

A bibliometric analysis of studies on healthcare marketing in the Web of Science database

Web of Science veri tabanındaki sağlık bakımı pazarlaması çalışmalarının bibliyometrik analizi

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a bibliometric analysis of academic publications in the field of "Healthcare Marketing" indexed in the Web of Science database between 1993 and 2025 to identify development trends, research foci, and thematic orientations within the discipline. The analysed publications were examined with respect to publication year, country, institution, author, document type, language, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and citation themes. The findings indicate a significant increase in scholarly output in the post-2020 period, with 2024 emerging as the year with the highest number of publications. The majority of studies were published in article format and predominantly written in English. Thematically, the literature has focused on the social sciences, health policies, food marketing, and consumer behaviour. Among the most productive institutions are the University of California System, Griffith University, and Harvard University. In terms of geographic distribution, the United States leads the field, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, and China. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the studies have been linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on "Good Health and Well-Being" (SDG 3) and "Responsible Consumption and Production" (SDG 12). Overall, the results demonstrate that healthcare marketing has evolved into a rapidly growing interdisciplinary research area that integrates perspectives on health, sustainability, and consumer behaviour.

Keywords: Healthcare Marketing, Bibliometric Analysis, Academic Trends, Web of Science, Sustainable Development Goals

Jel Codes: M31, I11, I18, C83, O35

Öz

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, 1993–2025 yılları arasında Web of Science veri tabanında "Healthcare Marketing" (sağlık pazarlaması) yada "sağlık bakımı pazarlaması" alanında yayımlanan akademik çalışmaların bibliyometrik yöntem ile analiz edilerek, alandaki araştırma eğilimlerinin, bilimsel gelişim çizgisinin ve tematik odak noktalarının ortaya konulmasıdır. Araştırma kapsamında incelenen yayınlar; yıl, ülke, kurum, yazar, belge türü, dil, sürdürülebilir kalkınma hedefleri (SDG) ve atıf temaları açısından değerlendirilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, bu alandaki akademik üretimin özellikle 2020 yılı sonrasında belirgin bir artış eğilimi gösterdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. 2024 yılı, en yüksek yayın sayısına ulaşılan dönem olarak öne çıkmıştır. Yayınların büyük bir bölümü makale formatında olup, çoğunlukla İngilizce dilinde hazırlanmıştır. Tematik açıdan çalışmaların, sosyal bilimler, sağlık politikaları, gıda pazarlaması ve tüketici davranışları konuları etrafında yoğunlaştığı belirlenmiştir. En fazla katkı sağlayan kurumlar arasında University of California System, Griffith University ve Harvard University öne çıkmaktadır. Ülke dağılımında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ilk sırada yer almakta; onu sırasıyla İngiltere, Avustralya ve Çin izlemektedir. Ayrıca, incelenen çalışmaların önemli bir kısmının Birleşmiş Milletler Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri (SDG) ile ilişkilendirildiği tespit edilmiştir. Özellikle "Sağlıklı Bireyler" (SDG 3) ve "Sorumlu Tüketim ve Üretim" (SDG 12) temaları ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bu bulgular, sağlık pazarlaması alanının son yıllarda disiplinlerarası bir araştırma alanı olarak hızla geliştiğini ve sağlık, çevre, beslenme ile tüketici davranışlarını bütünleştiren çok boyutlu bir akademik perspektif kazandığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sağlık Pazarı, Bibliyometrik Analiz, Akademik Eğilimler, Web of Science, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefler

JEL Kodları: M31, I11, I18, C83, O35

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Introduction

In recent years, healthcare marketing has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sub-disciplines at the intersection of marketing, health management, and public health. The field has evolved significantly from traditional promotional activities toward a more strategic, patient-centred, and integrated approach that addresses consumer behaviour, service quality, digital transformation, and ethical considerations in healthcare delivery (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Lee & Kotler, 2011). Contemporary research indicates that digital transformation, CRM systems, and patient-centred communication are major components of healthcare marketing strategies (Jeevan & Krishna, 2025). The findings also support the growing role of digital communication channels and influencer-based healthcare communication in shaping patient awareness and treatment engagement. Similar findings were reported by Imran and Zulfaqar (2025), who emphasised that social media influencers can reduce self-stigma and improve treatment engagement among women. Recent bibliometric studies show that healthcare marketing research has increasingly focused on artificial intelligence, medical tourism, digital marketing, customer experience, and value co-creation (Sadhotra & Joshipura, 2025). Recent studies emphasise that healthcare organisations are increasingly expected to create value not only for patients but also for society through digital healthcare technologies, user experience, and corporate social responsibility practices (Soares Júnior & Mainardes, 2026).

Healthcare marketing is the application of marketing principles and techniques to influence health-related behaviours, increase patient satisfaction, and improve the competitive position of healthcare organisations (Smith & Zook, 2016). A key distinguishing feature of the healthcare sector is the continuously rising demand for services, along with the growing burden of chronic diseases, rising treatment costs, and heightened expectations from patients as customers. This development has led to the emergence of a patient-centred perspective, in which service quality is increasingly defined by clinical expertise, patient satisfaction, comfort, and empathetic communication (Gök, 2023). It is understood that healthcare services have certain difficulties and sensitivities compared to other types of services in the marketing sector. However, healthcare services, which also possess unique characteristics, need to be evaluated specifically in terms of marketing practices. If the required stages are not considered and implemented within the sector-specific conditions, it is thought that efficiency and quality will not reach the desired level (Bulut et al., 2023). Healthcare marketing differs from traditional marketing due to the unique structure of healthcare services, the dominant role of clinicians in decision-making processes, and the ethical and social dimensions of healthcare delivery (Thomas, 2020). Recent social marketing studies suggest that consumers perceive value not only in healthcare services but also in health-related behaviours and experiences (Butler et al., 2016).

Despite growing academic interest, important gaps remain in the literature. While many studies focus on specific topics such as digital marketing, medical tourism, or social media use in healthcare, comprehensive analyses that map the overall intellectual structure, evolutionary trends, and interdisciplinary connections of healthcare marketing remain relatively limited (Donthu et al., 2021; Rościszewski, 2024; Kar & Wasnik, 2024). Moreover, few studies have systematically examined how healthcare marketing research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Butt et al. (2019) conducted one of the earliest comprehensive citation-based reviews of the healthcare marketing literature and emphasised the field's growing interdisciplinary structure.

Healthcare marketing has gained increasing attention as a strategic tool for improving patient engagement, service quality, and competitive positioning of healthcare institutions. Elrod and Fortenberry (2018) argue that healthcare establishments must move beyond traditional approaches and adopt outsider thinking to catalyse marketing innovation and achieve sustainable competitive advantage. They highlight that effective healthcare marketing strategies not only enhance patient satisfaction but also improve resource utilisation and organisational performance. Subsequent works by the same authors further explore integrated marketing communications, the use of incentives, and the formulation of productive marketing strategies, demonstrating how a well-designed marketing mix can significantly strengthen patient-provider relationships and overall healthcare delivery (Elrod & Fortenberry, 2020). Leading journals in the field have made substantial contributions to this domain. In the constantly evolving and highly competitive healthcare marketplace, branding is considered a strategic marketing necessity, serving both to guide consumer preferences and to differentiate healthcare organisations (Yorulmaz & Ünal, 2025).

The current study seeks to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of publications on "Healthcare Marketing" in the Web of Science database from 1993 to 2025. By examining publication trends, leading countries and institutions, journal preferences, keyword networks, and connections to the SDGs, this research aims to provide a clear picture of the field's evolution and point toward promising future directions. In doing so, it offers one of the most systematic mappings of healthcare marketing's intellectual landscape to date, with a particular focus on its role in advancing global sustainability and public health objectives.

Methodology

This research is a descriptive study designed as a bibliometric analysis. Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative method used to evaluate scientific publications, citation structures, and research trends. The concept of bibliometrics was first introduced by Pritchard (1969) as the application of mathematical and statistical methods to books and other communication media. The main objective of the study is to examine academic production in healthcare marketing quantitatively and to reveal research trends, emerging themes, and scientific collaboration networks within the discipline.

Research population and sampling

The research population consists of all academic publications indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) database under the keyword "Healthcare marketing." The study includes works published between 1993 and 2025. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the inclusion of studies directly related to healthcare marketing. This approach, commonly used in bibliometric studies, enables a systematic evaluation of a thematically relevant yet focused research corpus. In this study, searches in the Web of Science database were deliberately limited to the single keyword "healthcare marketing." Both conceptual and methodological reasons drove this decision. Primarily, "healthcare marketing" is the most established, standardised, and widely recognised term in the international academic literature, representing the dominant nomenclature in the field (Donthu et al., 2021; Kar & Wasnik, 2024).

Data collection process

Data were retrieved from the Web of Science Core Collection by searching for the keyword "Healthcare marketing" in the Title, Abstract, and Keyword fields. The collected records were classified according to variables such as year of publication, author(s), institution, country, journal, number of citations, document type, language, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The dataset was exported to Microsoft Excel (v.2021) for data cleaning, coding, and organisation. Duplicate entries were eliminated, and only peer-reviewed journal articles were included in the analysis to ensure scientific reliability.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistical methods, including frequency distributions, percentages, and means, were used to analyse the data. In addition, VOSviewer software (v.1.6.20) was utilised to perform network analyses, including author collaboration, institutional linkages, and keyword co-occurrence mapping. The visualisations generated by this software enabled the identification of the most frequently co-occurring keywords and thematic clusters. The results were presented through comprehensive tables and graphical visualisations to ensure clarity and comparability.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations: only open-access, publicly available data were used. No personal or confidential information was accessed during the analysis. As the study is based on secondary data, it does not require formal ethical approval, which aligns with standard practices in bibliometric research.

Limitations

This research is limited to publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection. Consequently, studies indexed in other databases such as Scopus, PubMed, or Google Scholar were excluded from the scope. Therefore, the findings of this study represent only the academic output available within the WoS database.

Findings

This section presents the results obtained from the bibliometric analysis of studies indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) database in the field of "healthcare marketing" between 1993 and 2025. The findings are categorised according to publication year, country, institution, author, journal, and thematic focus.

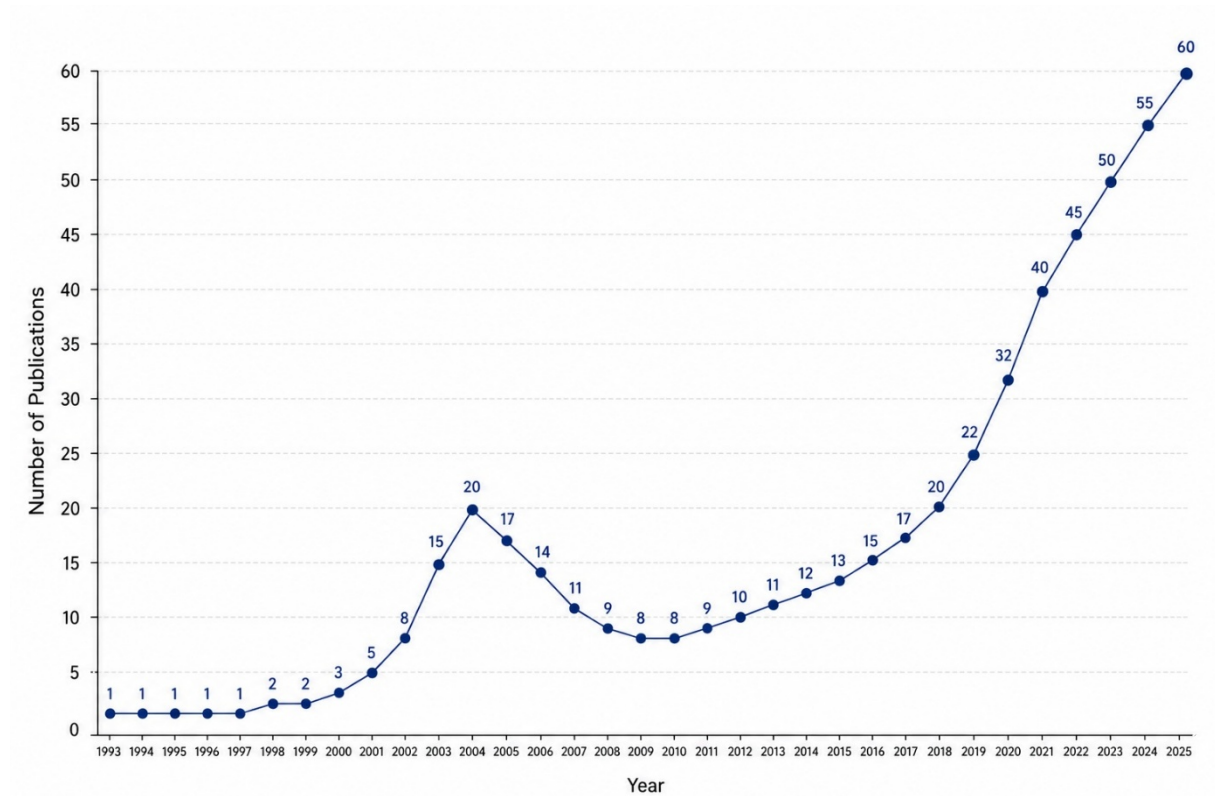


Figure 1: Annual Distribution of Publications in Healthcare Marketing Research (1993–2025)

Figure 1 illustrates the annual distribution of academic publications on healthcare marketing indexed in the Web of Science database between 1993 and 2025. The number of publications remained very low and relatively stable until the mid-2000s, averaging 1-2 per year. A noticeable increase began after 2005, followed by a significant acceleration after 2010. The most striking growth occurred in the post-2020 period, particularly reaching a peak of 23 publications in 2024. Although there was a slight decline in 2025, the overall trend clearly demonstrates a substantial and continuous increase in scholarly interest in healthcare marketing over the last decade. This rapid growth, especially after 2020, can be attributed to the rising importance of digital health technologies, patient-centred care, and health communication during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

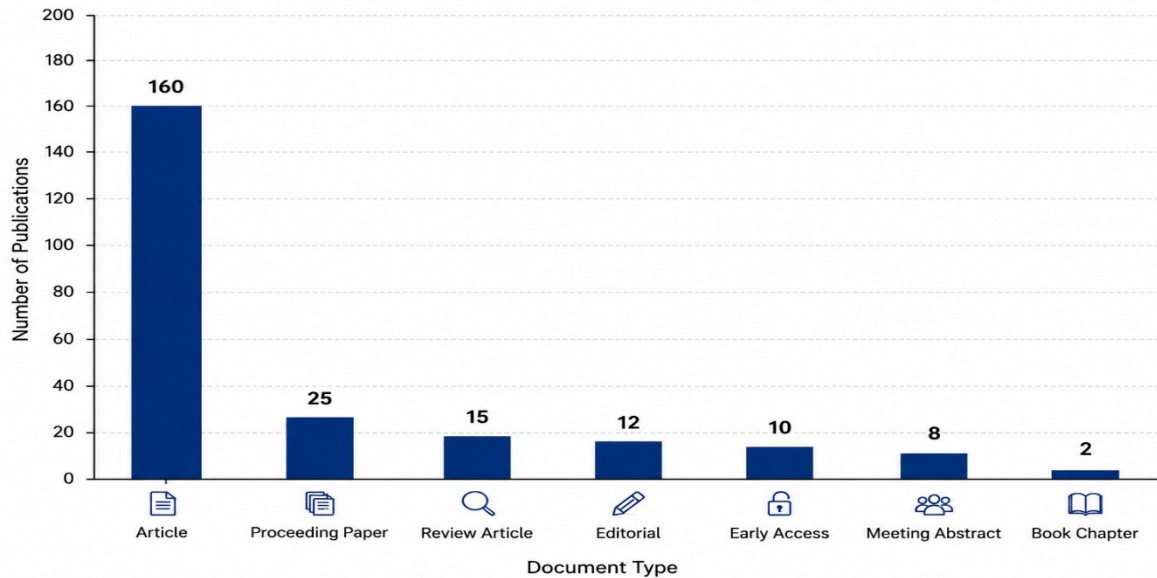


Figure 2: Distribution of Publications by Document Type in Healthcare Marketing Research (1993–2025)

Figure 2 reveals that journal articles dominate the literature by a large margin (160 publications), followed by proceedings papers (25) and review articles (15). This pattern shows that healthcare marketing has become a well-established research area, with core knowledge primarily disseminated through rigorous, peer-reviewed journals.

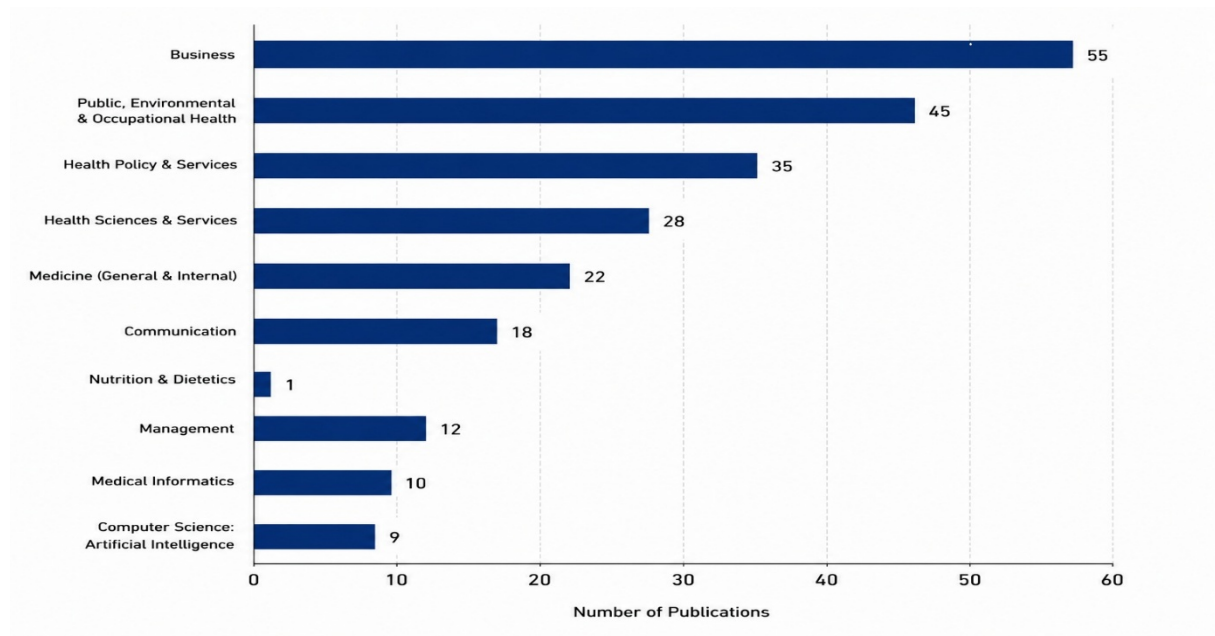


Figure 3: Top 10 Web of Science Categories in Healthcare Marketing Research (1993–2025)

Figure 3 shows the main scientific disciplines in which healthcare marketing research has been published. As can be clearly seen, the dominant category is Business, with 55 publications. Public, Environmental & Occupational Health and Health Policy & Services follow it. This distribution highlights that healthcare marketing is no longer limited to traditional business and marketing perspectives. Instead, it has evolved into a truly interdisciplinary field that intersects with public health, health policy, general medicine, communication, nutrition, and even artificial intelligence. The strong presence of both "Business" and public health-related categories indicates that researchers are paying attention to both the commercial/strategic side and the societal/public health dimensions of the topic. Overall, the figure demonstrates that healthcare marketing has become a rich, multidisciplinary research area that draws from multiple fields to address complex health-related challenges.

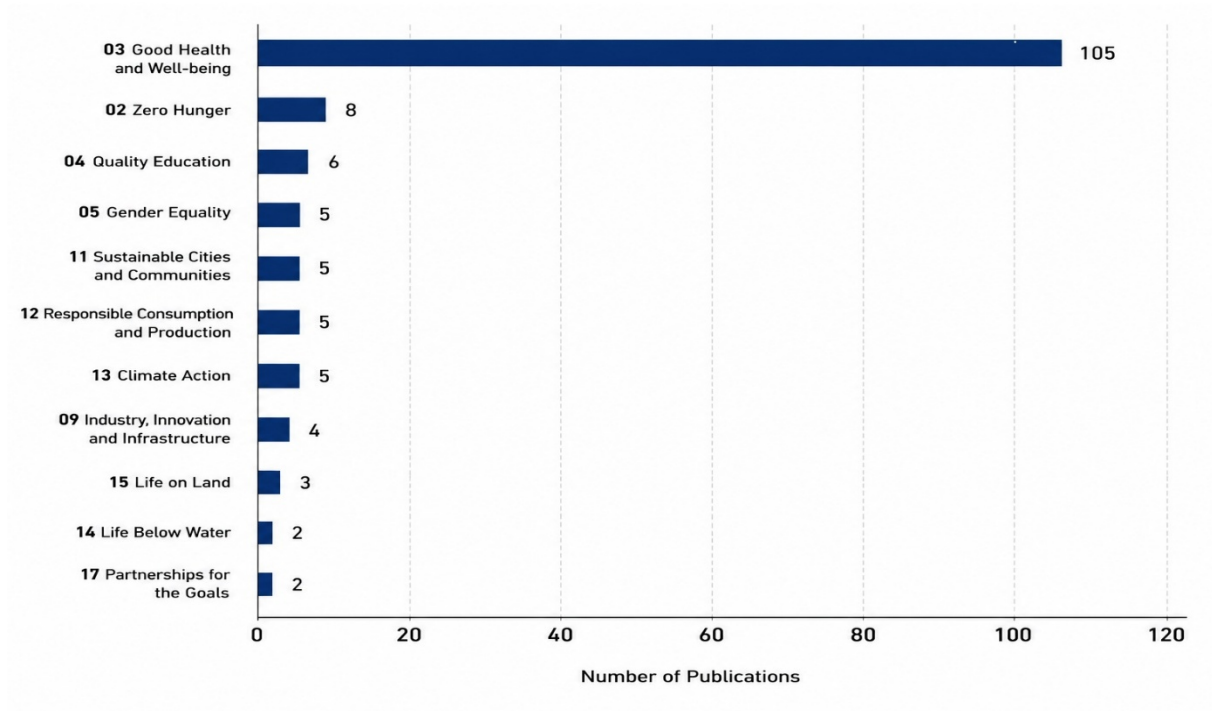


Figure 4: Distribution of Publications According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (1993–2025)

Figure 4 shows which global goals the studies in healthcare marketing are connected to. The vast majority of the research, 105 publications, focuses on Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3). All other goals, such as Zero Hunger, Quality Education, and Responsible Consumption, have few studies. In simple terms, researchers in this field have mainly concentrated on health, while paying much less attention to other important sustainability topics.

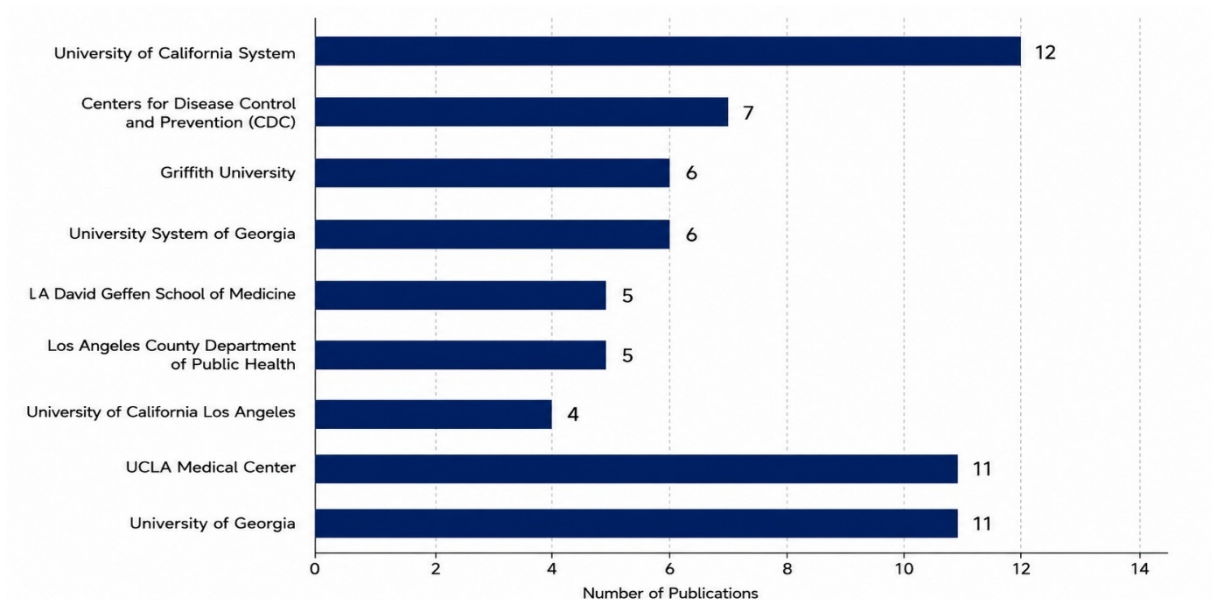


Figure 5: Top 10 Most Productive Institutions in Healthcare Marketing Research (1993–2025)

Figure 5 illustrates the leading institutional contributors to healthcare marketing research over the past three decades. The University of California System stands out with 12 publications, demonstrating a particularly strong research output in this domain. Three institutions follow with 7 publications each: the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Griffith University, and the University System of Georgia, indicating a notable yet more moderate level of contribution.

The geographic distribution reveals a clear pattern: the majority of top-contributing institutions are based in the United States, which suggests a significant concentration of research capacity and investment in this field within the country. The composition of these leading institutions is also worth noting it includes both academic entities and public health organisations, such as the CDC and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. This mix implies that healthcare marketing research draws upon diverse expertise, integrating academic inquiry with practical public health perspectives. Overall, the figure points to a notable concentration of research activity among a relatively small group of American institutions. While this indicates established centres of excellence, it also raises questions about the broader global distribution of research in this area and whether there are opportunities for greater international participation.

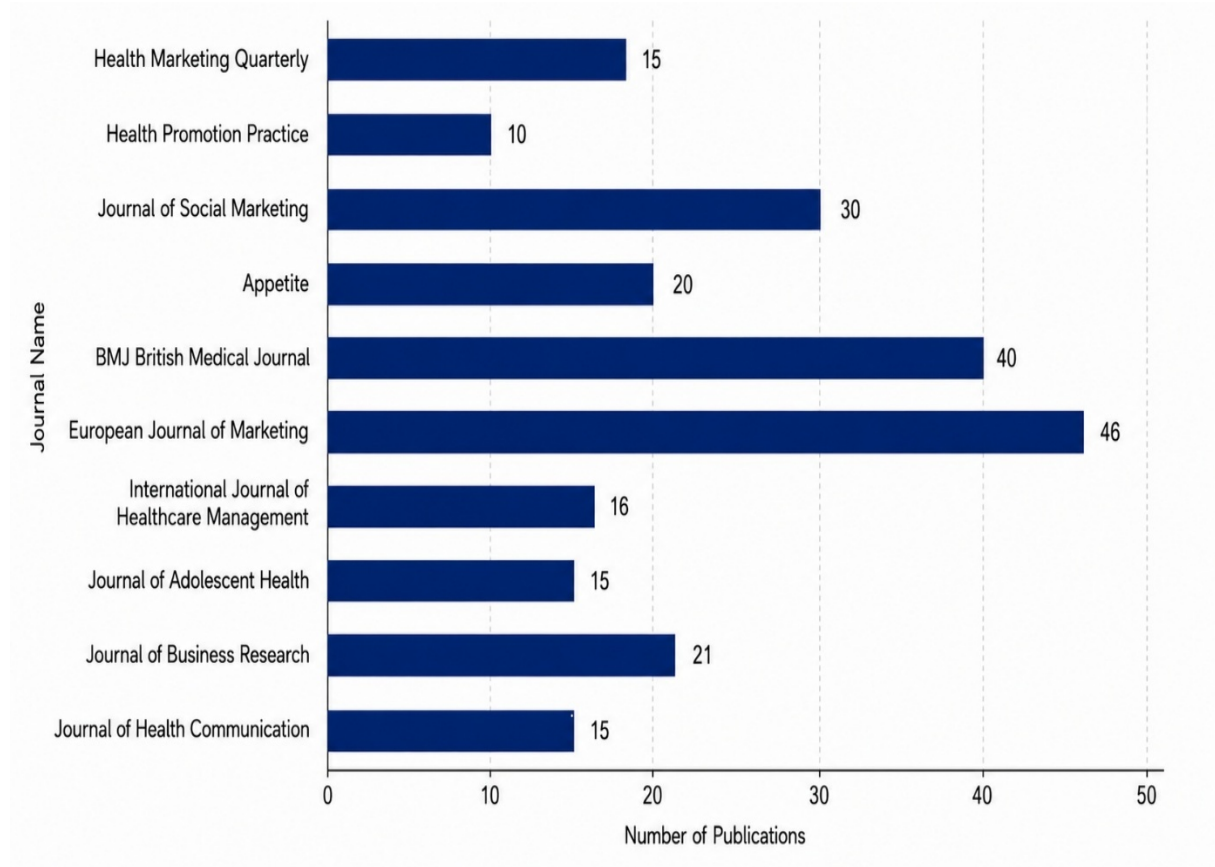


Figure 6: Most Productive Academic Journals in Healthcare Marketing (1993–2025)

Figure 6 presents the journals with the highest publication volume in healthcare marketing between 1993 and 2025. The findings reflect an interdisciplinary structure, with research distributed across specialised healthcare, broader marketing, and medical outlets. The *European Journal of Marketing* ranks first (46 publications), followed by the *BMJ* (40) and the *Journal of Social Marketing* (30). This distribution indicates that healthcare marketing extends beyond management into marketing strategy, social marketing, public health communication, and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, contributions from the *Journal of Business Research*, *Health Marketing Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Health Communication* highlight an increasing focus on branding, digital communication, patient engagement, and strategic management. The inclusion of outlets focused on adolescent health and health promotion also suggests an expansion toward preventive healthcare and behavioural change. Overall, the data illustrate that healthcare marketing has evolved into a robust, multidisciplinary domain integrating perspectives from marketing, medicine, communication, and public health.

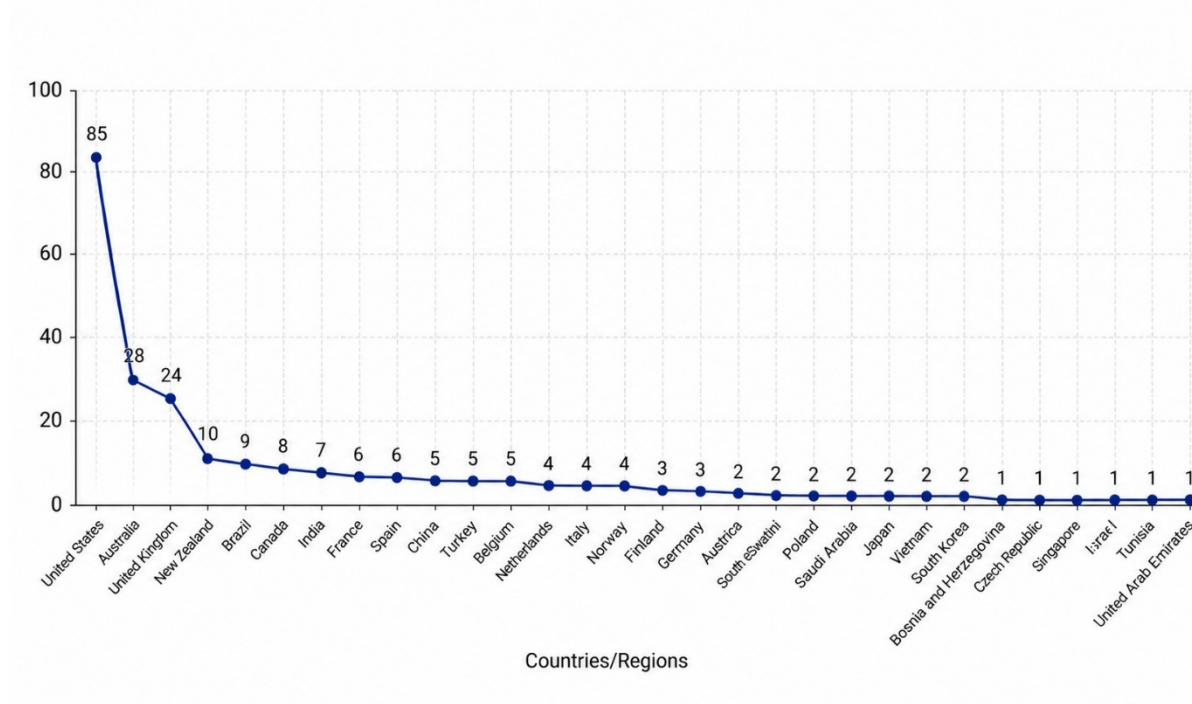


Figure 7: Mapping the Global Productivity of Healthcare Marketing Literature (1993–2025)

Figure 7 illustrates the global distribution of research output in healthcare marketing. The United States overwhelmingly dominates the field with 85 publications, revealing a stark geographical imbalance. Australia ranks second with 28 publications—less than one-third of the U.S. output—and is followed closely by the United Kingdom with 24. This pattern underscores the clear hegemony of Anglo-Saxon nations in shaping the literature. A particularly noteworthy observation is the disproportionately limited contribution from the Global South. Despite their massive populations, major emerging economies such as China, India, and Brazil have produced only 4 to 5 publications each. Furthermore, representation from the African continent is marginal, with South Africa contributing just two studies, while the Middle East remains nearly unrepresented. This heavily skewed distribution indicates that healthcare marketing research remains concentrated within a select cluster of high-income, English-speaking countries. Although healthcare marketing addresses universal challenges such as health behaviour, cancer screening, and vaccine hesitancy, which are often more pressing in developing nations, Western perspectives disproportionately shape academic discourse. This centralisation raises critical concerns about both theoretical generalisability and academic equity; health behaviours are deeply contingent on cultural contexts, yet voices from the Global South remain largely marginalised.

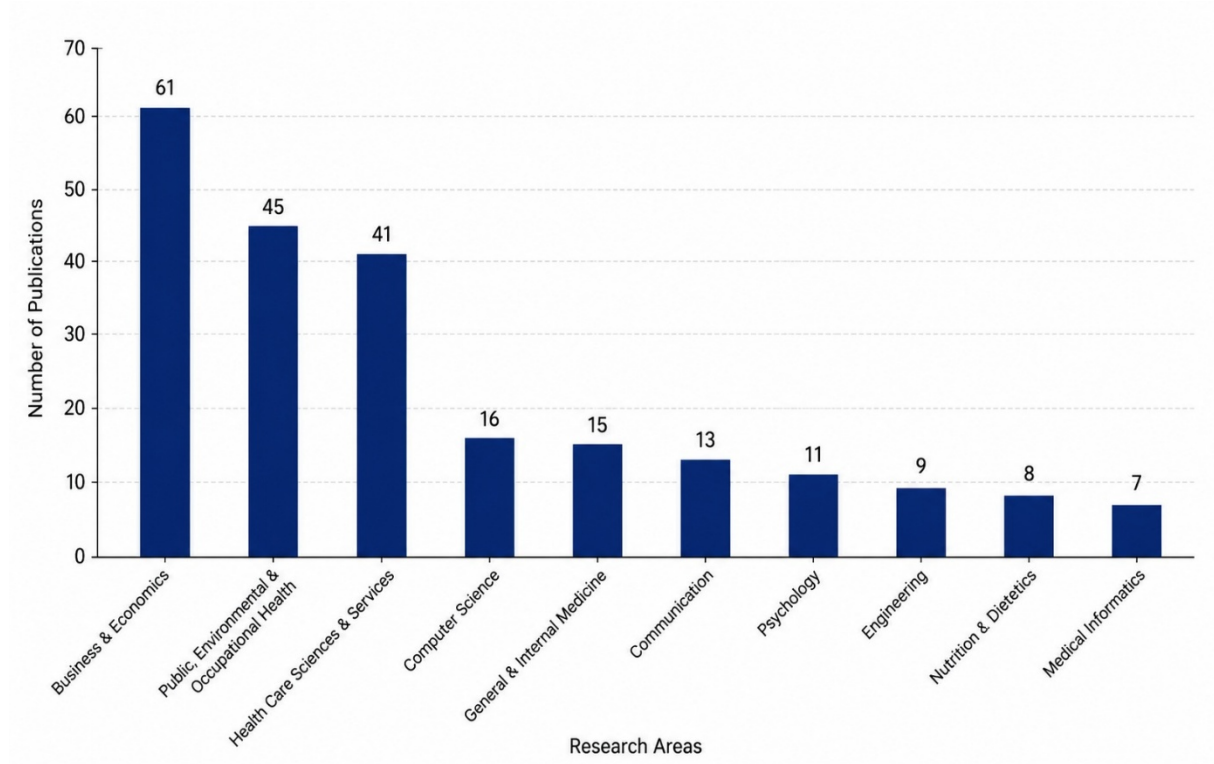


Figure 8: Core Research Areas and Thematic Clusters in Healthcare Marketing (1993–2025)

Figure 8 illustrates the disciplinary distribution of healthcare marketing research between 1993 and 2025. The findings show that the field has developed as an interdisciplinary research area primarily shaped by Business & Economics, Public & Environmental Health, and Health Care Sciences & Services. Among these, Business & Economics is the dominant category, with 61 publications, indicating that healthcare marketing research has primarily focused on marketing strategy, consumer behaviour, and economic perspectives. At the same time, the strong presence of public health and healthcare sciences demonstrates that the field is increasingly integrating patient well-being, health policy, communication, and technology-oriented approaches. Overall, the figure highlights the multidisciplinary nature of healthcare marketing research.

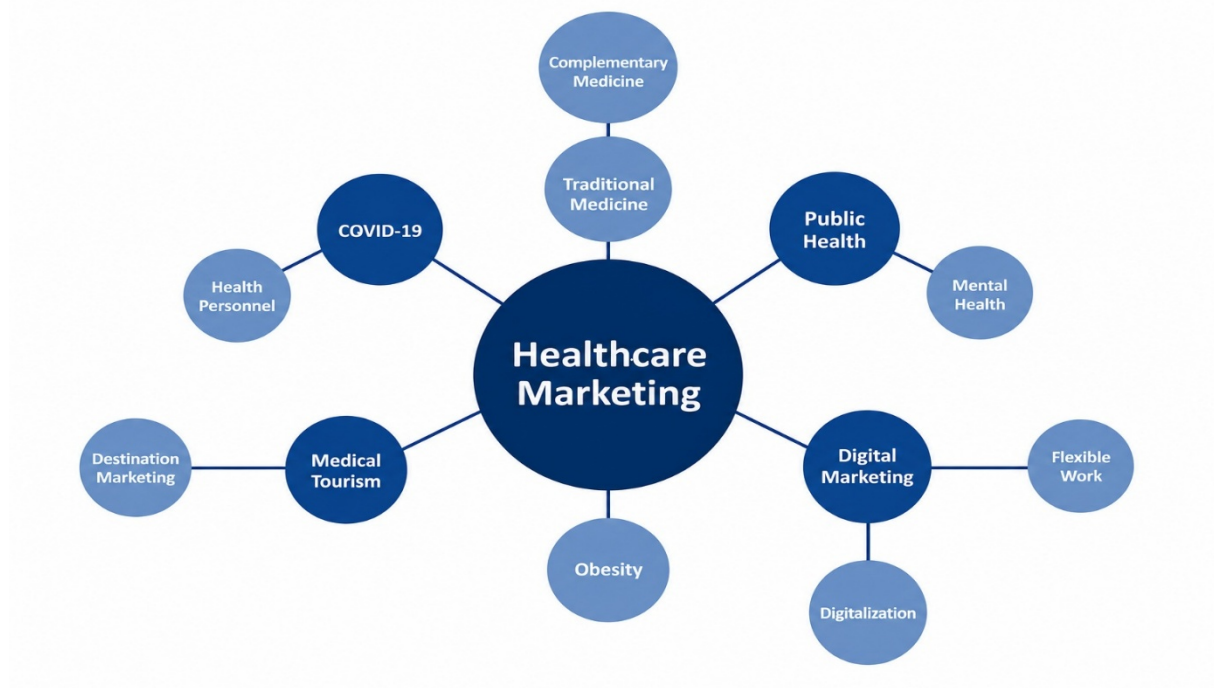


Figure 9: The Conceptual Structure of Healthcare Marketing Research: A Keyword Cluster Analysis (1993–2025)

Figure 9 illustrates the structural topology of the keyword co-occurrence network within healthcare marketing literature. Serving as the central hub, 'Healthcare Marketing' anchors the network, with emerging thematic streams structurally organised into two distinct hierarchical layers. The first-layer nodes—comprising 'Digital Marketing', 'Medical Tourism', 'Public Health', and 'COVID-19'—represent the most robustly associated core research domains. The second-layer nodes further conceptualise these foundational themes into specialised contexts: 'Digitalisation' and 'Flexible Work' branch directly from 'Digital Marketing'; 'Mental Health' extends the scope of 'Public Health'; 'Destination Marketing' aligns with 'Medical Tourism'; and 'Health Personnel' correlates with 'COVID-19'.

Meanwhile, peripheral nodes such as 'Obesity', 'Complementary Medicine', and 'Traditional Medicine' signify the discipline's ongoing expansion into holistic wellness, alternative therapies, and lifestyle-driven health behaviours. Given the uniform node sizes and edge densities, the visualisation offers a qualitative, structural mapping of thematic intersections rather than a quantitative citation metric. Overall, the network underscores that contemporary healthcare marketing research is balanced upon four dominant pillars: digitalisation, medical tourism, public health, and pandemic-driven crises. This layered architecture vividly demonstrates the field's interdisciplinary synthesis, effectively bridging clinical health priorities with strategic marketing and tourism frameworks.

Conclusion, discussion and recommendations

This bibliometric analysis reveals that healthcare marketing has emerged as a significant and rapidly evolving interdisciplinary research area, bridging health management, business administration, communication, digital marketing, and tourism. The increasing complexity and globalisation of healthcare systems, together with rising patient expectations and the expansion of digital health services, have positioned healthcare marketing as a strategic discipline in both academic and practical contexts. Similar thematic trends were identified by Shaheen (2025), particularly regarding the increasing importance of social media marketing, digital engagement, and AI-supported communication strategies (Shaheen, 2025).

The longitudinal trend analysis indicates that scientific publications in this field have increased markedly over the past decade, particularly after 2020. This surge can be attributed to three main factors: the rising importance of health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of technology into healthcare delivery, and the growing need for consumer-oriented strategies in health service management. Tosun and Yıldız (2021) similarly identified a significant increase in publications during the pandemic, with digital marketing and health communication gaining particular prominence. Despite this growth, periodic fluctuations in publication intensity suggest that healthcare marketing was recognised relatively late within academic discourse and continues to evolve toward conceptual maturity. Similar findings were reported by Soares Júnior and Mainardes (2026), who emphasised the growing importance of digital healthcare technologies, user experience, and value-oriented strategies in healthcare marketing.

The thematic analysis demonstrates that the most prominent research clusters centre on health communication, patient satisfaction, digital health, and medical tourism, and are supported by public health policies, sustainable healthcare practices, and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, aligning publications with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), indicates that healthcare marketing research increasingly contributes to global health sustainability and social responsibility agendas.

In practical terms, these results underscore the importance of integrating marketing principles into healthcare management to enhance patient engagement, improve service quality, and ensure efficient resource utilisation. Health institutions are encouraged to adopt evidence-based marketing strategies, supported by data analytics and digital communication tools, to strengthen public trust and service effectiveness.

Future research should adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, fostering stronger collaborations among health economists, behavioural scientists, digital communication experts, and data analysts. Particular attention should be given to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and mobile health applications, exploring how these tools shape consumer decision-making,

enable personalised care, and improve marketing effectiveness. Comparative studies across different countries and regions would also be valuable in uncovering context-specific dynamics, especially in developing economies. Huang and Rust (2021) proposed a strategic artificial intelligence framework that integrates marketing research, segmentation, targeting, and positioning strategies, as well as marketing actions, through mechanical, thinking, and feeling AI dimensions.

Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on the ethical and sustainability dimensions of healthcare marketing, examining how the field can promote responsible communication, equitable access to services, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals.

In conclusion, healthcare marketing has evolved far beyond traditional promotional activities. It now stands as a strategic, evidence-based discipline that plays a vital role in improving healthcare accessibility, enhancing patient satisfaction, and strengthening organisational competitiveness. Sustained academic interest and genuine interdisciplinary collaboration will be crucial to ensuring that healthcare marketing continues to support more sustainable, ethical, and patient-centred healthcare systems worldwide.

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