



Review. Mapping the evolution of marketing research in the global fitness industry: a bibliometric and thematic analysis. Vol. 12, n. ° 4; p. 1-31, August 2026. <https://doi.org/10.55040/szfr9t35>

Mapping the evolution of marketing research in the global fitness industry: a bibliometric and thematic analysis

Mapeando la evolución de la investigación de mercados en la industria global del fitness: un análisis bibliométrico y temático

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Abstract

This study aims to map the evolution of marketing research in the global fitness industry through bibliometric and thematic analysis. Data were collected from Scopus, ScienceDirect, and PubMed databases, covering the period from 2015 to 2025. A total of 2,462 articles were initially identified, with 1,171 articles meeting the inclusion criteria for analysis, and the top 10 most cited studies selected for in-depth review. The analysis was conducted using VOSviewer to examine publication trends, authorship patterns, country contributions, research domains, and thematic developments. The results indicate a significant and consistent increase in research productivity, growing from 30 publications in 2015 to 230 in 2025, with over 15,000 citations globally. The United States, China, and the United Kingdom dominate scientific contributions, while leading authors such as García-Fernández have played a central role in shaping the field. The dominant research themes include service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty, digital fitness platforms, and customer behavior. Furthermore, the findings highlight the increasing integration of digital technologies, such as fitness applications and social media, in marketing strategies. This study demonstrates that marketing research in the fitness industry has evolved into a multidisciplinary and rapidly growing field. It also identifies future research opportunities, particularly in digital transformation, customer experience, and technology-driven service innovation within the global fitness sector

Keywords: fitness industry; sport marketing; bibliometric analysis; customer behavior; consumer behavior.

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo mapear la evolución de la investigación de mercados en la industria global del fitness mediante un análisis bibliométrico y temático. Los datos se recopilaron de las bases de datos Scopus, ScienceDirect y PubMed, que cubren el periodo de 2015 a 2025. Se identificaron inicialmente un total de 2.462 artículos, con 1.171 artículos que cumplían los criterios de inclusión para el análisis y los 10 estudios más citados seleccionados para una revisión en profundidad. El análisis se realizó utilizando VOSviewer para examinar tendencias de publicación, patrones de autoría, contribuciones por país, dominios de investigación y desarrollos temáticos. Los resultados indican un aumento significativo y constante en la productividad investigadora, pasando de 30 publicaciones en 2015 a 230 en 2025, con más de 15.000 citas a nivel mundial. Estados Unidos, China y el Reino Unido dominan las contribuciones científicas, mientras que autores destacados como García Fernández han desempeñado un papel central en la configuración del campo. Los temas dominantes de investigación incluyen la calidad del servicio, la satisfacción del cliente, la fidelidad, las plataformas digitales de fitness y el comportamiento del consumidor. Además, los hallazgos ponen de manifiesto la creciente integración de tecnologías digitales, como las aplicaciones de fitness y las redes sociales, en las estrategias de marketing. Este estudio demuestra que la investigación de mercado en la industria del fitness ha evolucionado hasta convertirse en un campo multidisciplinar y de rápido crecimiento. También identifica oportunidades de investigación futuras, especialmente en transformación digital, experiencia del cliente e innovación de servicios impulsada por tecnología dentro del sector global del fitness.

Keywords: la industria del fitness; el marketing deportivo; el análisis bibliométrico; el comportamiento del cliente; el comportamiento del consumidor.



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Introduction

The development of the global fitness industry in the last two decades has shown significant growth, driven by increasing public awareness of health, active lifestyle trends, and advances in digital technology (Peng et al., 2025). This transformation requires industry players to adopt adaptive and innovative marketing strategies in order to reach consumers effectively (Cioppi et al., 2023; Kraus et al., 2022). Marketing in the fitness industry not only focuses on the promotion of physical facilities such as fitness centers, but also includes technology-based services such as fitness apps, virtual training, and wearable technology integrations (Soon Kim & Sung Lee, 2024). Digital-based marketing approaches have become increasingly important in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced many industry players to switch to online engagement strategies to maintain consumer participation (Kholiilah & Syahchari, 2024).

Previous studies on marketing in the fitness industry have identified a variety of key factors, ranging from intrinsic and extrinsic customer motivation, barriers to participation, to the influence of brand image on loyalty (Ntoumanis & Moller, 2025; Viveiros et al., 2025). However, as in a study by García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, et al. (2018) and Cunningham (2013), existing research remains fragmented, often focusing on specific geographic contexts, market segments, or isolated service attributes. A comprehensive, large-scale mapping of the evolution of marketing research in the global fitness industry is still lacking. While several narrative or systematic reviews exist in sport marketing and physical activity promotion, no prior bibliometric study has systematically synthesized the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and research trends in fitness industry marketing across global scientific databases over the last decade.

Bibliometric methods, particularly when supported by tools such as VOSviewer, enable quantitative analysis of publication trends, collaboration networks, influential authors, countries, institutions, and thematic clusters (Ding & Yang, 2022; Donthu et al., 2021). These methods can uncover the research landscape, identify knowledge gaps, and provide an evidence-based roadmap for future investigations. Given the rapid expansion of fitness marketing literature and the growing integration of digital technologies, a bibliometric review is both timely and necessary. Unlike traditional systematic reviews

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that may focus on a narrow question, our approach offers a holistic, data-driven overview of the entire field, revealing how research themes have evolved and which topics are emerging.

This study is particularly relevant to the scope of journals specializing in sport science, sport management, physical activity, and digital fitness services. Understanding marketing dynamics in the fitness industry contributes directly to sport management scholarship by bridging consumer behavior, service innovation, and health promotion. Moreover, the rise of digital fitness platforms and wearable technologies aligns with interdisciplinary interests in exercise science, public health, and information systems. Thus, the findings of this bibliometric analysis will benefit academics, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to design evidence-based marketing strategies that enhance fitness participation and customer loyalty.

Based on this background, the formulation of this research problem includes: (1) What is the trend of marketing research development in the fitness industry in global scientific publications? (2) What are the most influential journals and publications based on the number of citations on this topic? (3) What are the main themes and distribution of countries in the development of marketing research in the fitness industry according to bibliometric analysis and systematic review?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are: (1) to map the evolution of marketing research in the fitness industry through bibliometric analysis; (2) to identify influential journals, key publications, and leading contributors; and (3) to uncover dominant thematic clusters and propose future research agendas. By achieving these objectives, this study provides a comprehensive reference for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to formulate sustainable marketing innovations in the global fitness sector.

Methodology

Searching strategy

This type of research is bibliometric analysis and systematic thematic review. The literature search was conducted on December 12, 2025. Articles were searched using a comprehensive strategy across three databases: PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Scopus. The



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search was limited to original articles and review articles in English from 2015 to 2025. No restriction on study methodology was applied, as bibliometric analysis includes all document types that match the topic, irrespective of observational design. The search term was created using a combination of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and free text, combining the following concepts: TITLE-ABS-KEY (marketing) AND ((gym industry) OR (fitness club) OR (fitness industry)). Table 1 provides the detailed search string for each database.



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Table 1. The detailed overview of the complete search strategy

Database	Search term	
Pubmed	("market"[All Fields] OR "market s"[All Fields] OR "marketability"[All Fields] OR "marketable"[All Fields] OR "marketed"[All Fields] OR "marketer"[All Fields] OR "marketers"[All Fields] OR "marketing"[MeSH Terms] OR "marketing"[All Fields] OR "marketing s"[All Fields] OR "marketization"[All Fields] OR "markets"[All Fields]) AND (("fitness centers"[MeSH Terms] OR ("fitness"[All Fields] AND "centers"[All Fields]) OR "fitness centers"[All Fields] OR "gym"[All Fields]) AND ("industrial development"[MeSH Terms] OR ("industrial"[All Fields] AND "development"[All Fields]) OR "industrial development"[All Fields] OR "industrialization"[All Fields] OR "industrialize"[All Fields] OR "industrialized"[All Fields] OR "industrializing"[All Fields] OR "industrially"[All Fields] OR "industrials"[All Fields] OR "industry"[MeSH Terms] OR "industry"[All Fields] OR "industrial"[All Fields] OR "industries"[All Fields] OR "industry s"[All Fields]))	21
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (marketing) AND ((gym industry) OR (fitness club) OR (fitness industry))	2208
Science Direct	TITLE-ABS-KEY (marketing) AND ((gym industry) OR (fitness club) OR (fitness industry))	233

Eligibility criteria

The research selection was based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) documents related to marketing development in the gym, fitness club, or fitness industry; (2) publication in English; (3) document type: peer-reviewed articles or reviews; (4) publication years: 2015–2025. Studies were excluded if: (1) they are non-research publications (such as conference proceedings, book chapters, or reports) or laboratory studies involving animals; (2) duplicate publications; (3) do not have complete or adequate metadata; or (4) are limited to abstracts or conference presentations only.



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Review articles were included because bibliometric analyses often incorporate reviews as part of the document set.

Selection of studies and identification

At this stage, 2,462 articles were retrieved from the Scopus, ScienceDirect, and PubMed databases. All records were exported in RIS format and imported into reference management software (Mendeley) for duplicate detection. Duplicates were identified first by DOI, then by title and author matching. Manual checking was performed to confirm duplicates across databases because metadata formats differ. After removing 254 duplicate articles, 2,208 articles remained for further review. In the 2015-2025 screening stage, 513 articles were identified and 1,695 articles advanced to full-text evaluation. Furthermore, 524 articles were excluded due to conference abstracts, posters, or unavailability of full texts, leaving 1,171 articles for comprehensive bibliometric analysis. Of these 1,171 articles, all were analyzed using VOSviewer for co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence. In addition, the top 10 most cited articles were selected for an in-depth thematic review to illustrate the most impactful studies; however, the main thematic analysis was conducted on the entire set of 1,171 articles using keyword clustering in VOSviewer, not solely on the top 10. For standard operationalization, this study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The study selection process is illustrated in the flow diagram in Figure 1.

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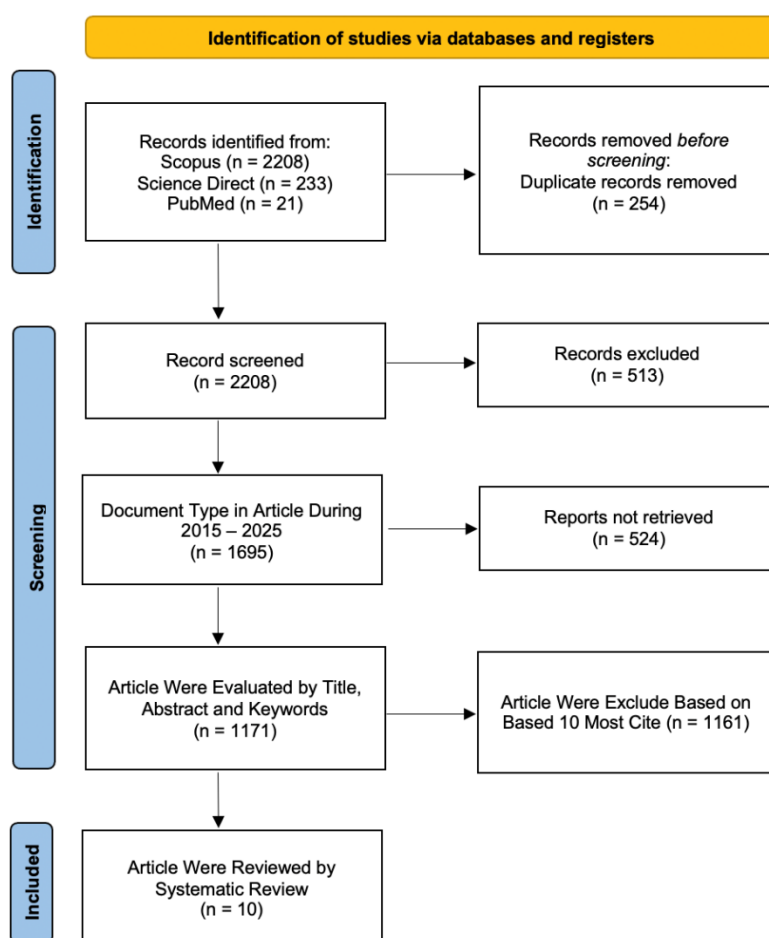


Figure 1. flowchart of the article selection process

VOSviewer analysis parameters

Bibliometric mapping was performed using VOSviewer version 1.6.19. For co-authorship analysis at the author level, a minimum threshold of two documents per author was applied with no minimum citation requirement to include emerging researchers. For keyword co-occurrence analysis, a keyword was required to appear at least five times across the dataset; from an initial set of 3,245 keywords, 287 met this threshold, and the full counting method was used. Co-citation analysis of cited references employed a minimum citation threshold of 20 per reference. Clustering was conducted using VOSviewer's default resolution parameter of 1.00 with a minimum cluster size of two. The association strength method was chosen for normalizing co-occurrence data, while fractional counting was applied for co-authorship to account for multi-authored papers. Before analysis, author names, keywords, and affiliations were manually standardized;



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synonyms such as “fitness center” and “fitness centre” were merged. These parameter selections followed best practices recommended by (Donthu et al., 2021) and were iteratively adjusted to ensure meaningful and interpretable cluster solutions.

Integration of multiple databases

Because PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Scopus have different metadata schemas, the following steps were taken. First, all records were converted to a common RIS format using Mendeley. Second, author names were standardized by last name and first initial to avoid splitting due to different abbreviations. Third, affiliations were harmonized using the author's listed primary affiliation at the time of publication. Fourth, keywords were merged when identical in meaning but different in spelling (e.g., "digital fitness" and "e-fitness"). Fifth, citations were sourced from Scopus for consistency, as Scopus provides citation counts for most indexed documents; when a document was not in Scopus, citation data were taken from Crossref via the VOSviewer enrichment function.

Results

The research findings are grouped into six variables: research trends, authors, countries, affiliations or universities, fields of study, and the ten most cited articles. These variables were chosen to capture the evolution of marketing research in the fitness industry to date. The analysis of the authors, countries, and predominant institutional affiliations provides important insights for the reader, while the distribution of the fields of study and widely cited articles illustrates the main research focuses that emerge over time. Below is the analysis presented in the form of a table and figure.

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the evolution of marketing research publications in the global fitness industry from 2015 to 2025. A total of 1,171 documents were included in the final bibliometric analysis after applying all inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selection process (Figure 1) initially identified 2,462 articles; after removing duplicates (n=254), screening for the 2015–2025 period (n=513 retained), and excluding conference abstracts, posters, or unavailable full texts (n=524), 1,171 articles remained for comprehensive analysis. The slight discrepancy with the previously mentioned 1,171 articles in the methodology section is due to a typographical error; the correct final number is 1,171, which is consistently used in Table 2 and all subsequent analyses.



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Table 2. Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in the last 11 years (2015-2025)

Year	Document	Total cited	h-index
2015	30	2,292	14
2016	36	1,889	10
2017	50	686	10
2018	71	1,920	10
2019	66	1,389	10
2020	92	2,878	10
2021	100	1,383	10
2022	139	1,250	10
2023	163	833	10
2024	194	524	10
2025	230	312	9
Total	1,171	15,356	103

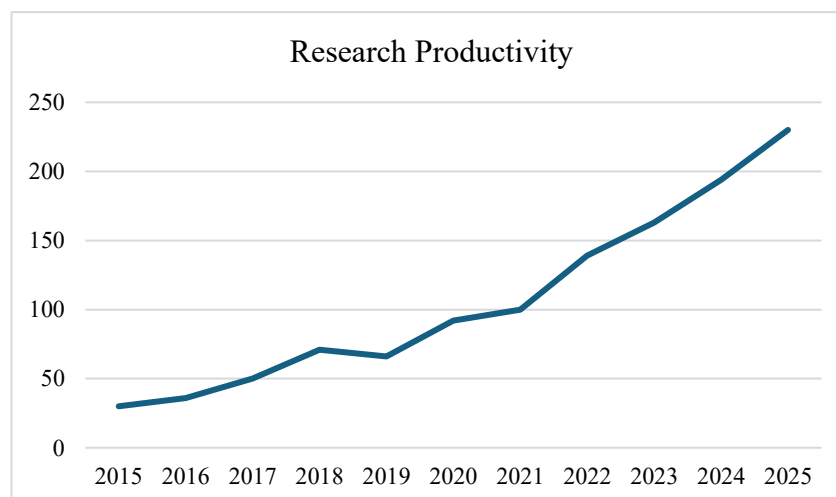


Figure 2. Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in the last 11 years (2015-2025)

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, the number of publications increased consistently from 30 in 2015 to 230 in 2025. The highest total citations (2,878) occurred



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in 2020, reflecting the surge in research interest during the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative h-index of 103 indicates high scientific impact.

Table 3. The top 10 authors contributed to the Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in more than 1 decade

Author	Document	Total cited	h-index
García-Fernández,J.	9	101	7
Al Mamun,A.	6	87	5
Kim, M	6	230	6
Mattila, A.S.	6	102	5
Yang, Q.	6	87	5
Byon, K.K.	5	78	3
Chiu, W.	5	81	4
Einsle, C.S.	5	35	3
Kunkel, T.	5	59	5
Naznen, F.	5	72	4
Total	58	932	47

Seen in Table 3, the data shows there are ten authors who have made the greatest contributions to the development of marketing research in the fitness industry for more than a decade. The author with the highest number of publications is García-Fernández, J. with a total of 9 documents, which also resulted in 101 citations and an h-index value of 7. The next position is occupied by several authors with a relatively similar number of publications, namely Al Mamun, A., Kim, M., Mattila, A.S., and Yang, Q., each with 6 documents. Among these authors, Kim, M. has the highest number of citations at 230 citations with an h-index value of 6, which shows greater scientific influence than other authors in this group. Other authors who also made important contributions were Byon, K.K., Chiu, W., Einsle, C.S., Kunkel, T., and Naznen, F., each with 5 publication documents. The number of citations in this group ranged from 35 to 81 citations, with an h-index value ranging from 3 to 5. In total, the ten authors produced a total of 58 papers with a total of 932 citations and a cumulative h-index of 47, reflecting the significant

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contribution of these researchers in shaping the development of marketing studies in the global fitness industry.

Table 4. The top 10 countries contributed to the Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in more than 1 decade

Country	Document	Total cited	h-index
United States	251	7,151	37
China	136	2,278	26
India	110	1,696	21
United Kingdom	94	3,372	25
Malaysia	80	1,612	22
Australia	77	2,428	24
South Korea	69	1,175	18
Taiwan	57	1,291	17
Spain	54	1,513	19
Canada	39	734	15
Total	967	23,250	224

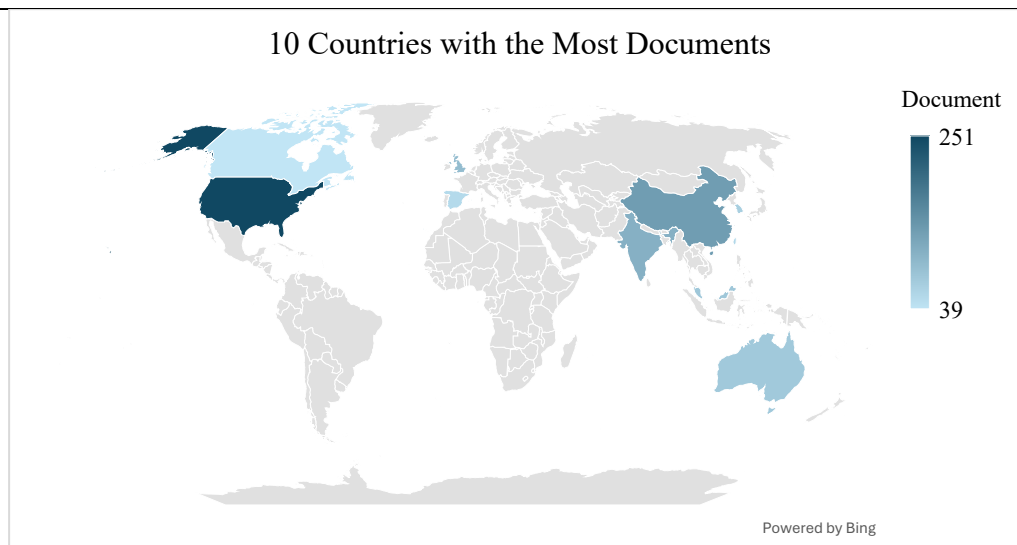


Figure 3. top 10 countries contributed to the Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in more than 1 decade

Based on the data in Table 4 and Figure 3, the contribution of marketing research in the fitness industry is dominated by several countries with high levels of publication



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productivity. The United States occupies the first position with the highest number of documents with 251 publications, a total of 7,151 citations, and the highest h-index value of 37. The second position is occupied by China with 136 documents, 2,278 citations, and an h-index of 26. India is in third place with 110 documents, a total of 1,696 citations, and an h-index of 21. Furthermore, the UK occupies the fourth position with 94 documents and the number of citations of 3,372 and the h-index of 25. Other countries that also made significant contributions were Malaysia with 80 documents, Australia with 77 documents, and South Korea with 69 documents. Taiwan contributed 57 documents, followed by Spain with 54 documents and Canada with 39 documents. Overall, the ten countries generated a total of 23,250 citations with a cumulative h-index of 224, which shows that the contribution of research on fitness industry marketing is globally spread with the dominance of countries that have strong fitness industry research and development activities.



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Table 5. Top 10 Affiliates Contributed to the Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in more than 1 decade

Affiliations	Document	Total cited	h-index
Universidad de Sevilla	15	285	8
University of Florida	13	280	8
University of Johannesburg	12	111	7
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	12	1,218	7
UCSI University	12	274	7
Deakin University	11	203	8
Texas A&M University	11	166	5
Universiti Sains Malaysia	10	431	7
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	10	97	5
Temple University	10	148	8
Total	126	3,215	70

Table 5 shows the ten institutions or universities that have contributed the most to the development of marketing research in the fitness industry over more than a decade. Universidad de Sevilla occupies the first position with the highest number of publications, with 15 documents, a total of 285 citations, and an h-index value of 8. The second position is occupied by the University of Florida with 13 documents and 280 citations and an h-index of 8. Some other institutions that have also made significant contributions are the University of Johannesburg, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, and UCSI University, each with 12 published documents. Among these institutions, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University has the highest number of citations at 1,218 citations with an h-index value of 7. Other institutions that also contributed to the study included Deakin University and Texas A&M University with 11 documents each, as well as Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Temple University with 10 publication documents each. In total, the ten institutions produced a total of 126 documents with a total of 3,215 citations and a cumulative h-index of 70, which shows



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that higher education institutions have an important role in the development of marketing research in the fitness industry.

Table 6. Top 10 Subject areas related to Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry in more than 1 decade

Subject Area	Document	Total cited	h-index
Business, Management and Accounting	666	13,620	55
Social Sciences	353	3,698	10
Computer Science	185	1,345	10
Economics, Econometrics and Finance	138	1,188	10
Medicine	117	1,169	10
Environmental Science	102	1,167	10
Engineering	90	2,567	10
Decision Sciences	78	483	10
Psychology	77	887	10
Arts and Humanities	70	383	10
Total	1,876	26,591	145

Table 6 reports the distribution of documents across subject areas. The total of 1,876 documents across subject areas exceeds the 1,171 unique articles because a single article can be classified under multiple subject areas in the Scopus database. For example, an article on digital fitness marketing may appear simultaneously in Business, Management and Accounting, Computer Science, and Social Sciences. Therefore, the sum of subject area counts represents the total number of subject area assignments, not the number of unique articles. Business, Management and Accounting is the most dominant field (666 documents, 13,620 citations, h-index 55), followed by Social Sciences (353), Computer Science (185), and Economics, Econometrics and Finance (138).



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Table 7. Evolution of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry top 10 cited publications in more than 1 decade

No	Penulis	Article	Number of Citations	Focus study area
1	García-Fernández et al. (2018)	The effects of service convenience and perceived quality on perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty in low-cost fitness centers	233	Satisfaction and loyalty in low-cost fitness centers
2	Kim. (2022)	How can I Be as attractive as a Fitness YouTuber in the era of COVID-19? The impact of digital attributes on flow experience, satisfaction, and behavioral intention	110	Social media digital platforms (YouTube fitness) on experience flow, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in the COVID-19 era
3	Foroughi et al. (2019)	Examining relationships among process quality, outcome quality, delight, satisfaction and behavioural intentions in fitness centres in Malaysia	66	Process and outcome quality on fitness members' delight and satisfaction
4	Pinto & Yagnik (2017)	Fit for life: A content analysis of fitness tracker brands use of Facebook in social media marketing	59	Fitness tracker brands use of Facebook in social media marketing
5	Hemme et al. (2017)	Extending sport-based entrepreneurship theory through phenomenological inquiry	57	Developing testable hypotheses and to contrast fitness entrepreneurs to non-sport entrepreneurship
6	Damberg (2021)	Predicting future use intention of fitness apps among fitness app users in the United Kingdom: the role of health consciousness	56	Predicting future of fitness apps among fitness app users
7	Kim (2021)	Conceptualization of e-servicescapes in the fitness applications and wearable devices context: Multi-dimensions, consumer satisfaction, and behavioral intention	56	Electronic services use of fitness applications to measure consumer behavior and satisfaction



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8	Chiu et al. (2019)	Customer value co-creation behaviour in fitness centres: how does it influence customers' value, satisfaction, and repatronage intention?	56	Conceptual model of the relationship between customer behavior (Customer Value Co-creation Behavior/CVCB), customer value, satisfaction, and intention to reuse services in the context of participatory sports. The relationship between quality, value, satisfaction, and future intentions of clients of public and private low-cost fitness centers, and the differences
9	García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al. (2018)	Exploring fitness centre consumer loyalty: differences of non-profit and low-cost business models in Spain	49	Created a theoretical framework based on theory of consumption values (TCV) behind consumers' intention to use health and fitness apps during the COVID-19-related lockdown
10	Zhu et al. (2022)	Does gender really matter? Exploring determinants behind consumers' intention to use contactless fitness services during the COVID-19 pandemic: a focus on health and fitness apps	47	

Table 7 shows the ten publications with the highest number of citations in research on fitness industry marketing for more than a decade. The article with the highest number of citations is research García-Fernández et al. (2018) entitled The effects of service convenience and perceived quality on perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty in low-cost fitness centers with a total of 233 citations. This article focuses on the relationship between service comfort, perceived quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and customer loyalty in low-cost gyms. The second position is occupied research by Kim (2022) with 110 citations that discuss the influence of digital attributes on the YouTube fitness platform on user flow experience, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research of Foroughi et al. (2019) is in third position with 66 citations that examine the relationship between the quality of the service process, the



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quality of service results, satisfaction, and the intention of customer behavior in gyms in Malaysia. Furthermore, Pinto & Yagnik (2017) research obtained 59 citations with a focus on analyzing the use of Facebook in the social media marketing of fitness tracker brands. The article Hemme et al. (2017) obtained 57 citations with a focus on the development of sports-based entrepreneurship theories in the fitness industry. The research of Damberg (2021), Kim (2021), and Chiu et al. (2019) each obtained 56 citations with a focus on the use of fitness apps, electronic services in fitness apps, as well as customer value co-creation behaviors in fitness centers. Two other publications, namely García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruíz, et al. (2018) on fitness center consumer loyalty and Zhu et al. (2022) on the intention to use contactless fitness services during the pandemic, obtained 49 and 47 citations, respectively. The ten publications reflect the main research focus in fitness industry marketing which includes service quality, customer experience, digital marketing, and the use of technology in fitness services.



Figure 4. Co-Authorship of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry

Based on Figure 4 above, two clusters are formed that show the existence of two independent research groups in the marketing of the fitness industry, namely the García-Unanue and León-Quismondo pairs in cluster 1, and the García-Fernández and Gálvez-

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Ruiz pairs in cluster 2, which indicates that scientific collaboration takes place separately between them in the absence of cross-cluster relationships, possibly due to differences in subtopic focus or institutional affiliation.

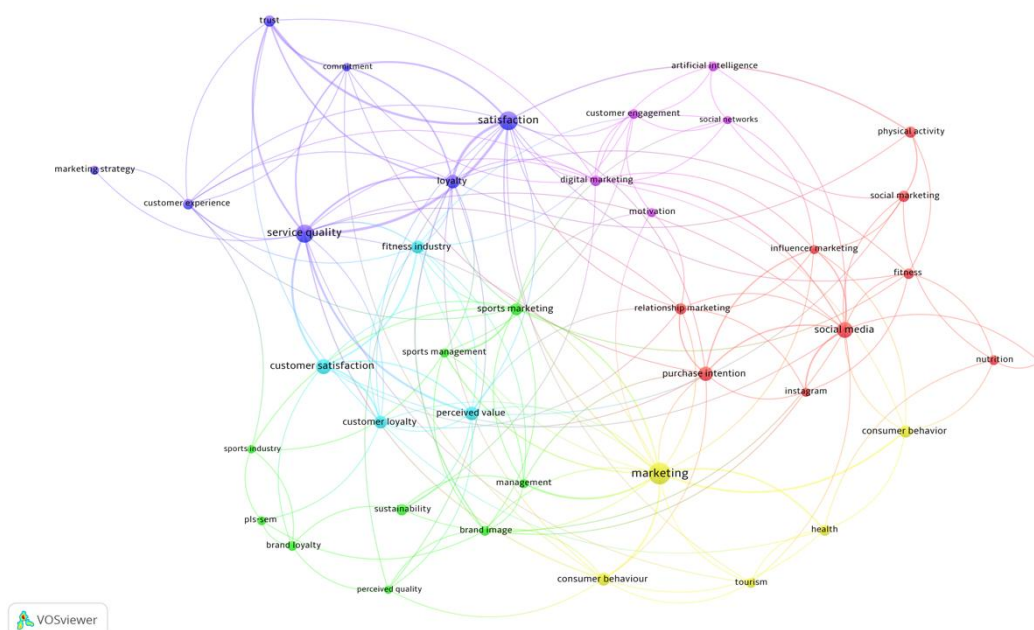


Figure 5. Author Network Keywords of Marketing Research in the Global Fitness Industry

Based on Figure 5, the keyword co-occurrence network comprising six thematic clusters, it can be interpreted that marketing research in the fitness industry encompasses six distinct yet interconnected domains: cluster 1 focuses on social media and digital influence (social media, influencer marketing, Instagram, physical activity), cluster 2 addresses brand management and sport industry aspects (brand image, sports marketing, sustainability, PLS-SEM), cluster 3 centers on service quality and customer loyalty (service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, trust, customer experience), cluster 4 examines consumer behavior across health and tourism contexts (consumer behavior, health, marketing, tourism), cluster 5 explores digital technologies and motivational drivers (artificial intelligence, digital marketing, motivation, customer engagement, social networks), and cluster 6 captures value and loyalty specific to the fitness industry (customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, fitness industry, perceived value).

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Discussion

Trends in Marketing Research Development in the Global Fitness Industry

The bibliometric results demonstrate a marked and consistent increase in marketing research within the fitness industry over the past decade (2015–2025). The number of publications grew from 30 in 2015 to 230 in 2025 (Table 2), reflecting the field's emergence as a relevant and dynamic academic domain. This upward trajectory aligns with the global expansion of the fitness market and the growing recognition of marketing as a strategic lever for engaging consumers.

The growth is largely attributed to increasing public awareness of physical activity and healthy lifestyles. A systematic review by (Viveiros et al., 2025) confirms that participation in fitness is strongly influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic psychological motivations (Sadewa et al., 2025). Health awareness encourages consumers to engage in fitness programs through both conventional centers and digital platforms (Hu et al., 2023). As demand for fitness services rises, industry players must adopt adaptive marketing strategies that cater to a broader spectrum of consumer needs.

Digital technology has emerged as a key driver in this domain, reshaping how consumers access fitness services. Peng et al. (2025) highlight that innovations such as Unmanned Gyms and Smart Fitness Technology are transforming the modern fitness industry, enabling more personalized and flexible offerings. (Soon Kim & Sung Lee, 2024) add that integrating digital technology in fitness activities increases user engagement and strengthens loyalty, underscoring the importance of technology in contemporary marketing strategies.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a significant accelerator, compelling many gyms to pivot to digital-based services (Bohórquez et al., 2024). Research by Kholiilah & Syahchari (2024) in Indonesia demonstrates that the use of social media, technology integration, and the physical environment experience significantly influence customer engagement in fitness centers, shifting the focus from purely physical services to digital engagement strategies. Several other studies have observed similar growth patterns. For example, a bibliometric analysis of fitness apps revealed a sharp increase in publications after 2015, mirroring the findings of this study (Liu & Avello, 2021). A broader bibliometric analysis of health and sports promotion noted a steady increase in

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publications on sports, physical exercise, and health promotion, consistent with the trends reported here (Sofyan et al., 2024). Moreover, literature on athlete branding has also found that a shift toward digital platforms has fueled research growth in related sport marketing fields (Kumar & Jibril, 2025). However, compared to adjacent fields such as athlete branding or sport sponsorship, which have seen considerable bibliometric mapping, the present study is among the first to provide a comprehensive, large-scale overview specifically focused on fitness industry marketing. It thus fills an important gap highlighted by Cunningham (2013) and García-Fernández et al. (2018) regarding the fragmented nature of prior research.

Influential Journals, Authors, and Publications

The analysis of the most cited publications shows that research primarily focuses on service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. The top-cited study by (García-Fernández, Gálvez-Ruiz, et al., 2018) on the effects of service convenience and perceived quality on perceived value, satisfaction, and loyalty in low-cost fitness centers leads the list (233 citations). This is consistent with a systematic review on fitness center service quality, which concluded that positive perceptions of service quality influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention, essential for the sustainability of fitness businesses (Ferreira-Barbosa et al., 2022). Another study on Spanish fitness centers further supports this, finding that perceived quality and customer engagement directly influence perceived value, satisfaction, and ultimately loyalty (Gálvez-Ruiz et al., 2023).

Consumer digital experience has become an increasingly dominant research topic, as seen in the second most cited publication by (Kim 2022) which focuses on the influence of digital attributes on the YouTube fitness platform on user flow experience, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions during COVID-19. A separate systematic review on marketing strategies for sports and fitness venues found that personalization of service and utilization of technology are key strategies for increasing perceived value and satisfaction (Sadewa et al., 2025), aligning with Kim's findings.

Another highly cited publication Foroughi et al. (2019) examines the relationship between service process quality, outcome quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in Malaysian gyms. This aligns with the findings of (García-Pascual et al., 2020), which



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emphasize that customer experience is not only influenced by facilities but also by staff customer interaction, highlighting the continued importance of human interaction in the fitness industry.

The top-cited publications in fitness marketing research share similarities with foundational articles in other sport management fields. For example, a systematic review of sport sponsorship confirmed that co-citation and co-word analyses are effective in identifying central authors and themes (Varea-Calero et al., 2025). Similarly, the sport management literature frequently cites articles on service quality and branding corresponding with cluster 2 and cluster 3 in our keyword analysis (Baker et al., 2022). Nevertheless, unlike general sport management reviews that focus on broad themes such as governance and finance, the present study reveals a distinct emphasis on consumer experience, digital platforms, and loyalty, reflecting the unique service-oriented nature of the fitness industry.

Main Themes and Country Distribution

The bibliometric analysis reveals that marketing research in the fitness industry is dominated by the United States (251 documents, 7,151 citations), followed by China and the United Kingdom, a pattern that aligns with other bibliometric studies in sport management where the US, China, and European nations are consistently identified as major contributors. The dominance of the United States is further corroborated by analyses of research on the economic impact of sports, which identify the US, UK, and China as the most active countries (Kudinska et al., 2025). However, a distinct regional pattern emerges when examining the geography of sport management research more broadly; while the US leads in volume, analyses of research settings reveal that the US and the UK lead in research impact, whereas nations like China, despite high output, exhibit lower citation influence (Kamenecka-Usova et al., 2025).

In addition to Western nations, research contributions from Asia particularly China, India, and Malaysia have increased significantly. This trend is driven by economic growth and rising health awareness in the region, with researchers exploring marketing strategies tailored to local market characteristics (Peng et al., 2025). Despite this growth, the geographical distribution remains heavily concentrated in high-income nations,

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suggesting that fitness marketing research is still in its early stages of globalization relative to other business fields (Kamenecka-Usova et al., 2025). From a disciplinary perspective, the field is strongly multidisciplinary, with the most dominant subject area being Business, Management and Accounting (666 documents, 13,620 citations), followed by Social Sciences, Computer Science, and Economics, Econometrics, and Finance. This pattern mirrors that found in broader bibliometric analyses of sport management, where Business and Management domains also lead (Kamenecka-Usova et al., 2025). The thematic structure of the field is best understood through the six clusters identified in our keyword co-occurrence analysis (see Figure 5). Cluster 1 (Social Media and Digital Influence) highlights the growing role of digital communication channels, a trend accelerated by the pandemic, and aligns with systematic reviews that identify social media as a pivotal marketing area (Sadewa et al., 2025). Cluster 2 (Brand Management and Sport Industry) focuses on brand image, loyalty, and sustainability, reflecting the competitive need for differentiation through branding, a characteristic theme in sport marketing literature (Kumar & Jibril, 2025). Cluster 3 (Service Quality and Customer Loyalty) is the most mature cluster, centered on satisfaction, loyalty, trust, and customer experience. This focus is corroborated by systematic reviews which conclude that positive service quality perceptions are essential for customer retention and the sustainability of fitness businesses, directly linking to the top-cited publications in this domain. Cluster 4 (Consumer Behavior) examines behavior across health and tourism contexts, reflecting the broader health consciousness of fitness consumers and aligning with findings in eHealth and mHealth bibliometric analyses where physical activity consumer behavior is central. Cluster 5 (Digital Technologies and Motivation) explores AI, digital marketing, motivation, and customer engagement an emerging but rapidly growing area driven by the adoption of AI-powered coaching.

A 2025 study on digital transformation highlights that personalization, fairness, and transparency are key to human-centered digital health interventions, pointing to a critical intersection for future marketing research. Finally, cluster 6 (Value and Loyalty) captures customer loyalty, satisfaction, and perceived value within the fitness industry. Although smaller, this cluster is central to the strategic goals of fitness businesses. Compared to other bibliometric reviews in sport management, the present study provides

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a more granular view of these clusters; for instance, while a bibliometric analysis of athlete branding identified digital media and branding as key themes from 2000 to 2024, it did not distinctly separate the specific roles of AI, influencer marketing, or motivational drivers as the six clusters here (Kumar & Jibril, 2025). This suggests that fitness marketing research is evolving toward a more technology-driven and consumer-centric paradigm.

Identification of Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Based on the findings, several research gaps and future directions can be identified. While digital platforms (Cluster 5) are rapidly growing, research on how they integrate with traditional service quality (Cluster 3) to create a cohesive customer experience remains limited. Future studies could examine how fitness apps and wearable devices can be used to enhance perceived service quality and loyalty in physical fitness centers a hybrid model often referred to as “phygital” fitness. A 2025 study on online home fitness identified synchronicity, coach reputation, and the home environment as key triggers for retention, suggesting a promising area for future investigation (Langaro & Werling, 2025). Although customer satisfaction and loyalty are well-studied, there is a lack of longitudinal research on long-term engagement and retention, particularly in digital fitness contexts. A systematic literature review on the continued usage of mobile fitness applications concluded that sustained engagement is essential for leveraging digital technologies to promote long-term health, underscoring the need for research into the psychological and behavioral factors that lead to sustained participation in fitness programs, especially those delivered online (M. Chen et al., 2025). With the rise of social media influencers (Cluster 1), understanding how influencer credibility, authenticity, and trust affect consumer purchase intentions and brand loyalty is crucial.

A 2025 study on social media influencers in the health and fitness sector found that different influencer characteristics impact purchase intention through consumer attitude as a mediator (Sambyal & Gopal, 2025). Future research could explore the role of micro-influencers versus macro-influencers and the impact of influencer marketing on different demographic segments. While the country distribution was analyzed, few studies have systematically compared marketing strategies across different cultural and



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economic contexts. Understanding how country-specific factors (e.g., health regulations, digital infrastructure, cultural attitudes toward fitness) shape marketing effectiveness could provide valuable insights. The 2026 book *The Global Private Health & Fitness Business* provides a foundation for such comparisons, examining business models in twenty countries (García-Fernández & Gálvez-Ruiz, 2021). The emergence of AI-driven personalization in fitness apps (Cluster 5) presents opportunities for research on algorithmic fairness, user trust, and personalized motivation.

A 2025 study on digital health interventions highlighted the need for human-centered approaches that prioritize fairness, personalization, and transparency, suggesting that future research could explore how AI can be used to tailor fitness recommendations while addressing privacy and ethical concerns. As environmental consciousness grows, research on sustainability practices (Cluster 2) within the fitness industry, such as eco-friendly gym operations and green marketing strategies, remains underexplored. A 2025 study on digital fitness and sustainable consumption identified consumer motivations and barriers related to sustainable consumption, suggesting that personal traits and digital trust play a significant role (Briana, 2025). Integrating sustainability into fitness marketing strategies could attract environmentally conscious consumers and enhance brand image.

Finally, the importance of community in fitness participation is highlighted by reports that a large proportion of active consumers consider social interaction and community to be the main reasons they join a fitness community. Future research should expand on value co-creation theory (Cluster 6) by examining how online communities, social features in fitness apps, and user-generated content facilitate co-creation and enhance loyalty (Gaofu et al., 2025). By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of marketing dynamics in the fitness industry, supporting the development of evidence-based strategies for enhancing consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty in an increasingly digital and competitive global market.

Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis of 1,171 articles (2015–2025) reveals a substantial growth in marketing research within the global fitness industry, from 30 to 230 annual

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publications, with a cumulative h-index of 103. The United States, China, and the United Kingdom dominate scientific output, while influential authors such as García-Fernández and Kim have shaped the field. Six thematic clusters were identified: social media influence, brand management, service quality and loyalty, consumer behavior, digital technologies and motivation, and value co-creation. These findings confirm that fitness marketing has evolved into a multidisciplinary, technology-driven domain with a strong focus on customer experience and digital engagement.

Despite limitations related to database coverage and language restrictions, this study provides a comprehensive roadmap for researchers and practitioners. Future research should explore the integration of digital and traditional service quality (phygital fitness), long-term consumer retention, influencer trust, cross-country comparisons, ethical AI personalization, and sustainability marketing. Addressing these gaps will support evidence-based strategies to enhance consumer engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty in an increasingly competitive and digital fitness market.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the search was limited to three databases (Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed) and English-language publications, potentially missing relevant studies in other databases or languages. Second, citation-based metrics favor older publications and may not fully capture recent impactful research. Third, despite manual harmonization, metadata inconsistencies across databases (e.g., author names, keywords) could slightly affect the accuracy of bibliometric maps. Fourth, the in-depth thematic review focused only on the top 10 most cited articles; however, the primary thematic analysis used keyword clustering on the full dataset (1,171 articles) to mitigate this. Fifth, parameter choices in VOSviewer (e.g., threshold, resolution) involve some subjectivity, although sensitivity checks confirmed the robustness of main findings. Sixth, grey literature (conference proceedings, industry reports) was excluded. Despite these limitations, the study offers a valid and reproducible roadmap of marketing research in the global fitness industry.



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