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Leisure, Social Justice, Research, Praxis and Scholarship: A Bibliometric Analysis and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Issues of social justice have become increasingly important as an area for academic research in recent decades. This has also been the case for researchers operating in disciplines such as leisure. The purpose of this bibliometric analysis is to review, analyze and synthesize the current state of research focusing on issues of social justice in leisure studies and, in doing so, draw together a more coherent understanding of the different strands of social justice research that are currently being undertaken. Through a quantitative process of bibliometric analysis, emergent and existing trends in research patterns, authorship, and article or journal performance were analyzed to generate greater understanding of the emergence, development and intellectual structure of social justice research over time within leisure studies. A quantitative process of bibliometric analysis was therefore undertaken to generate and analyze a nascent dataset of peer reviewed journal articles that have examined issues of social justice within leisure studies. Analysis of this dataset provided opportunities to outline recommendations for future research directions and research agendas linked to issues of social justice and leisure. This includes recommendations for expansion of research agendas within leisure studies in areas linked to: (a) ‘race’, gender and human rights; (b) a ‘broadening’ of social justice research into other socio-cultural areas of investigation; (c) initiation and/or expansion of research agendas relating to the global south; (d) business, organisations and social justice within the leisure industry; (e) issues of policy, politics and social justice in leisure.

Keywords Leisure · Social justice · Inequity · Inequality · Power · Bibliometric analysis

1 Introduction

Discourses surrounding issues of social justice have become increasingly embedded within the fabric of social and cultural life in many Western neoliberal countries in recent decades. Such movements have been particularly evident in North America and in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK). For example, in the UK, the *Centre for Social Justice* was established in 2004 as an independent political think tank to advise, lobby and influence government on key issues linked to social justice and to work with other organisations, charities and institutions to challenge social injustices, inequities and inequalities for the benefit of vulnerable people, groups and communities (Antrobus et al., 2009). Campaigns such as the *Black Lives Matter* movement – which emerged initially in America in 2013 as an online vehicle to advocate social justice relating to issues of ‘race’ and racism – have also raised public awareness towards the importance of social justice discourse within contemporary social and cultural spheres (Langford & Speight, 2015). Starting in 2009, the United Nations (UN) instituted the 20th February to be observed annually as the *World Day of Social Justice* to encourage global consideration of issues linked to inequality, inequity, exclusion, poverty and other key social justice issues (United Nations, n.d.). Likewise, beyond national and international political and policy settings, some authors have argued that many businesses and organisations are increasingly engaging with discourses, rhetoric and/or practices relating to issues of social justice, whether through increasing concerns with notions of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), or through interrelated concepts of Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or Corporate Social Justice (CSJ) within underlying business practices (e.g. Puaschunder, 2021; Zheng, 2020). In this respect, discourses of social justice have become increasingly important political, social and cultural issues within many western neoliberal countries in recent decades.

During this same period, there have been interrelated trends towards an increase in social justice research within leisure studies (Riches et al., 2017; Trussell & Jeanes, 2021). For example, the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Leisure, and Social Justice* brought together contributions from 71 authors across the 41 chapters that comprise this edited collection, focusing on a range of social justice issues within sport and leisure (see Lawrence et al., 2024a). There has also been recent emergent academic discourse relating to issues of sport, leisure and social justice in the global south (e.g. Giulio Santos de Farias et al., 2024; Valiente, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Some have even described issues of social justice as “the defining cultural debate of the immediate post-COVID-19 moment” (Lawrence et al., 2024b, p. 3). Whilst noting the increasing importance of social and cultural discourses surrounding social justice, the same authors also emphasize that issues and challenges remain prevalent:

...we are writing against a sombre socio-historical moment: despite the implementation of legal frameworks such as Title IX in the United States and the Equality Act 2010 in the United Kingdom, egregious violations of the rights of individuals persist. The recent reversal of *Roe vs. Wade* by the US Supreme Court in June 2022 and the UK Conservative government’s reluctance to reject

the option of exiting the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) for the purpose of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda are but two examples of such violations. Thus, it is imperative for scholars of sport and leisure to undertake further critical explorations of the role that sport and leisure play in contemporary cultures, in the hope we might tip the balance in favour of those working for human dignity, egalitarianism, and a compassionate humanist politics (Lawrence et al., 2024b, p. 4).

Within the context of ongoing social and political changes, developments, power imbalances and power struggles that continue to see the marginalisation of certain social groups within different areas of social and cultural life, there remains both need and scope to examine the current state of knowledge relating to issues of social justice and leisure.

In this paper, the aim is to draw together a more coherent understanding of the different strands of social justice research that are currently being undertaken within leisure studies. Given perceptions among some commentators that issues of social justice have taken ever greater importance in the post-COVID period as well as the variation that exists among different researchers on the underpinning theoretical conceptualisations that social justice approaches can and should entail (Lawrence et al., 2024b), it is both opportune and important to take stock, examine and analyze current intellectual structures and knowledge patterns within this area. Through such processes, there is scope to bring an element of 'structure' to understanding the status of research in this field. In doing so, existing areas and clusters of research can potentially be identified. Whilst existing research areas may require further investigation, understanding the different strands of existing social justice research might provide impetus to identify and, potentially, open additional opportunities and avenues of investigation for future research, particularly in those areas where there is, at present, a relative lacuna in the literature. Such approaches therefore have potential to identify prospective future research areas relating to issues of injustice, inequity and inequality among those people and groups that experience fewer power chances, whose day-to-day experiences are not currently examined and whose voices are yet to be heard.

To underpin this investigation, the following research questions are addressed in the paper: (1) What is the current state of research relating to issues of social justice within leisure studies? (2) What potential future research agendas may be needed to facilitate the continued empirical and theoretical development of social justice research and scholarship in leisure studies? According to Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020, p. 1227), systematic reviews are "among the most useful vehicles for advancing knowledge and furthering research". The findings generated from undertaking a systematic review in the form of a bibliometric analysis of a nascent dataset of published peer-review articles in response to these two research questions provides a basis to better understand the current structure of research and knowledge patterns relating to issues of social justice within leisure studies and determine potential avenues for further research. The development of proposed future research agendas may help to provide a potential 'route map' for those looking to navigate the current complexity of different strands of existing social justice research and find prospective avenues to contribute to continued critical development and expansion of research in such areas.

2 Literature Review

Writing at the turn of the millennium, Allison (2000, p. 2) indicated that issues of social justice had “only been tangentially addressed in the leisure literature”. Allison (2000) advocated the potential use of emerging conceptualizations of social justice to better examine and understand the experiences of people and groups that were marginalized or that experienced issues of exclusion or injustice on individual, social or institutional levels. Howell and McNamee (2003, p. 17) likewise offered a critique on the “problematic notion of social justice for leisure professionals in public organizations”, outlining issues and challenges linked to notions of equity and inequity, particularly regarding contemporary resource allocation considerations, policy formulation and decision making for practitioners within the leisure industry regarding service provision. Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing research undertaken on issues of social justice within leisure studies. Long et al. (2017) emphasized that leisure scholars have regularly examined issues and power struggles that align with matters of social justice. This has included, they argue, examination of issues linked to relative levels of access to sport and leisure activities, participation or non-participation trends, the relative marginalization or underrepresentation of some social groups within different leisure activities, alongside the social and political processes and power-struggles that underpin such issues. Researchers within leisure studies have, for example, examined such issues in relation to concepts of gender and sexuality (e.g. Parry, 2014; Zarezadeh & Rastegar, 2023), ‘race’ and/or ethnicity (e.g. Floyd, 2014; Love et al., 2024; Mukherjee, 2024a), migration and/or the experiences of refugees (e.g. De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2022; Doidge, 2024), disability (e.g. Condie, 2021; Devine, 2021; Kuppan, 2017), health and therapy (e.g. Dattilo, 2024), social class (e.g. Gemar, 2024), the environment (e.g. Mullenbach & Baker, 2020), the experiences of families and young people (e.g. Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014), or various intersections surrounding such issues (e.g. Son, 2018), among other key social justice considerations. Additionally, some researchers increasingly seek to examine the interrelated nature of leisure and human rights with emergent debates surrounding the extent to which such issues potentially overlap with concepts and understandings of social justice (e.g. Byrne & Ludvigsen, 2024; Veal, 2015, 2023; Veal & Sivan, 2024). Research across the overlapping intersections of leisure, human rights and social justice has likewise examined a range of issues such as disability (Evans et al., 2017), the experiences of children (e.g. Chambers et al., 2024; Donnelly, 2024; Mukherjee, 2024b) and various intersections such as gender and age (Cervin et al., 2017) and the experiences of children with disabilities (Byrne, 2024), among other key issues that encompass an increasingly broad terrain of practice in this area.

Despite an increase in research undertaken from a social justice perspective, it is important to appreciate that there is no common agreed definition of social justice as a concept or the manner in which social justice principles can or ‘should’ be implemented. The field and discipline that constitutes areas linked to social justice is therefore broad and complex. Whilst many researchers advocate the importance of undertaking social justice research, some have also been critical that the concept of social justice “has become an increasingly vague and woolly term” in recent decades (Lawrence et al., 2024b, p. 4) or

that “leisure and sport scholars have sometimes played fast and loose with notions of social justice, using it, and similar terms, to justify positions without proper consideration of what is entailed” (Wetherley et al., 2017, p. 15). In part, such issues reflect the complex range of underpinning conceptualizations of social justice, which may adopt utilitarian, equal opportunities, rights-based, distributive, or compensatory approaches to issues of social justice, among other approaches (Wetherley et al., 2017). It is interesting to pose the question as to whether there may also be instances where the label of social justice is subsequently attached by others to research that examines issues of exclusion, inequity and inequality, when application of a social justice label on a theoretical and conceptual level was not perhaps the direct intention of the original author at the time of writing.

Key theorists who openly seek to adopt social justice principles likewise advocate different conceptualizations and terminologies that underpin their approaches to such issues. Some of the key theorists that have underpinned their work with principles of social justice include Sen (2009), Rawls (1971, 1999, 2001), Sandel (2010) and Miller (1976, 2005, 2013). Whilst a full review of such theories and concepts is beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to provide at least an indication of some of the key tenets that often underpin approaches to issues of social justice.¹ Wetherley et al. (2017, p. 18) suggest that the work of John Rawls in particular has “dominated subsequent discussion of social justice”. The approach advocated by Rawls (1971, 1999, 2001) builds upon a series of interrelated and hierarchical principles of: (a) equal basic liberties for all; (b) equality of opportunities within those social systems that contain social and/or economic inequalities; and (c) the difference principle, which indicates that the poorest in society may indeed experience fewer opportunities, but only to the extent that the least advantaged are as wealthy as possible and experience the greatest benefits possible within the overall social distributive system. Related conceptualisations of justice as ‘fairness’ from authors such as Miller (2005) draw upon similar themes when discussing issues linked to equal citizenship, the social minimum, equality of opportunity and fair distribution. Within systems of fair and equal opportunity and fair distribution, provided that basic and essential needs are met for those who are less advantaged within the social hierarchy, it is important to appreciate that some inequalities may therefore be considered ‘just’ linked to notions of meritocracy, effort and choice on the part of the individual (Miller, 2005). In their review of various conceptualizations of social justice, Wetherley et al. (2017, p. 19) offer a summary indicating that “a just society is one in which: people are free to live as they choose; people have equal opportunities to compete for advantage, through attaining positions that confer unequal rewards; and unequal rewards are permitted only to the extent that they comply with a principle of fair distribution”. Whilst not exhaustive, such principles provide a useful starting point to indicate some of the key conceptual and theoretical tenets that often underpin issues of social justice.

Although ongoing theoretical debates surrounding issues of social justice are important, another underlying issue that some researchers consider to be ‘diluting’ social justice research within leisure studies is the extent to which researchers engage in action,

¹ See Wetherley et al. (2017) for a more detailed discussion of key underpinning principles, theories and conceptualisations of social justice within sport and leisure studies, including an outline and critique of some of the key theoretical approaches to issues of social justice advocated by authors such as Amartya Sen, John Rawls, Michael Sandel and David Miller.

intervention and praxis. Stewart (2014) has argued that there have essentially been three underpinning approaches among academics that have undertaken social justice research within leisure studies: descriptive, explanatory or transformative. Through this framework, Stewart (2014) further opened the debate surrounding the extent to which social justice researchers should seek to not only describe and explain issues of injustice, inequity and inequality, but to also fundamentally and explicitly seek to initiate social and cultural change and transformation through forms of praxis as had often been an evident underpinning aim, he argued, in critical theories research.

Floyd (2014) has acknowledged that many academics have often been trained to undertake research, but to then leave issues of action and praxis to policymakers and others. The tendency to identify trends or issues and engage in theoretical or conceptual discussion on such matters is indicative of more descriptive or explanatory approaches to research (Stewart, 2014). There has however been criticism from some academics regarding descriptive or explanatory research, which has at times been labelled as more akin to social justice theorizing and scholarship (Lawrence et al., 2024b). Floyd (2014, p. 385) has argued, for example, that “researchers working in the social justice arena must be willing to take intentional and unequivocal positions that place them well beyond the line separating research and activism and advocacy”. Such an approach is consistent with the calls of others for social justice researchers to engage in a ‘politics of hope’, to seek social change and action against social injustices through forms of activism and praxis as a fundamental and integral aspect of their research process, practice and agenda (e.g. Parry et al., 2013; Parry, 2014; Riches et al., 2017; Trussell and Jeanes, 2021). The underpinning aim according to such authors is for social justice research to be more transformative in approach, seeking to not only understand and explain inequalities and longstanding trends that have seen some social groups marginalized from sport and leisure activities, but to also advocate and take action for social change towards greater equity, fairness and inclusion. The challenge with more transformative approaches to research is the risk that underpinning ideologically-driven approaches on how the world ‘ought to be’ might bias aspects of the research process from the outset. Some researchers argue that there is an underpinning need for academics to seek to develop more detached understandings of social processes, power-relationships and interdependencies, if more reality-congruent changes to policy and practice are to be developed and implemented (e.g. Mierzwinski et al., 2019). Whether it is the role of researchers and academics to seek and initiate social change through more transformative research approaches and a ‘politics of hope’ or whether the role of researchers and academics should be more ‘detached’ – perhaps more explanatory or descriptive in approach – remains a point of debate within academic circles.

Lawrence et al. (2024b) acknowledge the challenges that academic researchers can experience in striving for more transformative approaches to issues of social justice, particularly within many modern neoliberal university systems. The publish-or-perish phenomenon and ever-increasing importance of research metrics and frameworks within academia can, at times, lead to researchers striving for regular “easy win” publications (Lawrence et al., 2024b, p. 12). This contradicts the type of approach that is often required to undertake effective social justice research, which requires a commitment to ongoing engagement and involvement with relevant marginalized communities, including the need to develop such relationships and networks over more extended periods of time (Floyd,

2014; Lawrence et al., 2024b). There can also be a level of scepticism within academia towards those who embrace notions of praxis and activism. Lawrence et al. (2024b, p. 12) state, for example, that “we know personally of colleagues who have received feedback on publications that social justice writing reads ‘too much’ like political activism”. Such research has not always been considered desirable within academia, with some authors recounting warnings being provided to early career researchers not to engage in such forms of research, as this might stifle or jeopardize their future careers (Trussell and Jeanes, 2021). Some researchers can likewise experience the challenges of praxis in seeking to transform research activism into real-life social and political change. Pringle and Falcous (2018) even posited the notion that researchers operating within leisure studies may need to engage with different philosophical approaches and underlying epistemologies, perhaps including mixed methods approaches or more quantitatively driven forms of research, in the hope that the production of large-scale statistically based findings may be more widely ‘accepted’ by governments and policymakers at local, regional, national and/or international levels as well as the general public. This, they argue, may provide greater opportunities for researchers to induce broader and more widespread social, cultural and political impact and change within key social justice areas.

Notwithstanding the challenges that can be involved in undertaking more transformative forms of research, one of the key traditional tenets of social justice has been the underpinning concept and intention to induce social change through engaging in a ‘politics of hope’ (Parry et al., 2013; Parry, 2014; Riches et al., 2017; Trussell and Jeanes, 2021). Wetherley et al. (2017) argue that areas of sport and leisure are fundamentally linked to the broader societies in which they operate, and vice versa. As such, they suggest that issues of social justice within society are integral to leisure and sport. They likewise argue that developments in sport and leisure – both of which are long contested areas of resistance and power struggles surrounding opportunities for greater equity and inclusion for the members of different marginalized social groups – have the potential to facilitate trends towards greater social justice within society. They argue that:

If sport and leisure are to play a part in reducing marginalisation and promoting social inclusion the principles of social justice need to be confronted. In evaluating the relationship between sport, leisure and social justice we need to attend to a series of questions: to what extent sport and leisure are ‘virtuous’ and therefore capable of promoting justice; what balance there might be between positive and negative aspects of sport and other elements of leisure; what transference there is between sport/leisure and ‘society’; and what the distributional consequences might be. That will allow social justice to be part of a manifesto for change in leisure and sport, removing barriers and providing fair access (for all), and at the same time offer a paradigmatic lens through which the unfair distribution of resources can be acknowledged, accounted for and addressed (Wetherley et al., 2017, p. 26).

Any such research agenda takes place within a contested arena of social and political power struggles and power imbalances. There are sizeable challenges for academics and researchers who are seeking to examine issues of social justice within and across those areas of leisure and society that have traditionally evidenced instances of inequity and

inequality. Whether research conducted in this area is currently more descriptive, explanatory or transformative in nature (Stewart, 2014), there remains scope, particularly in the post-COVID era, to examine the current state of social justice research within leisure studies, more particularly with a view to outlining possible opportunities and directions for potential future research. To address the research questions stated at the beginning of the paper, this process will therefore be undertaken through bibliometric analysis of a nascent dataset of existing peer-reviewed social justice research within leisure studies, as outlined in the following methods section.

3 Methods

Through a quantitative bibliometric analysis, the aim is to discover emergent and/or existing trends in research patterns, authorship, and article or journal performance (Coombes & Nicholson, 2013; Mathew et al., 2024), with a view to generating greater in-depth understanding of the development and intellectual structure of social justice research over time within leisure studies. The following methods are therefore grounded in bibliometrics. Such methods encompass a set of techniques that can be used to undertake large-scale quantitative statistical analysis of bibliographic data to analyze and evaluate interrelationships within and across research publications based on analysis of research constituents (such as topics, keywords, authors, academic institutions) and often encompassing citation/co-citation analyses (Donthu et al., 2021). Such analyses often focus on peer-review journal articles. To address the first research question that was posed in the introduction to this study involving the generation of an appropriate dataset and the presentation of resultant analyses, the following four steps of the *Bibliometric Analysis Procedure and Best Practice Guidelines* advocated by Donthu et al. (2021) were deployed as an underpinning protocol. The adoption of a formal set of bibliometric procedures and protocols is likewise important to provide a framework to strive for greater rigor in the research process (Donthu et al., 2021).

3.1 Step 1: Define the Aims and Scope of the Bibliometric Study

The aim of this study is to draw together a more coherent understanding of the different strands of social justice research that have been undertaken within leisure studies. This will provide an opportunity – based on bibliometric analysis – to outline parameters for future research directions and agendas linked to issues of social justice and leisure. In doing so, the intention is to focus the discussion on those authors that identify their own research to be underpinned by social justice principles and approaches. The following research design and search terms proceeded on this basis. As noted in the following limitations section, focusing on those authors who explicitly identify their research to have a social justice angle – as identified within the title, abstract or keywords of the article – may not incorporate other articles that have examined issues, inequalities, inequities and power struggles within areas that are often identified as requiring social justice interventions, if social justice principles have not been formally adopted by the author(s). This reflects the underpinning aim of this bibliometric review to focus on those researchers

who explicitly adopt social justice principles and frameworks within their investigations, rather than ascribing such principles on a post-hoc basis to research undertaken by others.

3.2 Step 2: Choose the Techniques for Bibliometric Analysis

To develop graphical mappings of generated bibliographic data, the VOS viewer application (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010) was used to undertake various analyses. Distribution frequency analyses were undertaken to examine: (a) publication dates; (b) geographical country-based publication frequencies; (c) author publication frequencies; and (d) journal publication frequencies and metrics. Through use of the VOS viewer application, visualizations are also presented of: (a) co-occurrence of all keywords analysis; and (b) co-occurrence of article textual analysis. The use of analytical techniques such as frequency analyses and co-occurrence analyses provides a basis to critically evaluate the bibliometric dataset generated within this study.

3.3 Step 3: Collect Data for Bibliometric Analysis

As previously indicated, the development of search terms proceeded in-line with the aims of this investigation to review those items of research that are identified directly by their own author(s) as adopting an explicit social justice angle among authors that define their research as having a distinct leisure focus. A search using the Elsevier Scopus academic database was undertaken. Following some experimentation with search strings, the final search was undertaken on the 16th August 2024 with the search terms 'leisure*' AND 'social justice*' in the ARTICLE TITLE, ABSTRACT, KEYWORDS of the publication. Given that authors select the wording of their article titles, abstracts and keywords, the use of these search terms within these search fields met the requirements of the research questions posed in the introduction to this paper. In particular, this search framework provided a means to examine the current state of knowledge structures and patterns relating to issues of social justice among authors that self-define a specific and distinct leisure studies focus to their work.

The database was searched across the period from 1970 (the earliest period of records that are encapsulated within Scopus) up to the end of December 2023, marking the end of the preceding calendar year at the point that the search was being undertaken. This latter end point was implemented to facilitate a period of leeway for records of publications and citations to have been captured and added to the Scopus database post-publication from the preceding calendar year, given the natural delay that can occur in article records gradually being added to the database (Coombes, 2024). Whilst there was no predetermined restriction on how far back in time this search would span, it subsequently transpired that the earliest returned article relating to issues of leisure and social justice using the search strings above was from 1993. Accompanying restrictions were also attached that only journal articles would be incorporated within the final dataset – consistent with typical practice in undertaking processes of bibliometric analysis – and to draw article returns from the Scopus categories of BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTING subject areas, which incorporate those journals that are linked primarily to the areas of leisure, hospitality and tourism. This search revealed 116 journal articles from across the period 1993 to 2023 that hence formed the final dataset for this study.

3.4 Step 4: Run the Bibliometric Analysis and Report the Findings

The dataset generated from Scopus was then exported to a Microsoft Excel worksheet, which provided opportunity to further manually screen the dataset for any duplicate or irrelevant articles, before running relevant bibliometric analyses. The findings that emerged from this bibliometric analysis are presented in the following Results and Discussion section. Following analysis and evaluation, these findings provide a basis to outline potential future research directions and future research agendas linked to issues of social justice within leisure studies, thereby addressing the second research question posed at the outset of this paper.

3.5 Limitations

Prior to outlining the findings of this investigation, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this bibliometric analysis. Given that Scopus is continuously updated with new articles, literature and research, the dataset generated as part of this investigation constitutes a ‘snapshot’ of articles in the database at the point that data collection took place (Coombes, 2024; Valenzuela-Fernandez et al., 2020). Only journal articles were collected within the dataset because peer-review items are considered to be at the forefront of research (Coombes & Nicholson, 2013). In-line with typical protocols for undertaking bibliometric analysis (Donthu et al., 2021), the dataset does not therefore include other items such as textbooks or book chapters that may have examined issues of social justice in leisure. The formulation of search strings can also lead to limitations, as the use of alternative keywords could potentially have altered the composition of the dataset (Mathew et al., 2024). For example, the following analysis focuses specifically on leisure. This is not intended to overlook the fact that areas such as sport, tourism and events can at times be interrelated with leisure studies, nor is this to suggest that such areas should be examined in isolation, given potential practical, empirical and theoretical overlap between such areas. As noted in Sect. 3.3, it is however intended that the following results provide an important focused and in-depth ‘snapshot’ understanding of the current state of knowledge relating to issues of social justice among those authors that primarily identify their research to have a specific and distinct leisure studies focus. As with any bibliometric analysis, the selection of different search terms could potentially have altered the results, but also potentially the underlying focus of the investigation.

The methodological approach that was adopted within this paper – including the processes that were followed and the search criteria that were implemented to construct the final nascent dataset of literature – has been outlined in the preceding sections. As with any bibliometric analysis, there is no claim that the following review would (or could) somehow ever be ‘exhaustive’ given the limitations that are inherently involved when undertaking such bibliometric processes. Linked to previous limitations outlined above, it is worth noting that there may be other interrelated disciplines and domains such as the socio-legal profession, for example, in which authors engage in aspects of scholarship that encompass areas of overlap to leisure, social justice and/or human rights (e.g. Patel, 2015, 2025). Others may likewise argue that there are examples of research that examine ‘social justice’ issues, but where this has not been stated explicitly by the author. The

question within this context, is whether those authors would identify their own approach as being based upon processes of social justice, as indicated on a theoretical or conceptual level, or whether such perceptions are subsequently being ‘imposed’ by others on their research, as discussed above. The protocols adopted within this paper are consistent with underpinning methodological approaches and techniques (e.g. Donthu et al., 2021) that strive to foster and enhance rigor in the bibliometric review process. In this instance, the processes and protocols implemented above provided a framework to investigate the current state and structure of knowledge production relating to issues of social justice and leisure within peer review research among those authors that have self-identified their underpinning approach to incorporate a social justice approach within leisure contexts. It is towards the results and findings of this bibliometric analysis that consideration now turns.

4 Results

Figure 1 presents a line graph illustrating the distribution of the 116 journal articles that were published between 1993 and 2023. It is important to note that research into issues of social justice in leisure studies has been taking place since 1993. However, as Allison (2000) highlighted, there had been minimal research examining social justice issues in leisure by the turn of the millennium. In the period 1993–2007, there were only 11 research articles published within this dataset relating to issues of social justice. The subsequent growth in articles published since 2007 appears to clearly evidence an increasing interest in the field of leisure studies focusing on issues of social justice. Indeed, there has been publication of social justice research in leisure studies every year throughout the 16-year period between 2008 and 2023 inclusive, with a low point of 2 social justice articles published in 2008 and a high point of 12 social justice articles published in 2022. Across the period 2008–2023 inclusive, the

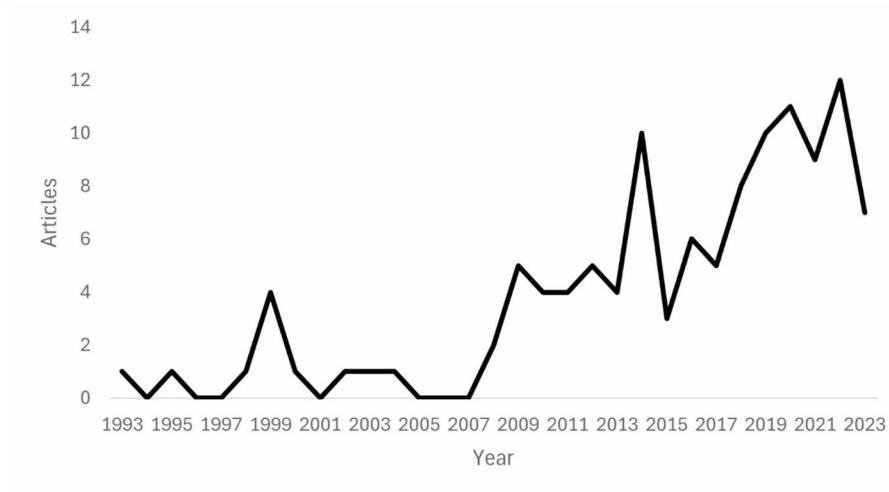


Fig. 1 Distribution of journal articles published between 1993–2023

growth in social justice research is evident in the visible trend in Fig. 1 towards a gradual increase in publications relating to social justice research across this period. Overall, 90.5% ($n=105$) of the 116 articles in this dataset were published in the period 2008–2023.

Across the period 1993–2023, articles relating to social justice and leisure have been published across 61 different academic journals. The top 12 journals that have been involved in publishing the 116 articles in the dataset are presented in Table 1. *Leisure Sciences* clearly leads with 18.1% ($n=21$) of articles examining issues of social justice in leisure. The *Journal of Leisure Research*, with 12.1% ($n=14$) of articles, also contains a sizeable proportion of published social justice articles. Between them, these two journals contain 30.2% ($n=35$) of published articles relating to issues of social justice and leisure in the period 1993–2023 within the dataset. Other journals that have published more than two social justice articles across this period include the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* with 6.0% ($n=7$), *Leisure Studies* with 5.2% ($n=6$) and *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education* with 4.3% ($n=5$) of published articles within the dataset. Analysis of the relative impact that publications within and across such journals have had in pushing forward academic research on social justice issues in leisure can be further developed through consideration of the time periods across which these publications took place.

Figure 2 presents a line graph showing the top five journals publishing the 116 journal articles in the dataset between 1993 and 2023. As the journal publishing the largest proportion of articles linked to issues of leisure and social justice, it is notable that all 21 articles in *Leisure Sciences* were published in the period 2013–2023 inclusive. This is the equivalent of an average 1.9 articles per annum across this 11-year period. The *Journal of Leisure Research*, as the second most prolific journal for research on leisure and social justice, has published 14 articles dating as far back as 2000, but with articles then continuing to appear within the journal on a somewhat sporadic basis across the period 2009–2021. This included a high point of 5 published social justice articles in the year 2009. Overall, this is the equivalent of 0.6 social justice articles published per annum across the 22-year period 2000–2021 inclusive. In

Table 1 Top 12 journals publishing social justice articles between 1993–2023

Rank	Journal Title	No. of Articles	Weight (%)
1	Leisure Sciences	21	18.1
2	Journal of Leisure Research	14	12.1
3	Journal of Park and Recreation Administration	7	6.0
4	Leisure Studies	6	5.2
5	SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education	5	4.3
6=	Annals of Leisure Research	2	1.7
6=	Disability and Society	2	1.7
6=	International Journal of Sport Policy	2	1.7
6=	Leisure/Loisir	2	1.7
6=	Loisir et Societe	2	1.7
6=	Pedagogia Social	2	1.7
6=	Social Science and Medicine	2	1.7
13–61	Other journals (each publishing one article)	49	42.2
	TOTAL	116	100

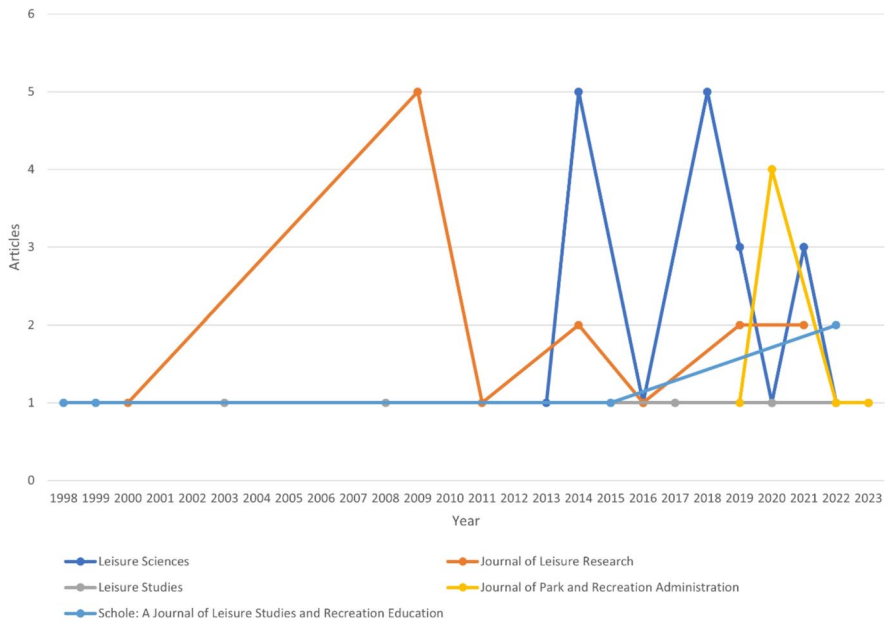


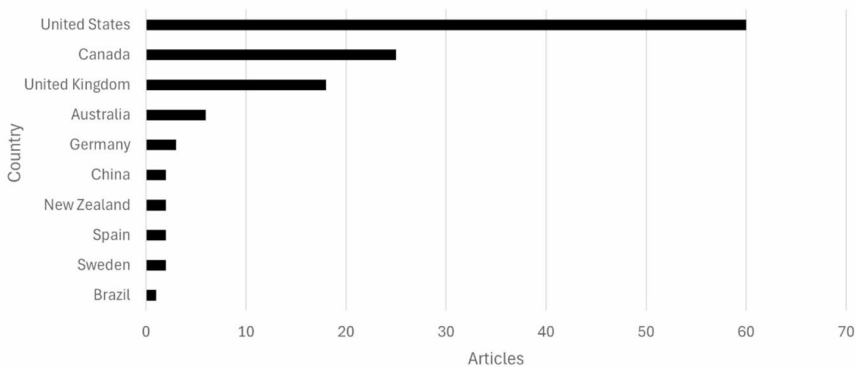
Fig. 2 Top five journals publishing articles between 1993–2023

comparison, it is only relatively recently in the period 2019–2023 that articles linked to issues of social justice have started to be published in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, but with the 7 articles published in this period – an average of 1.4 articles per annum – this does seem to be a journal that has witnessed a relatively recent increase in publishing peer-review research relating to social justice. The two remaining journals within the top five are *Leisure Studies*, in which 6 articles have been published on a very occasional and sporadic basis across the 21-year extended period 2003–2023 inclusive, and *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education*, with 5 articles published on a very occasional and sporadic basis across the extended 25-year period 1998–2022 inclusive. This is an equivalent of 0.3 articles per annum in *Leisure Studies* and 0.2 articles per annum in *SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education* across these respective time periods.

To further extend this analysis, *h*-indices provide a useful metric to rank both the productivity and impact of academic researchers, academic journals, and subject or topic areas within a dataset (Braun et al., 2006; Hirsch, 2005; Norris & Oppenheim, 2010). The *h*-index is calculated as the maximum possible *h* value based on the measure through which an author or journal has published at least *h* number of articles that have also each received at least *h* number of citations (Hirsch, 2005). Calculation of the *h*-index “helps us to distinguish between a ‘one hit wonder’ and an enduring performer” in terms of research productivity and impact (Cronin & Meho, 2005, p. 1275). The *h*-indices of the top 12 journals publishing social justice in leisure articles between 1993 and 2023 are presented in Table 2. Again, *Leisure Sciences* leads with a *h*-index of 13 whilst the *Journal of Leisure Research* is second with a *h*-index of 12. These are the only two journals in the dataset with an *h*-index in double figures. This

Table 2 Top 12 journals publishing social justice in leisure articles based on *h*-indices between 1993–2023

Rank	Journal Title	No. of Articles	Citations	Average Citations per Article	<i>h</i> -Index
1	Leisure Sciences	21	541	25.8	13
2	Journal of Leisure Research	14	153	10.9	12
3	Journal of Park and Recreation Administration	7	87	12.4	5
4	Leisure Studies	6	63	10.5	4
5	SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education	5	34	6.8	3
6	Annals of Leisure Research	2	55	27.5	2
7	Leisure/Loisir	2	47	23.5	2
8	International Journal of Sport Policy	2	22	11.0	2
9	African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure	1	26	26.0	1
10	Journal of Business Ethics	1	24	24.0	1
11	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	1	11	11.0	1
12	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	1	7	7.0	1
13–61	Other journals (each with <i>h</i> -index of 0)	53	905	17.1	0
	TOTAL	116	1975	17.0	

**Fig. 3** Distribution of journal articles by country between 1993–2023

is further reflected in the relatively high number of average citations that published articles have consistently received, particularly in *Leisure Sciences*. On the basis of the overall number of published outputs (Table 1), regularity of publications relating to issues of social justice (Fig. 2), and both citation metrics and *h*-indices (Table 2), it would seem that publications in *Leisure Sciences* have played a particularly instrumental role in helping to advance research on issues of social justice within leisure studies, particularly in the last decade-or-so.

Taking this analysis further, Fig. 3 presents a bar graph showing the frequency distribution of the 116 journal articles within this dataset by country or territory published between 1993 and 2023. The United States clearly leads with 51.7% ($n=60$) out of the 116 published articles within the dataset. This is followed by Canada with

24.1% ($n=28$) and the UK with 15.5% ($n=18$). Between them, these three countries account for 91.4% ($n=106$) of articles within the dataset, demonstrating a strong North American and UK bias in the publication of articles that examine issues of social justice in leisure studies. Out of those remaining countries or territories within Fig. 3, it is important to note the relative dearth of publications emanating from the global south, with only 1.7% ($n=2$) of articles from China and 0.9% ($n=1$) of articles from Brazil.

Such trends also appear to be reflected among key authors within the field. Figure 4 presents a bar graph showing the frequency distribution of the 116 journal articles in this dataset by author(s) published between 1993 and 2023. The scholars that authored and/or co-authored the most journal articles in the dataset include Rasul Mowatt, Felice Yuen, Darla Fortune, Karla Henderson, Corey Johnson, William Stewart, Daniel Theriault, Jose Caride, John Dattilo, and Mary Devine, most of whom are based in North America.

Moving on to the co-occurrence analyses undertaken in this investigation, Fig. 5 presents the results of a co-occurrence analysis of all keywords contained within the 116 articles published between 1993 and 2023. Van Eck and Waltman (2010) explain that this visualisation mapping technique uses nodes (circles) and edges (links between keywords) to build a bibliometric network evaluating the co-occurrence of keywords within and across articles in the dataset. The intention is to generate a more detailed understanding of the knowledge components and knowledge structure of a particular academic field. Each keyword is represented by a label attached to an accompanying node. The more often a keyword is used within articles in a dataset, the greater the subsequent weight of that keyword, and the larger and more prominently the relevant node and label will appear in the co-occurrence map. The link connecting any two particular keywords will hold a greater weight dependent on

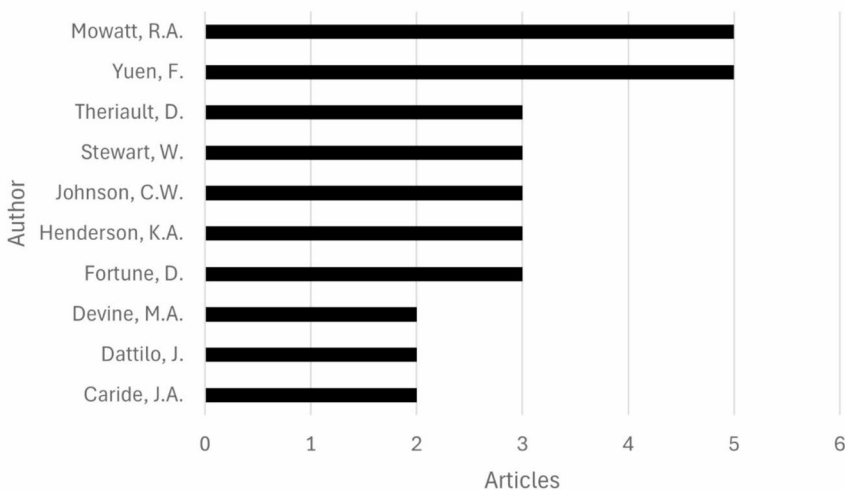


Fig. 4 Distribution of Journal articles by author(s) between 1993–2023

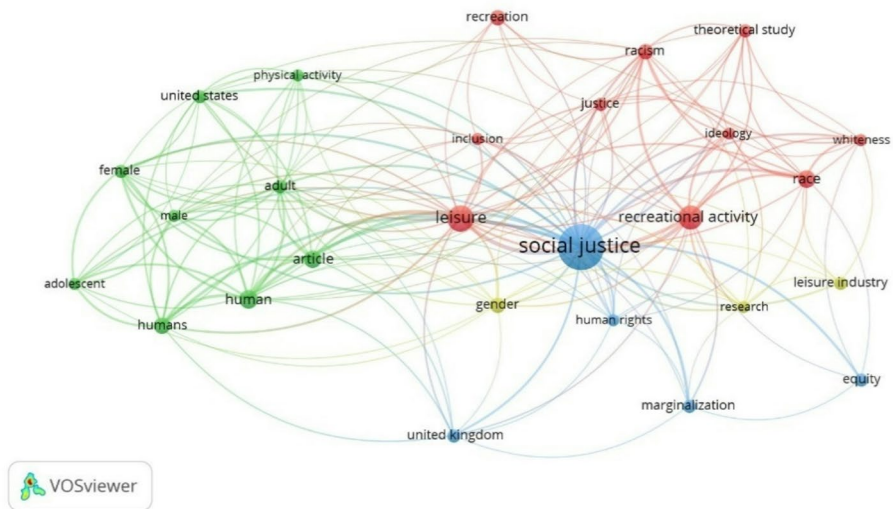


Fig. 5 Co-occurrence of all keywords analysis between 1993–2023

the number of times that any two keywords co-occur within the dataset. Within the co-occurrence map, those keywords that are closer together are also more strongly related in terms of co-citation links. The color of each node and link is then indicative of the emergent research cluster to which each keyword belongs.

In Fig. 5, the term *social justice* is located relatively centrally within the map as the largest keyword node, with many edges or lines linking into this node from across different identifiable research clusters across the co-occurrence keyword map. Similarly, the node of *leisure* is highly prominent, centralized and linked with edges or lines from across various clusters within the map. Four key clusters can subsequently be identified in Fig. 5. In Cluster 1, colored in red, the keywords with the highest total link strength are *leisure*, *recreational activity*, *race*, *racism*, and *whiteness*. The keywords with lower link strength are *ideology*, *theoretical study*, *justice*, *inclusion*, and *recreation*. The keywords identified in this cluster suggest a relatively strong focus and well-defined research area linked to issues of ‘race’ as a key analytical intersection and key social justice issue within leisure studies. From further analysis of emergent clusters in Fig. 5, there are two seemingly interrelated research clusters that likewise form the basis for social justice research relating to key intersections and key issues of gender within leisure studies. In Cluster 2, colored in green, the keywords with the highest total link strength are *human*, *article*, *humans*, *female*, and *adult*. The keywords with lower link strength are *male*, *adolescent*, *United States*, *physical activity*, and *social justice*. Linked to similar gender-related themes in Cluster 4, colored in yellow, the keywords with the highest total link strength are *gender*, *research*, and *leisure industry*. Finally, it is interesting to note the emergence of a distinct research cluster linked to issues of human rights and the potential crossover of such concepts with issues of social justice. As evident in Cluster 3, colored in blue, the keywords with the highest total link strength are *social justice*, *United Kingdom*, *human rights*, *marginalisation*, and *equity*. Whilst such debates are relatively

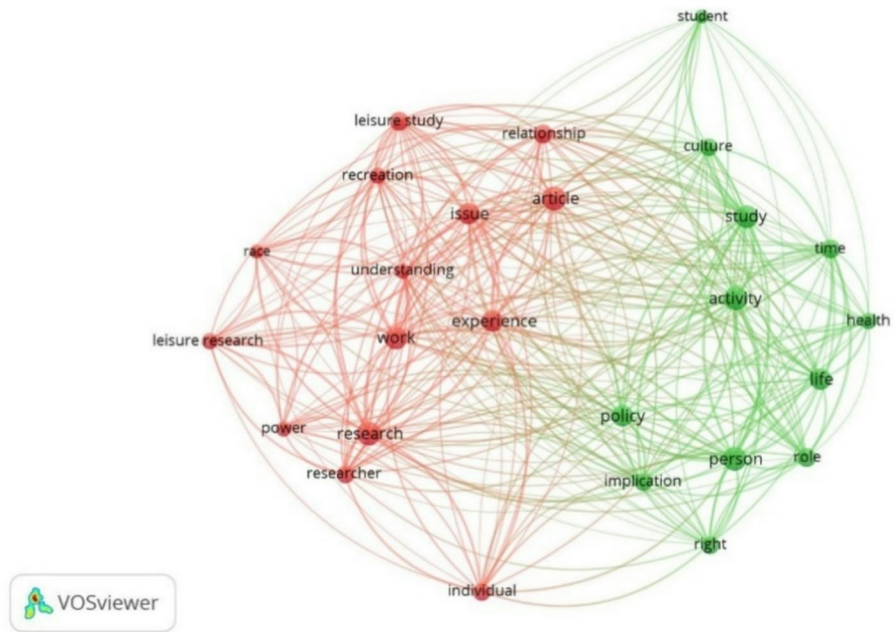


Fig. 6 Co-occurrence of text data between 1993–2023

recent within leisure studies literature, it is important to note a clear emergent cluster of research seeking to understand the potential relevance of issues linked to human rights within the context of underpinning social justice discourse and debate.

To complete the bibliometric analysis, Fig. 6 presents an illustration showing the results of a co-occurrence analysis of text data, using VOSviewer to distil data from the titles and abstracts of documents within the 116 articles published between 1993 and 2023. Text data from titles and abstracts can be used to construct a network of co-occurrence links between terms (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). In Fig. 6, only two clusters have been identified. In Cluster 1, colored in red, the textual words with the highest total link strength are research, issue, work, article, and experience. The textual words with lower link strength are relationship, leisure study, researcher, individual, recreation, leisure research, race, power, and understanding. Again, there appears to be some emphasis placed here on the relevance of ‘race’ as an integral social justice issue within leisure studies, with an apparent link also drawn by researchers to related conceptual issues of power that underpin such issues. In Cluster 2, colored in green, the textual words with the highest total link strength are person, activity, study, time and life, whilst the textual words with lower link strength are policy, role, implication, culture, right, health and student. As also indicated in Fig. 6, two of the most central textual words within this co-occurrence map are the terms experience and policy. Such phrases may speak to the need for researchers to seek to better understand the experiences of relevant people and key stakeholder groups in relation to issues of social justice. Yet the relatively central position of the term policy within the visualisation map also suggests a key focus on examining and understanding rel-

evant policies, policy formulation and policy development as such matters relate to issues of social justice in leisure.

5 Further Research Opportunities and Agendas

To address the second research question within this paper, the following 5 areas for further research and potential research agendas are proposed, emerging from the findings within the bibliometric analysis that has been undertaken above. Whilst 5 potential areas for future research are outlined below, this does not preclude opportunities for continued research into those areas of practice that have been more predominantly foregrounded and more repeatedly at the centre of existing social justice research to date. As evident from the preceding bibliometric analysis, existing research into social justice issues in leisure has been undertaken within and across various socio-cultural intersections. Research into such areas has not however been exhausted. There remains scope for academics to continue to develop existing research across the complex networks and intersections of power that enable and/or constrain people's experiences in leisure-related activities and in different socio-cultural contexts. Based on the preceding bibliometric analysis, several of the following potential research areas have, to date, received less attention than others, with scope and opportunity therefore for further development.

5.1 'Race', Gender and Human Rights

Several research clusters were identified within existing social justice research in the dataset analyzed above. In particular, there are relatively strong current foci on issues linked to 'race' and social justice, gender and social justice, and issues linked to human rights and social justice in leisure. However, as noted by Lawrence et al. (2024b), there remain significant social justice issues and challenges within and across different neoliberal societies in the present day that continue to require attention. Whilst there are identifiable research clusters linked to areas such as 'race' and gender, research examining such issues is not exhausted and there remains scope for researchers to continue to investigate the complex and challenging networks of power and resistance within and across such intersections. Whether such research is more descriptive, explanatory or transformative in approach (Stewart, 2014), there remains scope for investigation and the continued development of research agendas linked to issues of social justice across intersections such as 'race' and gender in which existing research clusters are evident in leisure studies.

Whilst the area of human rights and social justice in leisure is also identifiable as an emergent research cluster, debates in this area (e.g. Byrne & Ludvigsen, 2024; Veal, 2015, 2023; Veal & Sivan, 2024) are relatively recent, with scope for continued further development. There is research that examines human rights issues linked to various social issues and/or intersections of gender, age, disability and the experiences of children (e.g. Byrne, 2024; Cervin et al., 2017; Chambers et al., 2024; Donnelly, 2024; Evans et al., 2017; Mukherjee, 2024b). Yet the field of human rights is an

extensive field of practice across areas that incorporate the rights of women, children, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, among other social groups.

Within this context, there is also potential overlap to further examine and investigate the roles and responsibilities of governments, policymakers and other relevant organizations and institutions within and across the field of leisure to uphold and comply with their human rights obligations in such areas. Reference to the word ‘article’ as an emergent phrase from the co-occurrence of all keywords analysis in Fig. 5 most likely offers an acknowledgement of the relevance within such research clusters of Articles that are contained within legislation such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). For example, Article 24 of the UDHR enshrines the ‘right to leisure’ as a fundamental human right (McGrath et al., 2017; Veal, 2015). As such, there remains scope for continued research to investigate emergent debates surrounding the interrelated nature of issues linked to the broad field of practice that encapsulates issues of human rights, policy, procedures, legislation and social justice in leisure-related areas.

5.2 ‘Broadening’ Social Justice Research into Other Areas of Investigation

Based on the preceding co-occurrence mapping of all keywords (Fig. 5) and textual data (Fig. 6), there remains scope in future research agendas to continue to broaden, expand and strengthen the range and depth of current academic discussion and discourse surrounding social justice issues within and across other key areas of intersectionality. As noted earlier in the paper, there are some examples of emergent academic research and debate in areas such as migration and/or the experiences of refugees (e.g. De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2022; Doidge, 2024), disability (e.g. Condie, 2021; Devine, 2021; Kuppam, 2017), health and therapy (e.g. Dattilo, 2024), social class (e.g. Gemar, 2024), the environment (e.g. Mullenbach & Baker, 2020), and the experiences of families and young people (e.g. Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). However, current peer review literature within such areas does not yet indicate the same clustering of academic research and debate as other more defined existing research areas. As such, there remains scope for expansion of academic research and debate across a broader range of social justice areas – particularly within peer review literature – linked to the inherent power struggles and networks of power relationships that underpin the relative experiences and/or relative opportunities that may or may not be available to different intersections, people and/or groups within leisure settings.

5.3 Social Justice, Leisure and Future Research Agendas Relating To the Global South

The predominant focus within existing social justice research on the global north – particularly research undertaken by those working in the United States, Canada and the UK – was evident in the dataset examined above. The current respective dearth of research articles emanating from countries and territories in the global south was likewise evident, as noted in Fig. 4 with only China (1.7%, $n=2$) and Brazil (0.9%, $n=1$) represented from the global south within the dataset. As noted in Sect. 5.1, there remains scope for continued development of social justice research relating

to the global north, including those countries and areas in which research is already taking place such as the United States, Canada and the UK. But moving forwards, whilst it was noted earlier in the paper that there have been some recent emergent trends and interest towards examining issues of sport, leisure and social justice in the global south, at present such work has been published predominantly as chapters within edited textbooks (e.g. Giulio Santos de Farias et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). It has become further evident from analysis of our dataset in Sect. 4 that there remains scope for the development and expansion of double-blind peer review research within academic journals and the establishment of future research agendas to broaden current academic discussion relating to issues of leisure and social justice in the global south. This might include opportunities for those already researching issues of leisure and social justice to broaden their current foci of investigation, but likewise may also include scope for a wider range of researchers – including those currently living, working and undertaking research in the global south – to initiate, develop, broaden and/or expand their current research foci and develop future research agendas to examine and better understand issues of leisure and social justice in the global south. Again, whether based on more descriptive, explanatory or transformative research approaches (Stewart, 2014), the expansion of research and development of future research agendas linked to issues of leisure and social justice in the global south is an important potential starting point to provide opportunities through research and scholarly activity to better understand such issues within localized contexts and, potentially, to facilitate opportunities for social justice researchers to advocate social change, activism and praxis within a broader range of countries and territories.

5.4 Businesses, Organisations, Leisure and Social Justice

Given increasing concerns with notions of EDI, CSR, ESG and/or CSJ issues within many underlying business practices, organisations and sectors in many modern economies (Puaschunder, 2021; Zheng, 2020), there remains scope to develop more definitive research clusters examining the impact of such issues on organisations that operate within the leisure industry, as they relate to issues of social justice. The modern leisure industry is complex, multifaceted and global in context, generating considerable income, capital, revenue and turnover. Such discussions become more complex when considering the often-interrelated nature of the leisure, sport, tourism and hospitality sectors. Yet one area of investigation seemingly missing from the preceding analysis – or at least not emerging from analysis of the dataset as a clearly defined research cluster at present – surrounds the importance of businesses and organisations operating across the public, private and voluntary sectors in the leisure industry and potential interrelated issues of social justice. Key stakeholders that may be impacted by such issues include leisure participants, organisations, employers, employees, and local communities, with businesses and organisations in the leisure industry potentially operating within and across various different levels and sectors of the economy. As such, there remains scope for researchers to investigate issues of social justice as they relate to the operations of businesses and organisations in the leisure industry.

5.5 Policy, Politics and Social Justice in Leisure

Another potential future research agenda surrounds the importance of policy and policy development within the context of social justice. There is evidence within the analyzed dataset that issues of policy can be integral to discussion of social justice in leisure. Policy and legislation are continuously developed, updated and amended over time and in different local, national and international contexts. It has been argued within existing research that those examining issues of social justice should seek to influence the development, revision and implementation of policy and legislation when engaged in forms of activist research or praxis, but that such impact has proved challenging in the past, perhaps requiring the adoption of more quantitative or mixed-methods research approaches by academics as a means to provide more objective and large-scale forms of evidence to better influence policymakers and officials (e.g. Pringle & Falcous, 2018). The aim within this paper is not to call for a change in underpinning ontological and epistemological practices within leisure studies. It is, however, intended to further open the debate surrounding issues of policy and policy development, linked also to previous statements that social justice research can be descriptive, explanatory or transformative in approach (Stewart, 2014). Some researchers have argued that undertaking social justice research in a more detached manner can provide a more adequate basis to understand power networks and inter-dependent relationships within social and cultural settings and, in doing so, better position researchers to support subsequent development of more reality congruent policies and legislation (Mierzwinski et al., 2019). Others continue to call more directly for research and activism to engage specifically in a ‘politics of hope’ that is perhaps more ideologically-driven to strive for social change and action (e.g. Parry et al., 2013; Parry, 2014; Riches et al., 2017; Trussell and Jeanes, 2021). As researchers continue to push forward the boundaries of understanding within their particular areas of investigation – such as those research agendas suggested in Sect. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 – it remains important for them to analyze policy development and effectiveness and to engage with policymakers and practitioners. This may be in the form of academic scholarly activity, description and explanation, or perhaps more directly in the form of praxis, activism and underpinning ideological intentions to initiate social and cultural change in relation to matters of social justice.

6 Conclusion

The underpinning aims within this paper were, firstly, to examine the current state of research and knowledge relating to issues of social justice within leisure studies and, secondly, to propose potential future research agendas to facilitate the continued empirical and theoretical development of social justice research and scholarship in leisure studies. Through a process of bibliometric analysis, a nascent dataset of peer review articles relating to issues of leisure and social justice was generated via the Elsevier Scopus database and analyzed through quantitative bibliometric approaches. Based on this bibliometric analysis, five potential areas for future research and development of potential research agendas have been identified. Whether such research

remains more descriptive, explanatory or transformative in nature (Stewart, 2014), there remains scope for development of future research opportunities linked to issues of leisure and social justice, particularly in the post-COVID period. This does not of course preclude the fact that there can be considerable challenges for academic researchers who are striving to engage in the development of more interventionist forms of social justice research based on principles of praxis and activism (Lawrence et al., 2024b). Similarly, there is perhaps scope to reconsider those forms of research that have at times been dismissed by some social justice advocates as too descriptive or explanatory in approach. As other researchers have argued, there are instances in which transformative ideologically-driven social justice approaches based on a ‘politics of hope’ can potentially lead to researchers advocating for how the world ‘ought to be’ rather than developing more detached understandings of the complex networks of social interdependencies and power-relationships that often underpin key socio-cultural issues (Mierzwinski et al., 2019). There is perhaps a need for more ideologically-driven forms of social justice to be in a sense almost ‘tempered’ through continued development of more detached forms of research that may potentially provide more reality congruent examination of power struggles and power-discrepancies as they are. Given increasing trends towards the publication of peer review research relating to issues of leisure and social justice – particularly in the period from 2008 onwards – it is hoped that the preceding bibliometric review will open avenues for further research, enquiry and debate, and facilitate opportunities for the continued development of key research clusters and agendas in areas linked to issues of social justice and leisure.

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Declarations

Competing Interests One of the authors on this submission is an Editorial Board Member for the journal. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

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