, through community-based sport programs and sports clubs, sport enhances social cohesion, inclusion, and a sense of belonging, especially among women and vulnerable communities (Al Harthy et al., 2024; Corvino, Moriconi et al., 2023; Isard et al., 2023). These results imply that in order to maximise sports potential as a vehicle for

social change, inclusive sport development necessitates lowering structural, social, and policy barriers. These issues have prompted scholars to view sport as a means of social integration and empowerment. According to earlier research (Fridley et al., 2023; Kurniawan & Samudro, 2024; Montoya et al., 2024).

Expansion of Research Output and Internationalisation

The publication trajectory shows that between 2016 and 2025, scholarly interest in community sport development gradually increased. With minor variations throughout the years in between, the number of publications rose from 39 articles in 2016 to 54 articles in 2025. The greatest output in 2025 indicates that community sport development is becoming more well-known as a field of study. The participation of scholars from other nations and the growth of international collaboration networks are further indications of this expansion. Such internationalisation is vital since community sport is heavily impacted by variations in social structures, health systems, educational environments, government, and community needs across nations. This trend aligns with the wider growth of bibliometric research in sport-related domains, such as sport for sustainable development, sport entrepreneurship, and sport innovation (Ferreira et al., 2020; González-Serrano et al., 2020; Haq et al., 2026). The internationalisation of this field of study is further demonstrated by the growing participation of scholars from other nations and the growth of networks for collaboration. Because community sport is impacted by variations in social structures, institutional arrangements, health systems, educational environments, and community needs across nations, such international collaboration is especially pertinent.

From Sport Participation to Broader Community Outcomes

Sport, physical activity, and sports participation continue to be major elements in community sport development research, according to the thematic framework. Their status as fundamental topics implies that involvement continues to supply the field conceptual underpinnings. Nonetheless, the existence and growing significance of topics pertaining to social inclusion, health, education, and community outcomes suggest that the function of community sport is being viewed more widely than just participation. Participating in sports may provide communities a platform to discuss inclusiveness, health promotion, social interactions, and educational growth. The sport-for-development literature, which views sport as a means of accomplishing more general social and developmental goals, is in line with this growth (Peachey et al., 2020; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Research on community involvement and sport development (Ramadhan et al., 2022), and the role of informal sport in public health (Jeanes et al., 2024), in the context of community sport also reflects this larger viewpoint. Participation is still essential, but it is becoming more closely linked to community development, health, education, and social inclusion.

Emerging Role of Mental Health, Inclusion, and Vulnerable Populations

An significant trend in the field of study is the rise of issues pertaining to mental health, refugees, disability, well-being, and marginalised people. These themes suggest that community sport is being investigated more and more as a way to address social vulnerability and uneven access to social and physical possibilities. The emergence of issues pertaining to refugees and disabilities is especially noteworthy as it implies a change in focus toward analysing who gains from community sport and under what social circumstances. In a similar vein, focusing on mental health and wellbeing expands community sports function beyond physical exercise to include psychosocial consequences. These themes show that community sport potential to address social vulnerability and uneven access to social and physical opportunities is receiving more attention. Sport-based programmes have been shown to support mental health and social development in underprivileged communities (Fernandes et al., 2023), encourage social inclusion (Corvino, D'Angelo et al., 2023), and facilitate participation among people with intellectual disabilities (Fraser et al., 2025). The potential of athletic activities to help social integration has also been emphasised by research on refugees (Kölbel, 2025). According to these results, community sports are increasingly being seen as a platform for social integration, inclusion, and psychological well-being in addition to encouraging physical exercise.

Thematic Structure of Community Sport Development

The thematic map provides further insight into the intellectual structure of the field. The motor themes, including integration, acculturation, refugees, social capital, and social class, represent areas that are relatively well developed and strongly connected to the broader research structure. Their position suggests that community sport research has increasingly engaged with social integration and inequalities rather than focusing exclusively on participation. In contrast, basic themes, particularly sport, physical activity, and sports participation, provide the conceptual foundation of the field because of their high relevance and frequency of occurrence. The emerging or declining themes, including community sport, case studies, and sport-related issues concerning individuals with disabilities, require more cautious interpretation. Their position does not necessarily indicate that these topics are declining; rather, it may reflect their relatively lower centrality or developing integration within the broader knowledge structure.

Interestingly, the phrase emerged in the developing or falling quadrant rather than among the main themes, despite community sport being a key idea in the search approach. This is not inherently conflicting as the thematic map shows the frequency, co-occurrence, centrality, and density of keywords within the retrieved corpus, while the search method determines the conceptual limits of the literature. Therefore, the result implies that community sport has not yet developed into a well-integrated thematic core of the dataset's larger body of sport-related literature. Rather, participation, inclusion, health, education, disability, and other community-oriented issues seem to be scattered throughout its conceptual evolution. This dispersion would suggest that community sport development is still a developing and theoretically diverse field of study. The position of a theme in bibliometric thematic mapping reflects its relationships with other keywords in terms of centrality and density; therefore, rather than being a direct indicator of research importance, it should be interpreted as an indication of the structure and development of the research field (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022).

Thematic Evolution: From Participation to Integrated Social Development

One of the main features of this study is the thematic development from 2016 to 2025. It is possible to describe the years 2016-2018 as a formative period, during which time research was mostly focused on fundamental ideas of sport and participation. In 2019 and 2021, the study agenda broadened to include participation and educational aspects, suggesting a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental roles of community sports. Thematic diversity increased over the 2022-2024 era, especially in the areas of inclusion, social cohesion, disability, and community-oriented issues. Lastly, 2025 is the most recent stage of the research environment and demonstrates ongoing attention to health, mental health, inclusivity, well-being, and policy-related issues. It achieved the greatest yearly publication output with 54 papers.

This history points to a slow transition from viewing community sport solely via participation to viewing it as a component of larger social development processes. Crucially, this does not imply that involvement has lost significance. Instead, participation seems to serve as a fundamental concept that is becoming more closely linked to policy, health, education, inclusiveness, and psychological well-being. When considered collectively, these advancements point to a progressive shift in the focus of research from participation-oriented issues to more integrated social and community-development results. The conceptual growth of sport-for-development research, which has placed an increasing emphasis on social inclusion, community development, health, and other developmental outcomes in addition to sport participation, is consistent with this process (Peachey et al., 2020; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). This expansion is further illustrated by more recent studies that focus on social inclusion, public health, and community involvement (Corvino, Moriconi et al., 2023; Jeanes et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2022).

Implications for Research and Policy

The results have significant ramifications for those who oversee sports policy. Community sport should not be viewed as a separate area of sport administration due to the growing intersections between sport, physical activity, health, youth development, inclusiveness, and social policy. Alternatively, it can serve as a cross-sector policy tool that links public health, education, youth development, social inclusion, and local

community development with sport policy. Therefore, the policy implication is a change from participation-centered policy to inclusive, outcome-oriented community sport policy. To enable sport programmes to simultaneously serve many community needs, policymakers should promote cooperation between local governments, schools, health organisations, sport clubs, and community organisations. For populations who face obstacles to participation, such as refugees, individuals with disabilities, youth, and other marginalised groups, this kind of cooperation is especially crucial. Research found in this analysis shows that when programs are tailored to the requirements of particular communities, community sport can offer chances for social integration, empowerment, and enhanced well-being.

From a policy standpoint, community sports should not be seen only as a way to boost leisure or physical activity levels. According to the study theme development, community sport may support mental health, social inclusion, disability inclusion, health promotion, and community development. The rising necessity to link sport with health-related policies is further demonstrated by the creation of mental health guidelines for community sports (Liddelou et al., 2022). The potential contribution of community sport organisations to inclusive development is also highlighted by study on sports clubs and social integration among individuals with impairments (Al Harthy et al., 2024). Stronger integration within the fields of sport, health, education, social welfare, and community development might thus be advantageous for policy frameworks.

Limitations and Future Research

When evaluating these results, a number of restrictions should be taken into account. First, because the analysis was based on the Scopus database, it is possible that pertinent articles that were only indexed in other databases were missed. Second, the use of the Social Sciences subject-area limitation offers a targeted disciplinary scope, but it may omit pertinent contributions that are classified under the Multidisciplinary, Health Sciences, Education, Psychology, or Sport Sciences categories. Third, preprocessing techniques, analytical criteria, keyword selection, and search strategy all have an impact on bibliometric results. Fourth, thematic maps do not indicate causal linkages between study themes; rather, they show patterns of keyword co-occurrence (Donthu et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2022).

Lastly, as 2025 is only one year, it should be interpreted cautiously as the most recent theme phase. To investigate the substantive evolution of community sport research in more detail, future study might integrate Scopus with other bibliographic databases, use more comprehensive interdisciplinary retrieval techniques, and supplement bibliometric mapping with methodical content analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that research on community sport development evolved between 2016 and 2025 from a predominantly participation-oriented focus toward a more integrated research agenda encompassing social inclusion, health, education, mental well-being, and policy perspectives. The contribution of this study lies in identifying this longitudinal shift and demonstrating that community sport development is an increasingly diversified and interconnected research field, while participation remains a foundational theme. The thematic structure also indicates that community sport has not yet become a highly integrated core theme within the broader sport-related literature, highlighting opportunities for further conceptual integration.

These results imply that future studies should promote more multidisciplinary and global cooperation and reinforce the links between sport participation, health, education, inclusiveness, and policy. Community sport may be taken into consideration for policy and practice in connection to more general community, health, educational, and inclusion goals; however, the current bibliometric data does not prove its efficacy as a tool for policy. Therefore, more empirical and comparative research is required to investigate the ways and circumstances in which community sport contributes to certain social, health, educational, and communal outcomes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used QuillBot and Grammarly solely for language editing to improve grammar, sentence structure, readability, and clarity. These tools were not used to generate or develop the scientific content, methods, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions of the study.

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