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Review Article

Nationalist Narratives in Sports Event Reporting: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Sporting events have increasingly become sites through which media construct and circulate national meanings. This systematic literature review synthesises 14 peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2021 and April 2025 and identified through Web of Science and ScienceDirect. It examines how nationalism, national identity, and related forms of national representation are defined and represented in sports media reporting and closely related platform-mediated sports communication. The study finds that media texts link sporting achievements, athletes, and international events with national meaning through heroic representation, binary opposition, and emotional mobilisation. The analysis also shows that race, gender, immigration, citizenship, disability status, and geopolitical context collectively shape the boundaries of national belonging in sports media reporting. The evidence is primarily qualitative and case-based, encompassing critical discourse analysis, textual analysis, qualitative content analysis, and corpus-assisted methods. The studies frequently focus on international competitions, while audience reception, digital platform communication, systematic cross-cultural comparison, and geographical diversity remain underdeveloped. Future research should combine media-text analysis with audience-centred methods and develop comparative, cross-platform designs that remain sensitive to contextual differences.

Keywords: Media discourse, national identity, nationalism, sports journalism, sports media

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INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly intertwined communication environment of globalisation and nation-states, sports events, as one of the most influential transnational media activities in the world, are gradually

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becoming an important stage for building and spreading nationalism (Weber, 2021). Sports events, especially large-scale international events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup, have long had multiple functions, including shaping national identity, collective honour and political symbolism (Roche, 2002). Through a strong communication mechanism, sport not only becomes a platform to show national strength, but also an important field to activate and reproduce modern nationalism in daily life. By giving specific meanings to victory or defeat, building the national image of athletes, and repeatedly using national symbols, the media has effectively stimulated the public's emotional resonance (Mutz & Gerke, 2024). In this process, sport has become a form of emotional expression to build national identity.

In recent years, the global media environment has undergone profound changes. Digitalisation and platformisation have reshaped the logic of news production and dissemination, while social media has broken the monopoly of traditional mainstream media on public narratives (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019). Ordinary users, fans, and even athletes themselves can now directly participate in the construction of nationalist narratives. This transformation has led to the increasing diversity of the expression of sport nationalism and the increasingly blurred boundaries. In sports reports, nationalism is no longer completely defined only by state-led publicity, but can also be shaped by fan-led cultural production. From emotional mobilisation to the expression of identity politics, nationalism in the context of sports is increasingly manifested as a practice involving multiple centres and multi-participants (Hartmann, 2023).

Against this changing communication landscape, this article reexamines nationalism and national identity in sports event reporting through a systematic review of recent scholarship published during the review period. Although previous studies have examined sports, nationalism, media framing, and political communication from different perspectives, the literature remains dispersed across theoretical traditions and research contexts. This review brings these strands together to develop an integrated understanding of how nationalism is conceptualised, how media construct national meaning, and how research in this field has developed. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1 : How is nationalism defined and examined within the context of sports event reporting?

RQ2 : What narrative strategies do the media employ to convey nationalist themes in sports coverage?

RQ3 : What are the key features of existing research in terms of theoretical perspectives, research subjects, and methodological approaches?

This study contributes to relevant academic fields by systematically reviewing recent research on nationalist narratives in sports event reporting. It examines not

only sport nationalism but also related perspectives, including conceptualisations of nationalism, media narrative strategies, theoretical approaches, and methodological characteristics. By identifying recurring patterns and research gaps, the review clarifies the current state of the field and provides a basis for future research. In the context of rising global political tensions and the continuing internationalisation of sport, re-examining nationalist narratives in sports events has both academic and practical value. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of the social functions and ideological mechanisms of nationalist media discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between sports reporting and nationalist narratives has long been an important topic in the field of political communication. In conventional theoretical accounts, nationalism is understood as an ideological construction that may be shaped by the state, with the media serving as an important channel through which national identity is circulated.

Billig (1995) proposed the concept of banal nationalism, emphasising that national identity appears not only in major crises or wars, but also appears in daily news reports through "invisible symbols" such as flags, country names, and geographical labels. This concept was then widely used in sports reporting research, revealing how news reporting unconsciously revitalised the concept of nationality by mentioning the group to which athletes belong and their sports achievements (Sasao, 2024). Although Banal nationalism explains the daily reappearance of national identity, it pays less attention to how the media takes the initiative to build national meaning in highly symbolic sports events. This limitation prompts scholars to combine nationalist research with Framing theory.

To further examine how media constructs meaning, scholars often adopt Framing theory as an analytical framework. Goffman (1974) laid the cognitive foundation for the concept of frames, while Entman (1993) systematised it as a way of communication, pointing out that the media constructs a specific meaning structure through emphasis, exclusion, and interpretation. In the study of sports communication, scholars use this method to analyse how the media embed nationalist information in reports through strategies such as heroism, altruism of opponents, and collective sacrifice.

Markus et al. (2006) conducted a cross-cultural analysis of American and Japanese media coverage of the 2000 and 2002 Olympics and found significant cultural differences in how athletic performance was explained. American media emphasised individual attributes and personal uniqueness, whereas Japanese media foregrounded the athlete's coach, team, and emotional experience. These findings suggest that identical sporting events may be interpreted through culturally distinct narrative frameworks.

Taken together, banal nationalism explains the routine reproduction of national identity, whereas Framing theory explains how these symbols are organised and interpreted in media narratives. Rather than

representing competing perspectives, the two theories address different dimensions of nationalist communication. Together, they complement one another in explaining how sports media simultaneously reproduce national identity and actively shape nationalist meanings.

With the rapid development of social media and platform-based communication, studies of nationalism in sports reporting have shown new directions of exploration. User-generated content, interactive communication, and "fan politics" have blurred the boundaries between the state and the individual, making nationalist expression more decentralised. For example, Abe (2024) examined the nationalist comments by Indonesian users on Twitter during the 2023 Southeast Asian Games and found that these comments were often articulated through humorous and satirical language and constituted a form of unofficial banal nationalism.

Similarly, Swart and Hussain (2023) examined the global broadcasting of the 2022 Qatar World Cup from a postcolonial perspective. Their analysis showed that media representations of cultural others as "non-modern" could reproduce Western-centric cultural hegemony through ritualised reporting and visual encoding. These developments suggest that contemporary sports nationalism is increasingly shaped through interactions among media organisations, digital platforms, athletes, and audiences. They also extend accounts of banal nationalism by highlighting the active negotiation of nationalist narratives in digital environments.

At the methodological level, textual analysis and critical discourse analysis remain the most commonly used research methods. These methods are mainly used to examine how ideology and national emotions are integrated into sports news texts. For example, Han et al. (2023) compared British and American media reports on China's image during the Beijing Winter Olympics. Their analysis found that there is a contrast between authoritarianism and democratic values on both sides. At the same time, they also identified differences in emotional expression: British reports are relatively restrained and analytical, while American reports use emotional language more frequently. This case should be interpreted in relation to its specific media and geopolitical context.

However, these studies mainly focus on the media's texts themselves, and little attention is paid to how the audience interprets, negotiates, or reconstructs nationalist discourse. Therefore, existing research provides only a partial understanding of how the audience recognises or questions about nationalist narratives, and how nationalism circulates in the contemporary media environment.

There is an obvious imbalance in geographical coverage and event selection in existing studies. According to the literature review, most current research is concentrated on media powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States. These studies primarily examine media coverage of major international sporting events, including the Olympic Games and the World Cup. Coverage of the Nathan Chen

and Yuzuru Hanyu match, the European Championship, or analyses of public opinion across several Olympic Games illustrates the continuing prominence of major events and mainstream national media in studies of nationalist narratives (Ho & Lim, 2023; Jia et al., 2022; Mauro, 2024).

By contrast, research on "global southern" countries is still relatively scarce. Most studies focus on the narrative mode of mainstream media, and little attention was paid to the unofficial expressions of nationalism expressed by ordinary users on social media. Therefore, current understandings of nationalist narratives remain strongly shaped by Western media systems and large-scale sports events, limiting the universality of existing research results in different cultural and media contexts.

A few scholars have begun to solve these limitations. For example, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) studied digital nationalism and pointed out how algorithmic recommendation systems and platform logics may amplify collective emotions and make nationalist discourse more emotionally impactful on the Internet. This perspective expands the research of predecessors, focusing on the technical and emotional mechanism of nationalism-related narratives in digital environments.

In general, existing studies provide important insights into nationalism in sports events, especially in terms of theoretical frameworks, narrative strategies, and communication mechanisms. However, the relevant literature is still scattered in different theoretical traditions, methodologies, and research backgrounds, resulting in a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the nationalist narratives in sports reporting. Based on these research results, this review systematically examines the conceptualisation of nationalism, the construction of nationalist narratives in media reporting, and the development of theory, themes, and methodology in this field.

METHODS

This study adopts the systematic literature review method to comprehensively examine the academic research on nationalism, national identity, and related ethnic significance in sports media reports from January 2021 to April 2025. The purpose is to clarify the theoretical methods, research focus, and existing research gaps in this field. The systematic literature review emphasises the repeatability and transparency of the retrieval process, which is suitable for integrating scattered research results into a coherent description of the field (Abu-Salih & Alotaibi, 2024).

Search Strategy and Data Sources

The Web of Science and ScienceDirect were selected as complementary sources for this review. The Web of Science provides multidisciplinary citation indexing across communication, media, sport, and social science journals, whereas ScienceDirect provides access to journals in media, culture, communication, and related social science fields. The selection was intended to provide a structured and manageable search of peer-reviewed literature relevant to nationalism in sports-media reporting.

This database selection constitutes a pragmatic search boundary rather than a claim of exhaustive coverage. Scopus, SPORTDiscus, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and regional databases were not searched because of institutional-access and feasibility constraints. This decision reflects the practical scope of the review rather than a judgment that these databases are irrelevant to the topic. Consequently, relevant studies indexed exclusively in those databases may not have been retrieved. This limitation is considered when interpreting the scope and transferability of the synthesis.

The literature search was conducted on 30 April 2025 and was limited to studies published from 1 January 2021 to 30 April 2025. Web of Science and ScienceDirect were searched in the title, abstract, and keyword fields using Boolean operators. The search strategy comprised two concept sets: terms relating to sport or sports media communication and terms relating to nationalism and national meaning. The search string was: ("sports media" OR "sports journalism" OR "sports reporting" OR "media coverage of sports events" OR "international sports events" OR sport) AND (nationalism OR nationalist OR "national identity" OR patriotism OR "nationalist narrative" OR "nationalist discourse" OR "sports nationalism" OR "sport nationalism" OR "sporting nationalism" OR "banal nationalism" OR "cultural nationalism" OR "digital nationalism"). No additional mandatory framing or narrative set was imposed at the retrieval stage. Instead, the relevance of retrieved records to sports media reporting was determined during title and abstract screening.

The same conceptual strategy was implemented separately through the field-search functions available in each database. In the Web of Science, the search was conducted in the Topic field using TS = syntax. In ScienceDirect, the query was entered through the title, abstract, and keyword search interface without a Web of Science field prefix. Because ScienceDirect applies year-level date filtering, records published in 2025 were screened individually to retain only articles published on or before 30 April 2025. Full database-specific search details are reported in Table 1.

The initial search across the two databases identified 4,397 records (Web of Science, n = 453; ScienceDirect, n = 3,944). After seven duplicate records were removed, 4,390 records underwent title and abstract screening. At this stage, 4,290 records were excluded because they did not meet the publication, date, language, substantive-focus, or media-relevance criteria. The remaining 100 records underwent preliminary eligibility screening based on bibliographic information and abstracts. Seventy-one records were excluded because they did not meet the prespecified eligibility criteria, and a further seven records were excluded because they lacked a direct analytical focus on mediated national meaning in sport. The remaining 22 reports were sought and retrieved in full text. Following full-text assessment, eight reports

Table 1
Database-specific search strategy and search details

Database	Search Date	Search Field and Database-Specific Syntax	Search String	Filters and Date Handling	Records Identified
Web of Science	30 April 2025	Topic field: title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus.	TS = ("sports media" OR "sports journalism" OR "sports reporting" OR "media coverage of sports events" OR "international sports events" OR sport) AND (nationalism OR nationalist OR "national identity" OR patriotism OR "nationalist narrative" OR "nationalist discourse" OR "sports nationalism" OR "sport nationalism" OR "sporting nationalism" OR "banal nationalism" OR "cultural nationalism" OR "digital nationalism")	Publication dates: 1 January 2021 to 30 April 2025. English-language, peer-reviewed journal-article status, and full-text availability were confirmed during screening.	453
ScienceDirect	30 April 2025	Title, abstract, and keyword search interface. The conceptual query was entered without the Web of Science TS field prefix.	("sports media" OR "sports journalism" OR "sports reporting" OR "media coverage of sports events" OR "international sports events" OR sport) AND (nationalism OR nationalist OR "national identity" OR patriotism OR "nationalist narrative" OR "nationalist discourse" OR "sports nationalism" OR "sport nationalism" OR "sporting nationalism" OR "banal nationalism" OR "cultural nationalism" OR "digital nationalism")	The platform's 2021-2025 year filter was applied. Records dated May–December 2025 were excluded manually, so that only articles published on or before 30 April 2025 were retained. English-language, peer-reviewed journal-article status, and full-text availability were confirmed during screening.	3,944

Note. TS denotes the Web of Science Topic field. The same conceptual search strategy was implemented through the field-search functions available in each database. The ScienceDirect date restriction was refined manually because its interface applies to a year-level filter
Source: Authors' own work

were excluded: four focused on generic fan or public discussion rather than sports-media reporting; one examined event or ceremony texts rather than media texts; one was not a peer-reviewed journal article; and two were published outside the review period. Fourteen peer-reviewed journal articles met all eligibility criteria and were included in the systematic review.

Following full-text assessment, studies were retained when they directly examined sports journalism, media coverage, mediated event texts, or journalist-linked and news-linked platform communication. Nationalism, national identity, patriotism, or national representation also had to constitute a substantive analytical focus. Studies centred on sport participation, public health, governance, or generic fan or public discussion without a direct analytical focus on mediated national meaning were excluded. The final corpus comprised 14 peer-reviewed journal articles. The study selection process is presented in Figure 1.

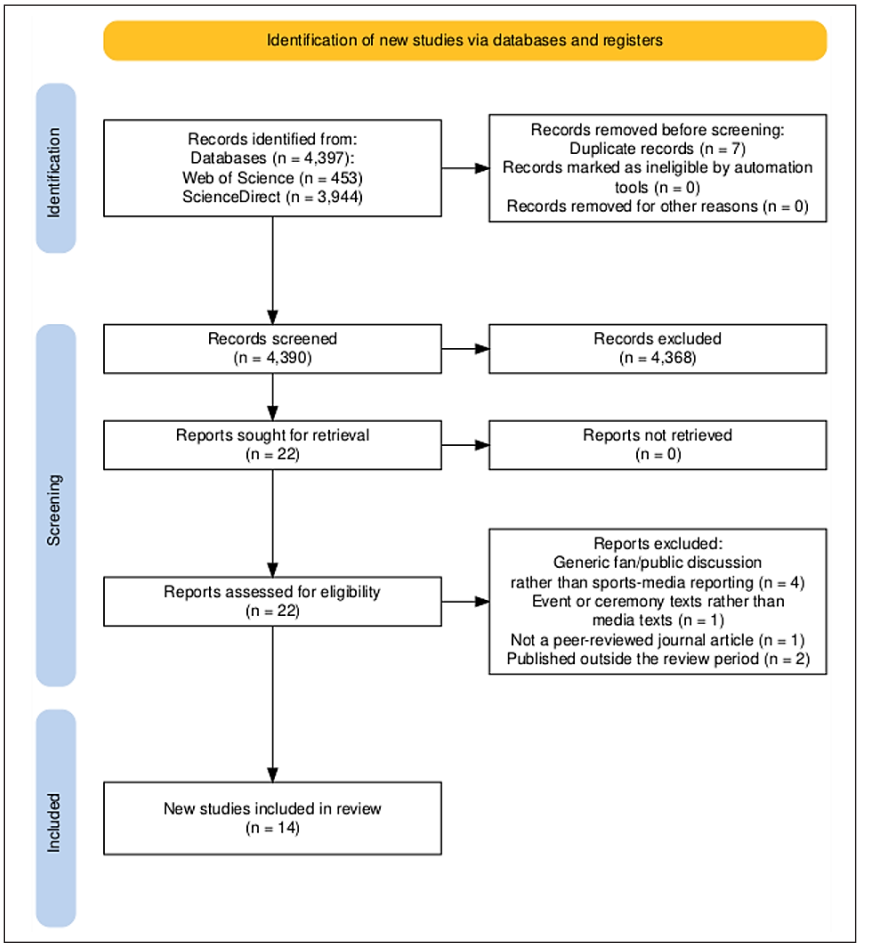

Figure 1. PRISMA literature screening flowchart
Source: Authors' own work

Inclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they: (a) were published in English in a peer-reviewed journal between 1 January 2021 and 30 April 2025; (b) examined nationalism, national identity, patriotism, national representation, or a closely related national meaning construct within sport; (c) analysed an identifiable corpus of sports journalism, media coverage, mediated event text, or journalist-linked and news-linked platform communication; and (d) reported a sufficiently clear empirical, analytical, conceptual, or review approach to support the interpretation of findings.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they: (a) were editorials, conference papers, book chapters, book reviews, newspaper commentaries, opinion pieces, or publications without a clearly described analytical approach; (b) were published outside the review period; (c) were not in English or could not be assessed from an accessible formal record; (d) treated sport without a substantive focus on nationalism or national identity; (e) referred to national identity only in passing; and (f) examined user-generated fan or public discussion, institutional conditions, participation barriers, or event performance without a direct analytical link to mediated national meaning in sports communication.

Table 2 summarises the eligibility relevance of the 14 included studies, identifying the national-meaning construct, media material, and analytical role of each study in the synthesis.

Methodological Quality Assessment

The included studies used different forms of qualitative and interpretive analysis, including critical discourse analysis, textual analysis, qualitative content analysis, and corpus-assisted analysis. Despite these procedural differences, all studies examined naturally occurring media texts and drew interpretive conclusions about mediated national meaning. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research was therefore used to assess cross-cutting features relevant to all studies, including congruity between the research question, theoretical perspective, data source, analytical procedure, and interpretation of findings (Lockwood et al., 2020).

The checklist was not used to impose a single methodological standard on the included designs or to generate a numerical quality score. Instead, it was used to assess the transparency and coherence of each study's reported analytical process. Items concerning researcher positioning and reflexivity were retained because they are relevant to interpretive media research, while items concerning participant representation and ethical approval were recorded as not applicable when a study analysed publicly available media material rather than human participants. The appraisal informed the interpretation of the synthesis and was not used as a criterion for excluding studies. Item-level results are reported in Table 3.

Table 2
Eligibility relevance of the 14 included studies

Study	National-Meaning Construct Examined	Sports Media Material	Eligibility Relevance / Role in Synthesis
Kim (2024)	Sports nationalism	Korean sports-news coverage of FIFA World Cups	Direct media-text analysis of the changing discourse of Korean sports nationalism.
Chen and Chiang (2023)	Sport nationalism; Taiwanese identity	News-linked Facebook communication during Tokyo 2020	Direct analysis of mediated Taiwanese identity and sport nationalism.
Humayun (2023)	Mediated national identity	Pakistani and Indian sports journalists' Twitter posts	Direct analysis of journalists' construction of national identity during cricket rivalry.
McCree (2022)	Sport nationalism; gendered national recognition	Local newspaper coverage of the 1979 World Netball Tournament	Direct analysis of press representations linking women's sport to national recognition.
Mauro (2025)	Race and national identity	English and Italian media coverage of UEFA Euro 2020	Direct comparative analysis of mediated national belonging and racialisation.
Zhang and Shi (2024)	National and ethnic identity	Chinese and US news coverage of Eileen Gu	Direct comparative analysis of media constructions of national identity.
Ziaee et al. (2021)	Iranian national identity	Iranian national and sport-media coverage of football tournaments	Direct content analysis of media construction of national identity.
Kobayashi et al. (2023)	Cosmopolitan nationalism	Japanese media representations of the 2019 Rugby World Cup	Direct analysis of media discourse connecting mega-events and national identity.
Choi (2023)	Nationalism; multicultural national belonging	Korean and Canadian news coverage of naturalised ice-hockey players	Direct analysis of news representations of citizenship, race, and national belonging.
Kramareva and Grix (2023)	Russian national identity; geopolitical othering	UK and US media representations of Olympic ceremonies	Direct comparative analysis of mediated national identity and international othering.
Yang and Lin (2023)	National identity; national-hero discourse	CCTV sports-channel coverage of Paralympic champions	Direct textual analysis of televised national representation narratives.
Park and Shin (2023)	Olympic nationalism; gender and whiteness	South Korean media representations of Coach Sarah Murray	Direct critical analysis of mediated Olympic nationalism and national hierarchy.
Zhang and Caple (2021)	Nationalism; national responsibility	Four Chinese and international English-language news outlets	Direct comparative analysis of media discourse on Li Na and Chinese national responsibility.
Latififard et al. (2024)	National identity; refugee/compatriot categorisation	Iranian state-owned media and public social-media posts	Direct content analysis of mediated national categorisation during the Tokyo Olympics.

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3
Methodological quality appraisal of the included studies using the JBI Critical appraisal checklist for qualitative research

Study	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Appraisal note
Kim (2024)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	CDA, corpus and interpretive procedures are reported; author positionality and reflexivity are not discussed.
Chen and Chiang (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	CDA is aligned with the research aim and online news-linked material; reflexive positioning is not reported.
Humayun (2023)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The tweet corpus and open/axial coding are clearly described; the underlying qualitative perspective is not explicitly located.
McCree (2022)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The newspaper corpus and qualitative content analysis are reported; philosophical positioning and reflexivity are not explicit.
Mauro (2025)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	CDA and theories of race/national identity are coherently linked to the comparative media corpus; reflexivity is not reported.
Zhang and Shi (2024)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Frame analysis and CDA are applied to a specified Chinese-US news corpus; researcher positioning is not reported.
Ziaee et al. (2021)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The sampling window and coding scheme are reported; a formal qualitative philosophical position is not stated.
Kobayashi et al. (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	CDA is clearly aligned with cosmopolitan nationalism and the media corpus; reflexivity is not reported.
Choi (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Critical discourse studies are coherently connected to the cross-national news corpus; reflexivity is not reported.
Kramareva and Grix (2023)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The comparative documentary/media sample and analytical procedure are reported; philosophical positioning is not explicit.
Yang and Lin (2023)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The televised corpus and textual analysis are specified; qualitative philosophical positioning and reflexivity are not explicit.

Table 3 (*continued*)

Study	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Appraisal note
Park and Shin (2023)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Intersectional CDA is linked to the media material and interpretation; reflexive researcher positioning is not reported.
Zhang and Caple (2021)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	The comparative corpus, corpus assisted procedures and interpretation are transparent; reflexivity is not reported.
Latififard et al. (2024)	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N/A	N/A	Y	Inductive content analysis, sources and intercoder procedure are reported; qualitative philosophical positioning and reflexivity are not explicit.

Note. The JBI checklist was applied to assess the transparency and coherence of reported qualitative and interpretive media-text research. It was not used to generate a numerical quality score or to exclude studies. Y = yes; N = no; U = unclear; N/A = not applicable. An N rating indicates that the relevant feature was not adequately reported in the published article; it does not necessarily indicate that the practice was absent from the original research process. Items 8 and 9 were marked N/A when a study analysed published news, broadcast, or publicly accessible platform material rather than participant accounts or other human-subject data)
*Appraisal item definitions. Q1: Congruity between stated philosophical perspective and methodology. Q2: Congruity between methodology and research question/objectives. Q3: Congruity between methodology and data collection. Q4: Congruity between methodology and data representation/analysis. Q5: Congruity between methodology and interpretation. Q6: Researcher culturally or theoretically located. Q7: Influence of researcher on research, and vice versa, addressed. Q8: Participant voices adequately represented. Q9: Ethical approval/evidence of ethical conduct. Q10: Conclusions flow from analysis or interpretation of data
Source: Authors' own work

The appraisal indicated that the included studies generally reported coherent links between their research questions, media materials, analytical procedures, and interpretations. However, the philosophical position was unclear in six studies, and researcher positioning and reflexivity were not adequately reported in the included articles. These reporting limitations do not invalidate the studies, but they limit the extent to which the interpretive process can be independently assessed. Accordingly, the synthesis identifies recurring analytical patterns across the reviewed corpus rather than estimating the prevalence or strength of particular forms of nationalism across sports-media systems.

Screening and Coding Reliability

Title and abstract screening, full-text eligibility assessment, data extraction, coding, and methodological quality appraisal were initially conducted by the first reviewer. To strengthen the reliability of the final review decisions, a second researcher independently reviewed the eligibility decisions for all 22 reports assessed in full text, including the 14 included studies and the eight reports excluded after full-text assessment. The second researcher also checked the coding and JBI appraisal of the 14 included studies against the coding manual and appraisal criteria. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus. Throughout the review, prespecified eligibility criteria, a structured coding manual, and a screening-decision log were used to support consistency and transparency. Although the initial title and abstract screening was conducted by one reviewer, independent verification at the full-text, coding, and appraisal stages reduced the risk of selection and interpretive bias. It did not eliminate that risk completely.

Coding and Analytical Approach

The final corpus was synthesised using structured thematic coding. The coding framework was applied to the 14 studies. The aim was interpretive comparison across studies rather than statistical pooling.

The coding manual specified six dimensions: (1) event or subject; (2) media material; (3) analytical approach; (4) country or region; (5) theoretical perspective; and (6) national-meaning construct and representational strategy. For each dimension, the manual provided operational definitions and classification rules.

Following the initial coding, all coding decisions were reviewed against the original publication record and the corresponding study summary. The researcher compared coding decisions across cases to ensure that terms such as sports nationalism, nationalist discourse, national identity, cultural nationalism, and cosmopolitan nationalism were applied consistently and were not treated as interchangeable.

For example, Kim (2024) traces changing constructions of sports nationalism in Korean World Cup reporting, linking

national achievement to sacrifice and meritocratic aspiration. Mauro (2025) examines how English and Italian media articulate race and national identity during Euro 2020, with particular attention to racialised belonging. These studies show how sports media discourse connects national meaning to distinct historical, cultural, and political conditions.

All coding results are recorded in a structured coding table. Table 4 summarises the media material, analytical approach, and substantive contribution of the 14 included studies.

RESULTS

This study systematically reviews and thematically analyses 14 peer-reviewed journal articles, organising the findings around the three research questions that guide this review. The analysis identifies how nationalism is defined and examined in sports reporting (RQ1), what narrative strategies media employ to convey nationalist themes (RQ2), and what characterises existing research in terms of theoretical perspectives, research subjects, and methodological approaches (RQ3). The following sections present the synthesised findings across the reviewed studies.

RQ1: Defining and Examining Nationalism in Sports Event Reporting

The 14 studies use related but analytically distinct concepts to examine mediated national meaning in sport. Some focus on sport nationalism and the symbolic connection between sporting achievement and the nation. Others examine national identity, national belonging, or national representation in relation to race, immigration, citizenship, gender, or disability. A smaller group considers national meaning in transnational media contexts, including cosmopolitan nationalism and representations of other nations. These concepts overlap because they all concern the relationship between sport, media representation, and the nation, but they address different dimensions of that relationship. Table 5 summarises these distinctions.

Several studies show that athletes and sport teams represent not only sporting achievements, but also national strength, values, and history. For example, Kim (2024), Yang and Lin (2023) and Ziaee et al. (2021) associate sports achievements with sacrifice, perseverance, national reputation and collective memory. In this way, athletic performance becomes part of a broader national story.

National identity is also examined through the boundaries of belonging. Studies by Mauro (2025), Choi (2023) and Park and Shin (2023) show that race, immigration, whiteness, gender and citizenship affect who can be accepted as national representatives. McCree (2022) also shows that media coverage of women's sport is influenced by gender and may affect the construction of sport nationalism.

Table 4
Summary of the journal articles reviewed

Author (Year)	Event/ Subject	Media Material and Method	Country/ Region	Theoretical Perspective	Representational Strategy	National-Meaning Construct	Key Finding
Kim (2024)	Korean national football team; FIFA World Cups	News articles; critical discourse analysis	South Korea	Sports nationalism; CDA	National traits, sacrifice, meritocratic achievement	Sports nationalism	Korean reporting links football to changing national identity and neoliberal merit.
Chen and Chiang (2023)	Tokyo 2020 Olympics	News-linked Facebook communication; discourse analysis	Taiwan	Performativity; sport nationalism	Athletes as proxy representatives; democratic distinction	Sport nationalism	Platform communication performs Taiwanese identity amid geopolitical tension.
Humayun (2023)	2017 ICC Champions Trophy final	641 sports-journalist tweets; textual analysis	Pakistan and India	Elias's habitus thesis	In-group/out-group comparison; journalistic style	National identity	Journalists' tweets construct contrasting national identities during cricket rivalry.
McCree (2022)	1979 World Netball Tournament	Local newspaper reports; qualitative content analysis	Trinidad and Tobago	Gendered sport nationalism	Gendered valuation and national representation	Sport nationalism	Press coverage connects women's netball with gendered forms of national recognition.
Mauro (2025)	UEFA Euro 2020	English and Italian media; critical discourse analysis	England and Italy	Race and racialisation	Inclusion, exclusion, and racialised belonging	National identity	Race remains central to mediated constructions of national belonging.
Zhang and Shi (2024)	Eileen Gu; Beijing 2022	Chinese and US media; frame analysis and CDA	China and United States	Framing; CDA	Competing national and ethnic roles	National identity	Media in both countries negotiates Gu's national identity through competing frames.

Table 4 (*continued*)

Author (Year)	Event/ Subject	Media Material and Method	Country/ Region	Theoretical Perspective	Representational Strategy	National-Meaning Construct	Key Finding
Latififard et al. (2024)	Kimia Alizadeh; Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games	Iranian state-owned media and public social-media posts; inductive content analysis	Iran	Media framing; national identity	Compatriot/ refugee categorisation; patriotic and gendered representation	National identity	Iranian media and public posts construct Alizadeh through competing national belonging and refugee frames.
Ziaee et al. (2021)	2018 FIFA World Cup; 2019 AFC Asian Cup	Iranian national and sport media; content analysis	Iran	National identity	Unity, determination, oppression, emotionality	National identity	Iranian football coverage reproduces national identity through political and historical references.
Kobayashi et al. (2023)	2019 Rugby World Cup	Japanese newspaper and public materials; CDA	Japan	Cosmopolitan nationalism	Conditional inclusion and "One Team" discourse	Cosmopolitan nationalism	Cosmopolitan imagery is incorporated into a renewed Japanese national narrative.
Choi (2023)	PyeongChang 2018 ice hockey	Canadian and Korean news coverage; critical discourse studies	South Korea and Canada	Transnationalism; critical multiculturalism	Migration, whiteness, and citizenship	Multicultural nationalism	News coverage uses naturalised athletes to negotiate national belonging and hierarchy.
Kramareva and Grix (2023)	1980 Moscow and 2014 Sochi ceremonies	UK and US media; documentary analysis	Russia, United Kingdom, United States	Soft power; strategic narratives	Othering and reciprocal national narratives	National identity	Western coverage helps reproduce reciprocal Russian–Western identities.
Yang and Lin (2023)	Paralympic champions on CCTV	Television coverage; textual analysis	China	Social model of disability; critical perspectives	National hero and self-reliance narratives	National identity	CCTV incorporates Paralympic champions into narratives of national reputation and citizenship.

Table 4 (*continued*)

Author (Year)	Event/ Subject	Media Material and Method	Country/ Region	Theoretical Perspective	Representational Strategy	National-Meaning Construct	Key Finding
Park and Shin (2023)	Sarah Murray; PyeongChang 2018	South Korean media; critical discourse analysis	South Korea	Olympic nationalism; gender; whiteness	Familial ties, hierarchy, and credibility	Olympic nationalism	Media representation reproduces national hierarchy, gendered authority, and whiteness.
Zhang and Caple (2021)	Li Na news coverage	Four English-language news outlets; corpus assisted discourse analysis	China, United Kingdom, Australia, United States	Discursive news values	Individualism/ collectivism and national responsibility	Nationalism	Chinese and international outlets position Li Na differently within competing sports systems.

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5
Conceptual distinctions in the reviewed literature

Construct	Main Analytical Focus	Relationship to Other Constructs	Illustrative Studies
Sport nationalism	The connection between athletes, sporting success, and events with national pride, reputation, values, or collective memory.	A form of nationalism expressed through sport and media representation.	Kim (2024); Yang and Lin (2023); McCree (2022); Ziaee et al. (2021).
National identity	Shared ideas about who "we" are as a national community.	Broader than sport's nationalism; sport becomes one setting in which national identity is articulated.	Zhang and Shi (2024); Chen and Chiang (2023); Ziaee et al. (2021).
National belonging and representation	The conditions under which people are accepted, questioned, or excluded as national representatives.	Focuses on boundaries of membership and often intersects with race, gender, citizenship, migration, and refugee status.	Mauro (2025); Latififard et al. (2024); Choi (2023); Park and Shin (2023).
Nationalist narratives and discourse	Media language, images, and storylines through which national meaning is communicated.	A communicative form that may express sport's nationalism, national identity, or contested belonging.	Humayun (2023); Kramareva and Grix (2023); Zhang and Caple (2021).
Cosmopolitan nationalism	National identification articulated alongside openness to transnational or multicultural identities.	Differs from exclusionary forms of national belonging, although inclusion may remain conditional.	Kobayashi et al. (2023).
Banal nationalism	Routine and often unremarked national cues in media communication.	Distinct from overt nationalist claims; retained as an analytical distinction rather than a dominant framework in the final corpus.	Not a principal framework in most included studies.

Source: Authors' own work

Some studies examine nationalism in transnational contexts. Zhang and Shi (2024), Kobayashi et al. (2023), and Kramareva and Grix (2023) show that national identity can be shaped through international comparison, cosmopolitan ideas, soft power competition, and the representation of other nations. These studies suggest that national meaning is not fixed. Instead, it changes through media representation and interaction across national borders.

RQ2: Narrative Strategies in Sports Coverage

Across the 14 reviewed studies, three recurring ways of linking sport to national meaning became apparent: heroic representation, binary opposition, and emotional mobilisation. These categories were developed by combining a predefined focus on representational strategy with an inductive comparison of the findings reported in each study. The categories were not mutually exclusive, and some studies supported more than one strategy.

Heroic representation was identified in seven studies: Kim (2024), Latififard et al. (2024), Yang and Lin (2023), Chen and Chiang (2023), McCree (2022), Zhang and Caple (2021), and Ziaee et al. (2021). This strategy portrays athletes or teams as symbols of national strength, moral value, sacrifice, achievement, or collective aspiration. Kim (2024) shows how Korean media linked football success with sacrifice and personal achievement. Ziaee et al. (2021) identify heroic comparisons, courage, unity, and determination in Iranian football reporting. Yang and Lin (2023) show how CCTV represented Paralympic champions as national heroes. In these studies, sporting achievement is linked to national identity, collective history, and national reputation.

Binary opposition was identified in seven studies: Mauro (2025), Zhang and Shi (2024), Latififard et al. (2024), Humayun (2023), Chen and Chiang (2023), Kramareva and Grix (2023), and Zhang and Caple (2021). This strategy constructs national identity through contrast with an external national, cultural, or geopolitical other. Examples include journalists' posts about India and Pakistan during cricket, Taiwanese online communication that distinguished Taiwan from China, Chinese and US coverage of Eileen Gu, Iranian media categorisation of Kimia Alizadeh, UK and US representations of Russian Olympic ceremonies, and English and Italian coverage of Euro 2020. These studies show how media texts may construct an "us" and "them" relationship through geopolitical comparison, race, citizenship, or contrasting sporting systems. However, this pattern should be understood in relation to the specific contexts examined and not as a universal feature of sports-media coverage.

Emotional mobilisation was identified in eight studies: Kim (2024), Zhang and Shi (2024), Latififard et al. (2024), Yang and Lin (2023), Chen and Chiang (2023), Humayun (2023), McCree (2022), and Ziaee et al. (2021). It refers to the use of pride, unity, loss, recognition, or other affective appeals to connect sport with national meaning.

Chen and Chiang (2023) show how Olympic success generated collective joy and online mobilisation in Taiwan. Humayun (2023) identifies pride and jubilation in sports journalists' posts during the India-Pakistan cricket final. Latififard et al. (2024) show how media and public communication constructed affective responses to Kimia Alizadeh's Olympic match. Such appeals may also intersect with gender, race, refugee status, and contested forms of national belonging.

The three strategies were not expressed in the same way across all studies. They depend on sports events, media content types, and national background. Most of the published studies focus on a single case or a small number of media texts. Therefore, these research results are more suitable for comparing specific contexts than making generalisations about the universality of sports media.

RQ3: Theoretical Perspectives, Research Subjects, and Methodological Approaches

Critical discourse analysis, textual analysis, and qualitative content analysis are the main methods used in the reviewed studies. The studies draw on different perspectives, including sport nationalism, national identity, transnationalism, critical multiculturalism, race and racialisation, discursive news values, the social model of disability, and soft power. Although these approaches examine different issues, they are complementary. Studies of media language and narratives examine how national meaning is constructed, while studies of identity, belonging, race, gender, and citizenship examine who is included or excluded from that meaning. Transnational approaches examine how national meaning is shaped through international comparison. This diversity allows the field to address different aspects of nationalism in sports media, but it also makes direct comparisons between studies more difficult.

The studies cover East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America. The Olympic Games, the World Cup and other international competitions are common research backgrounds. Some studies have also examined historical news reports, domestic television, and news about individual athletes. This shows that major sports events remain an important research focus, and researchers are also investigating a wider range of media and national contexts.

Most studies clearly describe their media data, analytical methods, and main findings. However, researchers rarely explain their own position or discuss reflexivity. Some studies have not clearly stated their qualitative research perspectives. Therefore, the existing evidence helps to understand how sports media presents the meaning at the national level, but cannot explain how the audience receives the information, what impact the information will have, and the prevalence of these models among different countries.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that nationalism in sports reporting is neither uniform nor limited to overt patriotic celebration. Its form varies according to the event, media outlet, and social and political context of reporting. Sport nationalism may provide shared emotional experiences and symbolic resources for collective identification, particularly through representations of heroic athletes and national achievement (Kim, 2024; Yang & Lin, 2023; Ziaee et al., 2021). At the same time, media representations of nationalism may be exclusive or hierarchical. Race, gender, immigration, citizenship, and refugee status can shape who is recognised as a legitimate member or representative of the national community (Choi, 2023; Latififard et al., 2024; Mauro, 2025; Park & Shin, 2023).

The studies also suggest that media institutions and reporting practices can shape how national meaning is presented. These differences should be understood in their specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, rather than as fixed characteristics of particular media systems.

The studies use different theoretical approaches because they examine different aspects of nationalism in sports media. Discourse-based approaches show how national meaning is constructed through media language and narratives. Studies of identity, race, gender, citizenship, and migration show how these meanings may include or exclude particular groups. Transnational perspectives further indicate that national meaning may be shaped through comparison with other countries. These approaches are complementary, but few studies connect media representation with journalistic practice, platform circulation, and audience response.

Against this contextual variation, the three narrative strategies identified in the review should be understood as analytical patterns within a small and heterogeneous corpus, rather than as stable features of sports-media reporting across settings. The available evidence does not establish that heroic representation, binary opposition, or emotional mobilisation are equally prevalent across national contexts, sports, or media systems. This caution is particularly important because several studies provide limited information about researcher positioning and because the corpus consists primarily of case-based analyses of specific events and media texts.

The review identifies three priorities for future research. First, few studies examine audience responses; therefore, there is limited understanding of how audiences interpret, accept, question, or share mediated national meanings. Second, comparative research across countries and media environments remains limited. Third, further research is needed on how news content, user participation, and algorithmic visibility interact on digital platforms.

Future studies could combine textual analysis with audience-centred methods, including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and experiments.

Comparative research across platforms and national contexts could also provide a fuller understanding of how media institutions, platform features, and sporting events shape the representation and reception of nationalism-related narratives.

CONCLUSION

The 14 articles reviewed show that sports media reporting can give national significance to athletes, competitive performance, and competitions. Heroic narratives, international comparisons, emotional language, and debates about belonging are common means of achieving this goal. Issues such as race, gender, immigration, citizenship, disability, and geopolitics are not marginal factors in these processes. In many studies, these issues affect who is considered a national representative and how the nation is represented.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Several characteristics of this review limit the scope of its conclusions. The scope of retrieval is limited to the Web of Science and ScienceDirect. Relevant literature indexed only in other databases may therefore not have been retrieved. This database boundary may particularly limit the retrieval of studies indexed exclusively in specialist sport, communication, or regional sources. In addition, the English-language requirements and the publication time limit from January 2021 to April 2025 also exclude studies published in other languages or at different times, including studies that may provide different historical or geographical perspectives.

A total of 14 articles were finally included. There are significant differences in these studies in terms of location, sports events, media materials, time periods, and research methods. Therefore, the comparison is explanatory rather than statistical. Initial title and abstract screening were undertaken by one reviewer. Therefore, some risk of selection bias remains despite the independent verification of full-text eligibility, coding, and appraisal decisions. The two-concept search strategy broadened the retrieval process, but relevant studies may still have used terms that were not included in the search.

The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) based appraisal strengthens transparency about the included evidence but does not remove the limitations associated with reporting differences and interpretive, case-based research. These constraints mean that the review offers a structured and context sensitive synthesis rather than definitive claims about global sports media systems.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The reviewed studies suggest that sports-media reporting can connect athletes and sporting events with national values, while also shaping the boundaries of national belonging. This conclusion is based on case-specific analyses of media texts. The reviewed evidence does not establish how audiences respond to these representations or

whether particular professional interventions can change them.

On the basis of these findings, journalists and media practitioners could consider how opponents, migrants, women athletes, racialised athletes, and athletes with disabilities are represented in sports reporting. Sport-management institutions and policymakers could also encourage communication around major events that does not treat athletes or competitive success as simple proof of national superiority. These are cautious normative considerations arising from the synthesis, rather than recommendations directly tested by the studies included in this review.

Future research could combine media content analysis with interviews, surveys, focus groups, experiments, or digital-trace data to examine how audiences interpret and respond to mediated national meaning. Comparative research across countries, platforms, and event types could also help distinguish patterns linked to particular cases from those that may be found across different settings.

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