Research Background. Relationship marketing (RM), as an academic field and as a marketing approach, has attracted the attention of a great number of academics and practitioners in the last three decades (Gummesson, 2017; Sheth, 2017). In academics, scholars started discussing the concept of RM in the early 1980s (e.g., Berry, 1983), and its rise in the 1990s was reflected through a number of emerging academic infrastructures such as special issues in journals, RM centered books, RM focused academic conferences, RM dedicated research centers (Ballantyne et al., 2003; Möller & Halinen, 2000). Over the years, RM has been “probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management” (Egan, 2003, p. 145). As Harker and Egan (2006) concluded from their review of the literature, RM certainly challenged the dominance of transactional marketing as a theory and practice. Among other influences, relational perspectives have informed revisions to the American Marketing Association’s definition of marketing (O’Malley, 2014), where relational thinking started being encapsulated in the 2004, 2007, and 2013 definitions.

However, the place of RM in marketing theory and practice has been debated among scholars and practitioners in the last three decades (Grönroos, 2017; O’Malley, 2014). Some (e.g., Grönroos, 1994) considered that the evolvement of RM to be representative of a paradigm shift, while others (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2004) referred to it as a “dominant logic”, and still some others (Egan, 2003) contended that it is a perspective rather than a paradigm. Sheth, Parvatiyar, and Sinha (2015), for their part, considered RM as a dominant paradigm that is a subset or a specific focus of marketing. Following the lack of co-ordination of these and similar other nature, several review articles have been conducted in which authors attempted to organize the literature by examining the history and evolution of RM (e.g., Harker & Egan, 2006; Möller & Halinen, 2000), the varied definitions of RM—at least, 70—(e.g., Agariya & Singh, 2011; Harker, 1999), the different schools of thought of RM—at least, four—(e.g., Ganguli et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2005), the state of what is known about RM (e.g., O’Malley, 2014; Bonnemaizon, Cova & Louyot, 2007), and the different research streams in RM (e.g., Das, 2009; Yadav & Singh, 2014). Along with this, critical reviews of the literature were published that proposed future directions for RM (e.g., Christopher et al., 2002; Lindgreen, 2001; Palmer et al., 2005; Tadajewski, 2015). These reviews reported that a solid and consistent body of theory of RM is lacking. Even the early works (e.g., Mattsson, 1997) describe the lack of co-ordination among the various research streams of RM as “scientific myopia” and a “melting pot.”

The same is true in recent past, and it is difficult today to find one distinctly defined perspective, definition, or term that gives a clear picture of RM in the literature (O’Malley, 2014; Tadajewski, 2015). RM remained a diverse field with different schools of thought, with no clearly demarcated scope and domain, and, most particularly, the literature is a ‘melting pot” of various theories. The whole phenomenon sometime causes frustration among researchers and possibly lead to confusion. As Egan (2003) and O’Malley and Tynan (2000) stated, the diverse academic approach has exacerbated conceptual problems within the discipline, and most importantly, it has made the delimitation of RM domain challenging with its permeable and elastic boundaries. Sport management scholars, particularly new scholars, working on the topic area are not different, as the circumstance creates a difficult situation in their attempt to identify an appropriate context for empirical research.

Therefore, a critical review of the RM literature in the field of sport management research, along with the identification of agenda for future research, is hoped to help document and present the state of the literature in the field (i.e., to gain insight into how RM understood, interpreted, and utilized in sport management), and to clarify future directions. Findings can help to inform, familiarize, and guide researchers about the complex nature of the literature by articulating the ‘big picture’ of RM while cataloging its parts. Most importantly, such endeavours are hoped to assist new researchers in identifying their area of research interest within the diverse literature of RM. Hence, this study attempts to critically examine the RM literature in sport management research. The following three
research questions guide the study: (i) what is the prevalence and the nature of RM studies in sport management research? (ii) What are the topic areas investigated in RM studies in sport management research? and (iii) Which schools of thought of RM, and their respective theoretical perspectives, guided RM studies in sport management research? Gaining an understanding from the findings of these research questions is hoped to facilitate the identification of agendas for future research.

Research Method. The study adopted a cross-disciplinary review of sport-related scholarly studies that grounded their research in RM and published in different academic journals. Five sport related online search databases were used, including Academic Search, Google Scholar, Scopus, SportDiscus, and Web of Science. The search for journal articles was based on 24 keyword descriptors. The keywords were identified through brainstorming and a concept map, and the use of truncation variant words. Synonyms (e.g., customer relationship management, customer relationship marketing), plural/singular forms (e.g., relationship, relationships), and acronyms (e.g., CRM, customer relationship management) were used. The databases were queried for the keywords in the title, abstract and the keyword list. It is worth mentioning here that while other publications provide a great deal of information (e.g. practitioner publications and reports, textbooks and edited volumes, masters and doctoral dissertations, conference papers), they were not selected for inclusion as only peer-reviewed academic journals were considered in this work.

The work adopted a critical literature review – combining both systematic and narrative literature review types. In adopting a systematic literature review, the work reviewed the literature in a systematic and consistent manner by two independent reviewers, and the pieces of evidence that were drawn from the reviewed articles will be extracted in the same fashion to help decrease extraction bias (per Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). In incorporating a narrative literature review, the review will report the authors’ findings in a condensed format that typically summarizes the contents of each article (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). The latter is intended to present a readily available quick reference for scholars who conduct their research on the topic area.

Research Findings. The search for RM articles in sport studies generated a total of 33 academic articles published over the past 20 years (since the late 1990s). The earliest studies that were identified were published in Sport Marketing Quarterly in its 1997 special issue (Vol. 6, Issue 2). A critical analysis of the 33 articles offers valuable insights in terms of: the prevalence and the nature of RM studies in sport management research over the years, the topic areas investigated in RM studies in sport management research, and the school of thoughts of RM, and their respective theoretical perspectives, guided studies in sport management research. Informed by the study’s findings, agenda for future research will be identified. The work is in-progress, and findings will be presented at NASSM conference.