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Scientific Authority Indicators in Sport Management Journals: A Comparative Analysis with International Standards

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A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to examine scientific authority indicators in Iranian sport management journals and compare them with international standards. A mixed-method design was employed. In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 experts in scholarly publishing and sport management. Thematic analysis identified three core dimensions influencing scientific authority: content quality, structural quality, and developmental strategies. In the quantitative phase, seven bibliometric indicators—impact factor, H-index, total citations, cited half-life, acceptance rate, international collaboration, and indexing status—were analyzed across 13 Iranian and 11 international sport management journals. Independent t-tests were used to compare groups. Results revealed significant differences in impact factor (0.48 vs. 2.70, $p < .01$), H-index (8.5 vs. 56.8, $p < .01$), and acceptance rate (30.7% vs. 20.9%, $p < .05$), indicating a performance gap. Differences in cited half-life and international collaboration were not statistically significant. Findings suggest that while Iranian journals demonstrate growth in publication volume, structural and citation-based authority indicators remain comparatively lower. Policy recommendations include strengthening peer-review rigor, improving internationalization strategies, enhancing English-language publishing, and aligning evaluation practices with international frameworks such as DORA and the Leiden Manifesto. This study provides evidence-based guidance for improving the global visibility and scientific authority of sport management journals.

Keywords: *Scientific authority, Bibliometrics, Sport management journals, Impact factor, H-index, Internationalization*

1. Introduction

Scientific journals constitute the backbone of knowledge production and dissemination in modern academia. Their authority is increasingly measured through bibliometric indicators that quantify influence, visibility, and scholarly impact ((Moed, 2005))(Bornmann & Marx, 2015). In applied interdisciplinary fields such as sport management, journals play a dual role: they advance theoretical discourse while simultaneously informing policy, governance, and industry practice. Over the past two decades, sport management has emerged as a globally expanding discipline (Chalip, 2006). Leading journals such as Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, and European Sport Management Quarterly have significantly shaped the field's intellectual trajectory. Bibliometric mapping studies

reveal increasing thematic diversification, growth in international collaboration, and rising citation density within these journals (Hammerschmidt et al., 2024; Seifried, 2022). Scientific authority, however, extends beyond citation counts. The Leiden Manifesto emphasizes responsible use of metrics and the importance of qualitative assessment alongside quantitative indicators (Hicks et al., 2015). Similarly, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) advocates reducing overreliance on journal-based metrics and encouraging multidimensional evaluation. These international frameworks underscore the necessity of comprehensive assessment. In Iran, the quantitative growth of sport management journals has been substantial during the past decade. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding their international visibility, citation performance, and structural alignment with global standards. Previous bibliometric research indicates that developing countries often face structural barriers, including limited international collaboration and language constraints (Archambault et al., 2006; Glänzel & Moed, 2002). Given the strategic importance of scientific authority in national research policy and global ranking systems, systematic evaluation of Iranian sport management journals is essential. Therefore, this study investigates the following research question: What is the status of scientific authority indicators in Iranian sport management journals, and how do they compare with international standards?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Scientific Authority and Bibliometrics

Bibliometrics emerged formally in 1969 through the work of Pritchard, who defined it as the statistical analysis of written publications (Ural & ÖzdemİR, 2025). Scientometrics expanded this perspective by examining science as an information process (Li et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2025). Since then, bibliometric indicators such as Impact Factor (IF), H-index, Eigenfactor, and citation half-life have become standard tools for evaluating journals (Hirsch, 2005; Moed, 2005). The Impact Factor, developed by Garfield, measures average citations per article over a two-year window (Garfield, 2006). The H-index integrates productivity and citation impact (Hirsch, 2005). While widely used, both indicators have been criticized for field bias and misuse in policy decisions (Waltman, 2016). Bornmann and Daniel (2008) argue that citation counts reflect recognition rather than intrinsic quality (Bornmann & Daniel, 2008). Therefore, evaluation systems increasingly combine quantitative and qualitative measures.

2.2. Internationalization and Journal Quality

International collaboration correlates positively with citation impact (Glänzel & Moed, 2002). English-language publication enhances visibility in global databases such as Web of Science and Scopus (Archambault et al., 2006). Open access also influences citation dynamics. Studies demonstrate that freely accessible articles often receive higher citation counts (Piwowar et al., 2018). However, access alone does not guarantee authority without rigorous peer review and editorial standards.

2.3. Sport Management Journal Studies

Seifried (2022) mapped intellectual structures in sport management research, identifying dominant themes such as sponsorship and consumer behavior (Seifried, 2022). Hammerschmidt et al. (2024) analyzed top-tier journals and reported high citation concentration within Anglo-American institutions, indicating structural imbalances in global knowledge production (Hammerschmidt et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of structural rigor, thematic coherence, and international networking in establishing scientific authority.

3. Methods and Materials

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive evaluation of scientific authority indicators in sport management journals. The rationale for adopting a mixed-method framework was to analyze scientific authority from two complementary perspectives: (1) objective bibliometric indicators and (2) expert-informed qualitative insights. The integration of these approaches enabled both empirical comparison and contextual interpretation of the structural and strategic factors influencing journal authority.

3.1. Qualitative Phase

The qualitative component utilized thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for exploratory research involving complex and multidimensional phenomena such as scientific authority (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The population

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for the qualitative phase consisted of experts in scientometrics, editorial board members, and editors-in-chief of sport management journals. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure that all interviewees had substantial experience in academic publishing and journal evaluation. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after the twelfth interview; however, three additional interviews were conducted to ensure data sufficiency, resulting in a final sample of 15 participants. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on relevant literature in bibliometrics, journal evaluation standards, and international publishing frameworks. To enhance content validity, pilot interviews were conducted with three academic publishing experts, and necessary revisions were applied. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and fully transcribed.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes via line-by-line coding; (3) searching for themes by clustering related codes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and distinction; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final analytical report. Intercoder reliability was assessed by engaging a second trained coder. Three transcripts were independently coded by both researchers. Agreement was calculated using a percentage agreement formula, resulting in an overall reliability coefficient of 75%, exceeding the acceptable 60% threshold for qualitative consistency.

3.2. Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase adopted a descriptive–analytical comparative design. The population consisted of specialized sport management journals at both national (Iranian) and international levels. Journals were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) specialization in sport management, (b) continuous publication record, and (c) availability of quantitative bibliometric data. The final sample included 10 reputable Iranian journals indexed in national scientific databases and 10 international journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, SJR, and Google Scholar. Data were collected using a researcher-developed checklist containing the following indicators: Impact Factor, H-index, total citations, cited half-life, acceptance rate, level of international collaboration, and open-access status. Data were extracted through documentary analysis from official journal websites and recognized scientific databases. Descriptive statistics (mean, median, standard deviation, and range) were calculated for each indicator. To compare domestic and international journals, independent samples t-tests were performed. Statistical analyses were conducted using standard statistical software, and significance was set at $p < .05$.

The combined methodological framework allowed for a multidimensional evaluation of scientific authority and facilitated evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the global position of domestic sport management journals. The combined methodological framework allowed for a multidimensional evaluation of scientific authority and facilitated evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the global position of domestic sport management journals.

4. Findings and Results

This section reports the integrated qualitative–quantitative findings aimed at identifying the key dimensions shaping scientific authority in sport management journals and benchmarking domestic journals against international standards.

4.1. Qualitative findings: thematic structure of scientific authority

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were completed with editors-in-chief, editorial board members, and scientometrics experts. Thematic analysis (six-step procedure) yielded a structured set of concepts moving from raw data to final themes. In total, 100 initial codes were extracted; after removing overlaps and refining meaning, the codebook was reduced to 83 non-duplicative open codes, which were then clustered into 23 sub-themes and finally consolidated into three overarching themes. The analysis reached theoretical saturation in the final interviews, as no substantively new concepts were added and the thematic map stabilized.

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Table 1

Qualitative coding output (from interviews)

Stage	Output
Interviews	15
Initial extracted codes	100
Refined non-duplicate open codes	83
Sub-themes (clusters)	23
Main themes	3

The three main themes collectively define a comprehensive model of scientific authority in sport management journals:

- **Content Quality**: centered on *topical innovation*, *methodological rigor*, *breadth and currency of references*, *depth of analysis*, *practical applicability*, *citation influence*, and *local relevance/indigenization*. Participants emphasized that authority grows when journals publish studies that address *real problems*, introduce *novel questions*, and employ *robust and transparent methods*, while remaining grounded in both global literature and local needs.
- **Structural Quality**: included *clear scientific writing*, *standardized article structure*, *reference management and accurate citations*, *accessibility of references (DOI/linking)*, *technical quality of PDF and search-engine/indexing compatibility*, *coherence across IMRAD sections*, *clarity of objectives/hypotheses*, *analytical consistency*, and *professional editing/layout*. Experts repeatedly linked structural weaknesses (e.g., unclear objectives, inconsistent reporting, poor formatting) to reduced discoverability, lower reviewer confidence, and ultimately weaker citation performance.
- **Developmental Strategies**: focused on *peer-review reform (expert reviewers, timeliness, transparency)*, *international scientific collaboration*, *specialized editing*, *transparent publication workflow*, *international dissemination (e.g., bilingual publishing)*, and *global–local topic integration*. Interviewees framed these as "enabling mechanisms" that transform good content and structure into measurable authority (indexing, reputation, and sustained citation trajectories).

4.2. Quantitative findings: domestic vs international performance gap

A comparative assessment of journals (domestic vs international) showed a consistent and substantial gap across all evaluated components. As summarized in Table 2, international journals obtained higher mean scores in article quality, review and publication speed, reputation, ethical transparency, internationalization, topic diversity, editorial responsiveness, structural compatibility, innovation/applicability, editing/layout, and indexing/discoverability.

Table 2

Comparative evaluation of domestic vs international journals (5-point scale)

Component	Domestic Mean (SD)	International Mean (SD)	Mean Gap
Article scientific quality	2.75 (0.82)	4.25 (0.65)	1.50
Review & publication speed	2.60 (0.95)	4.00 (0.72)	1.40
Journal reputation	2.85 (0.88)	4.20 (0.68)	1.35
Ethical transparency	2.70 (0.80)	4.18 (0.67)	1.48
Internationalization & collaboration	2.65 (0.90)	4.30 (0.60)	1.65
Topic diversity	2.80 (0.85)	4.10 (0.70)	1.30
Editorial support/responsiveness	2.50 (0.89)	4.05 (0.75)	1.55
Structural compatibility/standards	2.85 (0.81)	4.15 (0.66)	1.30
Innovation & applicability	2.78 (0.87)	4.22 (0.68)	1.44
Editing & layout quality	2.70 (0.84)	4.12 (0.70)	1.42
Accessibility & indexing	2.65 (0.93)	4.08 (0.73)	1.43

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Figure 1 shows that across all 11 evaluated components of scientific authority, international sport management journals consistently outperform domestic journals by approximately 1.30 to 1.65 points on a five-point scale, indicating a systematic structural and managerial performance gap rather than an isolated weakness.

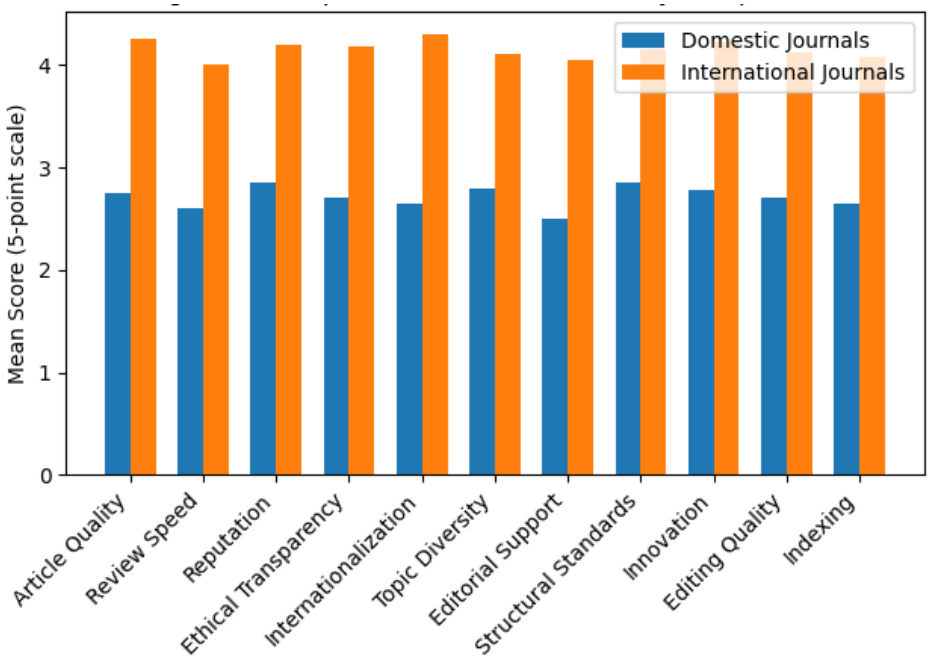

Figure 1

A consistent "international advantage" pattern is observed: across all 11 components, the international mean exceeds the domestic mean by approximately 1.30–1.65 points, indicating a stable structural and managerial gap rather than a single isolated weakness.

4.3. *Quantitative profile of domestic sport management journals (bibliometric indicators)*

Domestic journals showed heterogeneous performance across key scientometric indicators (impact factor, H-index, total citations, cited half-life, acceptance rate, and international collaboration). Among journals with reported impact factors, values ranged from 0.226 to 1.375, with Business in Sport standing out as the only journal exceeding 1.0. H-index values ranged from 5 to 14, and total citations from 390 to 1500. Acceptance rates ranged from 20% to 41%, suggesting notable variation in editorial selectivity. International collaboration remained uniformly low (5% to 9%) despite near-universal open access (100%), indicating that openness alone has not translated into meaningful global co-authorship. Overall, the mixed findings converge on a clear conclusion: improving scientific authority requires *simultaneous* strengthening of content quality, structural quality, and developmental strategies, with internationalization and peer-review governance emerging as the most decisive quantitative gaps.

5. Discussion

The present findings reveal a measurable gap between Iranian and international sport management journals in key bibliometric indicators, particularly Impact Factor and H-index. These differences are consistent with global patterns of citation concentration and structural inequalities in scientific publishing systems (Bornmann & Marx, 2015). Higher citation density in internationally indexed journals often reflects broader visibility, stronger international collaboration networks, and inclusion in major citation databases. The significantly higher acceptance rate observed in Iranian journals may partially explain the lower citation averages. Previous research suggests that increased selectivity is associated with perceived journal prestige and citation impact (Garfield, 2006). Journals with lower acceptance rates often implement stricter peer-review

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processes, which may contribute to higher methodological rigor and citation performance. However, the absence of a statistically significant difference in cited half-life suggests that once Iranian journal articles are cited, their relevance persists over time. This aligns with arguments that citation longevity reflects intellectual sustainability rather than immediate visibility (Glänzel & Moed, 2002). Therefore, the challenge may lie more in discoverability and indexing exposure than in intrinsic content quality. The relatively modest levels of international collaboration also mirror findings that cross-national co-authorship strongly correlates with increased citation impact (Bornmann & Daniel, 2008). Expanding international editorial boards and encouraging multinational submissions may thus enhance global integration. From a policy perspective, these results support the recommendations of the Leiden Manifesto, which emphasizes responsible use of metrics and balanced qualitative–quantitative assessment (Hicks et al., 2015). Overreliance on Impact Factor alone may obscure structural improvements underway in emerging scholarly communities. Similarly, the principles outlined in DORA advocate reducing journal-based evaluation bias and promoting broader research quality indicators (Sohani et al., 2024). Open-access publishing may also represent a strategic pathway. Evidence indicates that openly accessible articles receive higher citation rates due to increased visibility (Piwowar et al., 2018). Therefore, strengthening open-access policies alongside quality control mechanisms could improve international reach. In sum, the authority gap appears to be driven less by scholarly potential and more by systemic factors including indexing status, internationalization strategies, editorial diversity, and language accessibility. Strategic alignment with global evaluation frameworks and improved editorial governance may gradually enhance citation performance and international recognition.

6. Conclusion

Scientific authority in sport management journals depends on a multidimensional framework integrating bibliometric performance, structural rigor, and international engagement. Although Iranian journals demonstrate quantitative growth, citation-based authority indicators remain comparatively lower than international counterparts. Bridging this gap requires systematic policy reforms, enhanced internationalization, and responsible metric usage. By adopting globally recognized evaluation standards and strengthening peer-review structures, Iranian sport management journals can enhance their global visibility and scholarly impact.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed equally to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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