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Status of internal communication research in public relations: An analysis of published articles in nine scholarly journals from 1970 to 2019

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the trends of internal communication research through a quantitative content analysis of published articles in public relations and other communication journals. Research topics, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and authorship information were analyzed using 223 articles. Results indicate that internal communication research in public relations scholarships has exponentially increased since 2011. Research topics on internal communication have diversified since 2000, from descriptive studies illustrating internal communication practices to a variety of relevant phenomena on employee and organizational outcomes. Public relations theories, such as organization–public relationship and symmetrical communication, have been frequently applied in internal communication research. In terms of methodology and sample, quantitative and qualitative methods have been equally utilized, and employees from multiple organizations were frequently used as a type of sample in a large portion of research works. The most productive researchers and institutions of internal communication research in public relations were also identified. Implications for ongoing internal communication research in public relations disciplines are discussed. To address the limitations of the current study, future studies should incorporate an interdisciplinary and a global perspective.

1. Introduction

Internal communication is the art and science of “managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees” (Men & Bowen, 2017, p. 12). The rapid growth of internal communication as a discipline and profession is highlighted in the words and actions of academics and practitioners. In particular, internal communication is one of the “fastest growing specialization in public relations and communication management” (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012, p. 223). According to the Seventh Communication and Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) study conducted by four leading public relations associations, senior-level practitioners reported that internal communication becomes one of core responsibilities of public relations *Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California, 2012*.

The advancement of internal communication as an independent domain is also a global trend, as evidenced by an increasing number of think tanks and professional bodies emerging across the globe. In 2010, internal communication practitioners in the UK launched the new *Institute of Internal Communication* as a professional organization separated from the *Chartered Institute of Public Relations*. In 2012, the *Institute*

for Public Relations in the U.S. launched its *Organizational Communication Research Center* dedicated to serving as “knowledge aggregator, model innovator and thought leader in the area of employee communication and engagement” (OCRC, 2019). *IC Kollektiv*, a Canada-based non-profit organization, has played a key role in publishing research reports on internal communication while fulfilling its mission in connecting internal communication professionals, educators, and researchers across the globe (IC Kollektiv, 2017). Accordingly, Men (2019) noted that internal communication is welcoming its best era and summarized 12 emerging internal communication topics that deserve further empirical research and discussion in a blog post for the *Institute for Public Relations*.

Given that, public relations scholars must ask if our scholarship has progressed with the practice and determine how topics and theories in internal communication research have reflected and resolved the emerging issues facing contemporary organizations. Until the last few years, internal communication scholarship has lagged behind practices (Verčič et al., 2012), and in particular, scholars noted a lack of research in internal communication from public relations perspective (e.g., Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Yeomans, 2006). However, recent years have seen

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research flourishing in internal communication, especially from public relations scholars. Recent studies have examined a wide array of topics, including the role of internal communication in the context of organizational culture (e.g., Men & Yue, 2019; Rhee & Moon, 2009), organizational change (e.g., Luo & Jiang, 2014; Yue, Men, & Ferguson, 2019), employee social media communication (e.g., Ewing, Men, & O'Neil, 2019; van Zoonen, van der Meer, & Verhoeven, 2014), organizational crisis (e.g., Kim, 2018; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016), employee behaviors (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2017), diversity (e.g., Ni, Wang, & Gogate, 2018; Pompper, 2012), and leadership (e.g., Men, 2014; Meng & Berger, 2013; Thelen, 2019), to name a few.

The number of internal communication research has substantially increased, yet no systematic literature review of internal communication research is available in the public relations domain. A systematic literature review of research articles in internal communication is warranted to shed light on the evolution of this field, where we are now, and where we are heading towards. Given the fast development of public relations subfields, scholars have also turned to a systematic way of reviewing and assessing the progress of key concepts and topics, including global public relations (Ki & Ye, 2017), organization–public relationships (OPR) (Cheng, 2018; Ki & Shin, 2006), public engagement (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017), corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Lee, 2015), online public relations (Ye & Ki, 2012), crisis communication (An & Cheng, 2010; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009), measurement and evaluation (Volk, 2016), and dialogue and digital dialogic research (Morehouse & Saffer, 2018). Following this line of research, this study aims to understand the trend and development in internal communication research, as a subfield of public relations scholarship. To accomplish this goal, research articles on internal communication in nine PR-specific and non-PR specific scholarly journals were reviewed to understand the current state of internal communication research and provide directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. State of internal communication research

Internal communication is defined in many different ways due to its “complex and multidisciplinary nature” (Kalla, 2005, p. 303). It is interchangeably referred to as internal public relations, employee communications, business communications, employee relations, internal relations, internal marketing, intra-organizational communication, and staff communication (Men & Bowen, 2017; Verčič et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). However, the term internal communication is the most favorable name among practitioners (Verčič et al., 2012) and theorists (Foreman & Argenti, 2005; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Internal communication has been widely studied across different disciplines, including management, marketing, and advertising, yet we consider internal communication as a specialization of public relations in the current study. In public relations, internal relations has been termed as “internal communication” or “internal public relations,” which emphasizes the management of relationships with internal stakeholders (i.e., employees). Grounded in the excellence theory of public relations, Men and Bowen (2017) specifically defined internal communication as “a process co-created by the organization and its employees,” and defined internal relations as “the strategic management of internal communication in managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees.” (p. 12).

Several scholars have made efforts to provide an integrated and theory-driven approach to understanding internal communication through its definition, structure, dimensions, and models. Integrating literature from corporate communication, organizational communication, management, and business, Kalla (2005) applied a multidisciplinary theorization of internal *communications* (used in plural form to capture all communication processes) comprising four domains: business communication (focused on communication skills of

employees), management communication (focused on communication skills of managers), organizational communication (addressing philosophically- and theoretically- oriented issues), and corporate communication (addressing formal corporate communication function). Thus, Kalla described internal communications as “all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organization” (2005, p. 304). In comparison, Welch and Jackson (2007) took a stakeholder perspective focusing on internal stakeholder segmentation. They defined internal communication as “the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations across numerous interrelated dimensions, including internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication, and internal corporate communication” (p. 193). Furthermore, they elaborated on the level, direction, participants, and content of each dimension in their Internal Communication Matrix. Taken altogether, the current study provides a conceptual definition of internal communication as *the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organization through different communication processes including business communication, management communication, organizational communication, corporate communication, and strategic communication*. In this definition, we added strategic communication as a key communication process. As an academic discipline, strategic communication refers to “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” and is thus relevant to achieving specific internal communication goals (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder, 2018, p. 493). This holistic definition of internal communication is in line with the main function of public relations in managing relationships. Not only it addresses the goal of internal communication in facilitating interactions, communications, and relationship building between all levels of internal stakeholders, but it also incorporates different communication processes that can be utilized by organizations to reach the goal.

A few studies have endeavored to provide an overview of the industry practice of internal communication and theory development of the scholarship. For example, a Delphi study conducted among European internal communicators examined how practitioners have defined internal communication, conceived of the relationships between internal communication and other management functions, and perceived to be the knowledge and skills to fulfill the role of internal communicators (Verčič et al., 2012). Another study reviewing 12 academic and consultancy studies on internal communication assessments found that most assessment instruments tended to be management-centric and focused on evaluating one-way messaging effectiveness (e.g., communication processes, channels, and volume) (Ruck & Welch, 2012). These existing assessments, however, failed to center on employees’ communicative needs or address the development of dialogue and communities within organizations. In response, Ruck and Welch (2012) proposed a new framework for assessment, in which employee-centered engagement is conceptualized as the outcome of internal communication, and several drivers of engagement are also explored. Taking a critical perspective, Pompper (2012) advanced internal public relations theory from a social capital and diversity perspective. This view suggests shifting the focus away from the traditional adversarial relationships between managers and employees; rather, it promotes reorienting the function of internal public relations to “foster a livable work environment where diversity is embraced, conflict is minimized, and employees are interconnected and free to form relationships in the course of addressing organizational goals and achieving their maximum potential” (p. 101).

The aforementioned studies have made tremendous contributions to depicting a big picture of internal communication, either from a theory-building perspective or practice-based orientation. However, none of these studies have systematically identified peer-reviewed journal articles in internal communication or presented the theoretical, methodological, and topic development of internal communication research,

especially from public relations perspective. To fill this research gap, therefore, this study investigates the status of internal communication research in public relations scholarship.

2.2. Trend studies in public relations

In public relations scholarship, an increasing number of studies have assessed and evaluated the state of the research topics using content, bibliometric, and meta-analyses. Ki and Ye (2017) grouped such research into two broad categories: 1) analysis of the field state and 2) analysis of a specific topic. Studies in the first category examine the achievements in the entirety of public relations research to provide directions for future research at a macro level (Lee, 2017). Such efforts have been made by Ferguson (2018), who synthesized 10 years of articles in *Public Relations Review* and identified three categories of research back in 1984. Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) extended the work of Ferguson by analyzing 748 research articles from three peer-reviewed public relations journals and found evidence of theory advancement. Botan and Taylor (2004) traced the theoretic development in public relations and proposed functional and co-creational approaches as two organizing perspectives of public relations research. Based on a bibliometric study of public relations literature from 1990 to 1995, Pasadeos, Renfro, and Hanily (1999) called for more diversity in public relations topics and paradigm. Building on this work, Ki, Pasadeos, and Ertem-Eray (2019) studied the most-cited works from the 2000s and 1990s. They concluded that public relations scholarship has become theory-driven in the past two decades. Four research domains, namely, crisis communication, relationship management, new technologies, and dialogic communication, are considered with high importance.

The second type of trend studies in public relations concerns specific subtopics. For example, Ki and Shin (2006) examined the status of OPR research by analyzing articles from 1985–2004. Extending this study, Cheng (2018) reviewed studies from 1998 to 2016 that were relevant to OPR. Cheng suggested applying the concept of a contingent organization–public relationship to measure the longitudinal change in OPR. Lee (2017) identified several patterns of CSR research, including a balance in the application of qualitative and quantitative methods, the dominant use of stakeholder theory, and a lack of theoretical underpinning. Ki and Ye (2017) reviewed 163 articles related to global public relations research published between 2001 and 2014. They suggested future studies diversify methodological approaches. Jelen-Sanchez (2017) analyzed 59 journal articles from 2006 to 2015 to examine public engagement research in public relations scholarship. The author revealed a strong post-positivism research stream with a focus on management and relational perspectives rooted in western traditions and the dominance of quantitative method in engagement research. The increasing theoretical power of dialogic theory has prompted scholars, such as Morehouse and Saffer (2018), to conduct a bibliometric analysis of dialogue and digital dialogic communication research in public relations.

The abovementioned trend studies have provided insights into the evolution and future direction of different subtopics in public relations. Focusing on the second category of trend studies, this study attempts to extend the current line of trend research by examining internal communication, a growing subfield of public relations scholarship. Specifically, in line with previous studies, this study aims to investigate authorship, topics, theories, and methodologies used in internal communication research. The following research question is thus proposed:

Research Question: What are the (a) authorship, (b) research topics, (c) theoretical frameworks, and (d) methodological trends and sample featured in internal communication articles published in peer-reviewed journals?

3. Method

3.1. Sample selection

This study analyzed the contents of full-length, peer-reviewed scholarly articles addressing internal communication research from a public relations perspective. According to Ha and Boynton (2014), “trend studies in various disciplines usually examine the content of academic journals in terms of productive authors and institutions, general research topics, research purposes, theoretical applications, and research methods,” (p. 33) and “book reviews, opinion pieces, and bibliographic issues were excluded.” (p. 44). Following this argument, the authors only selected peer-reviewed academic scholarly journals as samples, excluding handbook, book reviews, and other relevant professional sources to understand the development of internal communication research. To select articles that best reflect this definition of internal communication suggested in the current study, the researchers employed two steps.

First, three major, high-impact journals that publish public relations research were selected: *Public Relations Review (PRR)*, *Journal of Public Relations Research (JPRR)*, and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly (JMCQ)*¹. These journals are selected by prior public relations scholars in examining both general (i.e., Vasquez & Taylor, 2001; Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010) and specific research trend (i.e., CSR, Lee, 2017; online public relations, Ye & Ki, 2012) in public relations. Then, two additional journals that are relevant to public relations research, *Public Relations Journal (PRJ)* and *Public Relations Inquiry (PRI)*, were also included². For these PR-specific journals, articles containing any of the following keywords in titles, abstracts, or keywords were selected: employee, employee relations, employee relationship, internal communication, employee communication, internal relations, internal publics, or internal stakeholders. A total of 97 articles were selected.

Second, to provide additional journal outlets that are most relevant to internal communication research from the perspective of public relations, the researchers requested input from a panel of six public relations scholars whose expertise lies in internal communication in March 2019 via e-mail, phone call, and face-to-face conversation. Four panelists are scholars based in U.S. universities, and two panelists are scholars based in two European countries. Each panelist has at least five articles published related to internal communication in peer-reviewed journals. Upon completing coding the frequencies of their responses, four additional journals were included: *Corporate Communications: An International Journal (CCLJ)*, *International Journal of Strategic Communication (IJSC)*, *Journal of Communication Management (JCM)*, and *Management Communication Quarterly (MCQ)*. JCM and IJSC, in particular, have been recognized for frequent publishing of public relations research (Ki & Ye, 2017; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003), and CCLJ has also been included in previous trend studies as one of the publishing outlets for public relations research (Ao & Huang, 2019; Ki & Ye, 2017). For these journals (e.g., CCLJ, IJSC, JCM, MCQ), the researchers collected relevant articles using the same keywords (e.g., employee, employee relations, internal communication, internal relations) listed above. Subsequently, two researchers whose expertise is in public relations read titles and abstracts to determine whether an article is relevant to the scope and the purpose of the current study; that is, an article should either (a) be written by public relations scholars

¹ The researchers only included public-relations-indexed articles published in JMCQ (Ki et al., 2019; Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999)

² Because of its focus on both the scholarly and practical contributions of public relations (Sisco, 2019), articles from PRJ have been selected as sample for public relations trend research (e.g., Ki & Ye, 2017). Moreover, to include internal communication research articles from diversified approaches and methods, the researchers selected PRI where conceptual, reflexive, and critical discussion on public relations is presented.

Table 1

The number of internal communication articles in public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

Journal Name	Frequency	Percent (%)
<i>Public Relations Review</i>	51	23 %
<i>Corporate Communications: An International Journal</i>	51	23 %
<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>	37	17 %
<i>Management Communication Quarterly</i>	28	13 %
<i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>	25	11 %
<i>Public Relations Journal</i>	17	8%
<i>International Journal of Strategic Communication</i>	10	4%
<i>Public Relations Inquiry</i>	2	1%
<i>Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly</i>	2	1%
Total	223	100.0

identified in the first step, or (b) address internal communication problems/issues from PR perspective (e.g., relationship management). Therefore, 126 articles were added.

In summary, a total of nine academic journals (see Table 1) were selected. In total, 223 articles published from 1970 to 2019 were identified for data analysis.

3.2. Measures

This study draws upon previous trend studies in public relations (e.g., Lee, 2017; Ye & Ki, 2012) and identifies the following categories to code each article: (a) general information about the article (e.g., journal title, publication year, authorship, and institutional affiliation); (b) research topic and theoretical frameworks; (c) research methods, sample characteristics, and statistical analysis.

3.2.1. General information

The researchers coded the name of the journal, title of the article, and year of publication to determine yearly trends in internal communication research. Additionally, the names and the institutional affiliations of all authors were coded. As noted by Cho and Khang (2006), author information is particularly useful in identifying the variety or uniformity of contributors, and this information has been commonly included in previous trend research (e.g., Ye & Ki, 2012)

3.2.2. Research topic and theoretical framework

The researchers inductively developed the coding categories by analyzing each article, and the following categories were identified: (1) descriptions of internal communication practices; (2) internal communication and issue/crisis management; (3) the role of public relations in internal communication; (4) perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge of employees; (5) employee behaviors; (6) internal communication, technology, and media; (7) employee engagement; (8) leadership; (9) organizational culture and internal communication; (10) change management and internal communication; (11) internal communication and ethics; and (12) other topics. Two researchers identified and coded the most prominent topic addressed in each article to avoid articles from falling into more than one category.

In terms of the theoretical framework, names of theories that are explicitly referenced in articles were coded. The researchers later consolidated these discrete theories into broader theoretical groups (e.g., public relations theory, mass communication theory, organizational theory).

3.2.3. Research methods

Research methods for each article were coded into either *qualitative method* (e.g., in-depth interview, focus groups, case study, critique/essay, thematic analysis, and rhetorical analysis etc.), *quantitative method* (e.g., survey, experiment, and content analysis, etc.), or *mixed method* to investigate the most frequently used methods in internal communication research. Different methods included in articles using

mixed method were coded several times to understand diverse methodological approaches.

3.2.4. Sampling methods

We assigned either *probability sampling* or *nonprobability sampling* in coding the sampling method of the selected articles. Probability sampling includes simple, stratified, and systematic random samplings, while nonprobability sampling includes convenience, purposive, quota, and snowball samplings. Sample size was also coded for all studies.

3.2.5. Sample type

The type of sample was coded into the following categories: (a) employees from multiple organizations, (b) employees in a single company, (c) managers (e.g., supervisors, executives, and CEO), (d) practitioners (e.g., public relations, internal communication, marketing, and corporate communication), (e) documents (e.g., posts, articles, images, texts, magazine, newsletter, and existing survey), (f) employees in a particular industry (e.g., airline, government, and non-profit), and (g) students.

3.2.6. Country of study

The country or region (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, and China) where each article was conducted was coded to understand the broad context of internal communication research.

3.2.7. Statistics

Based on the statistical analysis stated in each article, the following categories were identified: descriptive analysis, correlation, regression, chi-square, *t*-test, ANOVA, mediation/moderation/path analysis, factor analysis (e.g., EFA, CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM).

3.3. Intercoder reliability

Two coders participated in the coding. Scott's Pi (Scott, 1955) was used to calculate the intercoder reliability. Two coders randomly coded 15 articles, representing approximately 10 % of the total articles. The intercoder reliability was 1.0 for general information (e.g., journal name, publication year, and author information), 0.87 for research topics, 0.90 for theoretical frameworks, 0.94 for research methods, 0.91 for sampling method, 0.88 for sample type, 0.98 for country of study, 0.96 for statistics. The discrepancies were resolved after discussion. The two coders independently coded half of the remaining posts in July 2019.

4. Results

4.1. Published articles

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of published articles in each journal. A total of 223 articles were selected from nine peer-reviewed journals addressing internal communication from the public relations perspective. A total of 51 articles (23 %) were published in *Public Relations Review* and *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, respectively, followed by 37 articles (17 %) in *Journal of Communication Management*, 28 articles (13 %) in *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25 articles (11 %) in *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17 articles (8%) in *Public Relations Journal*, 10 articles (4%) in *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, and 2 articles (1%) in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Public Relations Inquiry*. Notably, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Public Relations Inquiry* have not considerably published internal communication research compared with other major public relations journals. As shown in Fig. 1, internal communication research has exponentially increased from 2011–2015. Specifically, thirty percent of the articles ($n = 66$) were published from 2011 to 2015, with 19 articles published in 2012. The most recent years (2016–2019) have also witnessed a

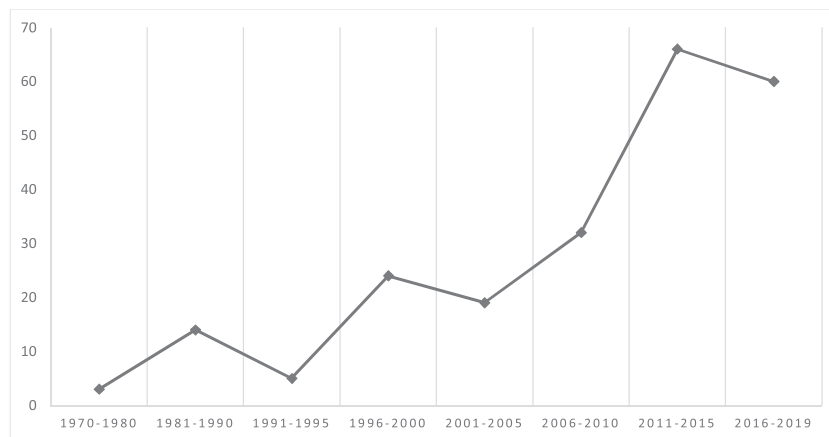


Fig. 1. The yearly trends of internal communication research in public relations scholarship (1970-2019).

substantial number of articles with the following breakdown by year: 2016 (13 articles), 2017 (16 articles), 2018 (18 articles), and 2019 (12 articles by June).

4.2. Authorship and institution

Using the cumulative article credit method applied by Pasadeo et al. (1999), the present study calculated credits for authors and their institutions. A maximum credit of 1.0 was assigned to each article. If an article contains a single author, the author and the author's institution received a credit of 1.0. If an article includes more than one author, then the authors and their institutions received partial credit. For example, in a two-author article, each author receives a credit of 0.5. For a three-author article, each author receives 0.33. As shown in the results (see Table 2), the most published author in selected journals was Linjuan Rita Men (15 articles, 10.66 credits), followed by Mary Welch (6 articles, 4.33 credits), Hua Jiang (6 articles, 3.50 credits), Jeong-Nam Kim (5 articles, 1.91 credits), Hongmei Shen (4 articles, 3.00 credits), Tiffany Derville Gallicano (4 articles, 2.66 credits), and Juan Meng (4 articles, 2.00 credits). In terms of the affiliated institutions, Aarhus University had the most publications (8.99 credits), followed by University of Florida (8.74 credits), Purdue University (6.15 credits), University of Maryland (5.58 credits), and University of Central Lancashire (4.33 credits).

Table 2

Most published authors and institutions of internal communication research (1970-2019).

Author	Number of Articles	Article Credits
Linjuan Rita Men	15	10.66
Mary Welch	6	4.33
Hua Jiang	6	3.50
Jeong-Nam Kim	5	1.91
Hongmei Shen	4	3.00
Tiffany Derville Gallicano	4	2.66
Juan Meng	4	2.00
Institution	Article Credits	
Aarhus University	8.99	
University of Florida	8.74	
Purdue University	6.15	
University of Maryland	5.58	
University of Central Lancashire	4.33	
Indiana University	4.25	
Southern Methodist University	4.00	
University of Oregon	3.99	

4.3. Research topic

Among the 12 topic categories identified (see Table 3), the most researched topics were internal communication description and practices (e.g., studies describing internal communication practices in a certain context) ($n = 37$, 16.6%), internal communication and issue/crisis management ($n = 31$, 13.9%), and the role of public relations in internal communication (e.g., relationship management, public relations functions, and internal publics) ($n = 27$, 12.1%).

Topics also varied by different periods. Before 2010, the focus of internal communication topics were internal communication description and practices ($n = 23$, 26%), the role of public relations in internal communication ($n = 13$, 17%), and employees' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge ($n = 13$, 14%).

After 2011, issue/crisis management in the internal context (e.g., conflict management, internal activism) was the most researched topic ($n = 23$, 17%), followed by employee behaviors ($n = 15$, 11%), internal communication and media ($n = 14$, 11%), the role of public relations in internal communication ($n = 14$, 11%) and descriptions of internal communication practices ($n = 14$, 11%). Research on employee engagement ($n = 12$, 9%), leadership ($n = 11$, 8%), and ethics ($n = 8$, 6%) has also notably increased. Compared with other topics, change management ($n = 1$, 1%) and organizational culture ($n = 3$, 2%) related to internal communication were underexplored during this period.

4.4. Theoretical framework

The results showed that a total of 130 articles (58%) among 223 articles explicitly presented theories/frameworks used. Approximately 29.2% of the articles ($n = 39$) referenced theories/frameworks commonly used in the public relations domain. Relationship theory (e.g., OPR) was referenced the most ($n = 17$, 13.1%), followed by situational theory ($n = 7$, 5.4%), symmetrical communication model ($n = 6$, 4.6%), excellence theory ($n = 4$, 3.1%), situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) ($n = 3$, 2.3%), four models of public relations ($n = 1$, 1%), and dialogic theory ($n = 1$, 1%).

Other theoretical frameworks applied in internal communication research include social exchange theory ($n = 11$, 8.5%) and leadership theory (e.g., Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)) ($n = 6$, 4.6%). The results further showed a wide application of theories across disciplines, including general communication theories (e.g., communication accommodation and expectancy violation theories), mass communication theories (e.g., uses and gratification theory, media richness theory), and theories in organizational behavior and business (e.g., organizational justice, stakeholder theory, social identity theory).

Table 3
Topics investigated in internal communication research from public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

Topics	1970–1990		1991–2000		2001–2010		2011–2019		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1 Descriptions of internal communication practices (e.g., internal communication practice or example in a specific nation, industry, or a company)	8	50	6	22	9	19	14	11	37	17
2 Internal communication and issue/crisis management (e.g., conflict management, internal activism)	1	6	2	7	5	11	23	17	31	14
3 The role of public relations (PR) in internal communication (e.g., public relations model, internal stakeholders)	2	13	5	19	6	13	14	11	27	12
4 Employees' perceptions, attitudes, knowledge (e.g., job satisfaction, image, organizational identification)	2	13	2	7	9	19	12	9	25	11
5 Internal communication, media, and technology (e.g., social media)	1	6	2	7	3	6	14	11	20	9
6 Employee behaviors (e.g., voice, silence, organizational citizenship behavior)	0	0	0	0	3	6	15	11	18	8
7 Employee engagement	1	6	0	0	1	2	12	9	14	6
8 Leadership	1	6	1	4	1	2	11	8	14	6
9 Internal communication and change management	0	0	4	15	7	15	1	1	12	5
10 Internal communication and organizational culture	0	0	4	15	1	2	3	2	8	4
11 Internal communication and ethics (e.g., CSR)	0	0	0	0	1	2	8	6	9	4
12 Others (e.g., measurement, education, diversity)	0	0	1	4	1	2	6	5	8	4
Total	16	100.0	27	100.0	47	100.0	133	100.0	223	100.0

4.5. Research methods and sampling

Overall, researchers have used both quantitative ($n = 100$, 44.8 %) and qualitative method ($n = 97$, 43.5 %) evenly, followed by mixed method ($n = 26$, 11.7 %) for internal communication research.

Table 4 summarizes specific methodology used. The survey method was the predominant methodological approach ($n = 109$, 41 %), followed by in-depth interviews ($n = 64$, 24 %), case studies ($n = 23$, 9%), critique/essay ($n = 16$, 6%), and qualitative content analysis ($n = 15$, 6%). Survey ($n = 24$) and critique/essay ($n = 9$) were the main methodologies before 2000, while survey ($n = 85$) and in-depth interviews ($n = 58$) were mainly used after 2001. Notably, we observed an increase in the usage of experiments ($n = 3$) and quantitative content analysis ($n = 7$) since 2011, yet these methods still constitute a small proportion. A total of 136 articles (61.0 %) explicitly mentioned the sampling method. Among the 136 articles, 100 articles (73.5 %) used non-probability sampling, featured by purposive sampling ($n = 43$, 43 %) and convenience sampling ($n = 22$, 22 %). In addition, 36 articles (28 %) used probability sampling. Among these articles, approximately 23 (63.8 %) articles used simple random sampling method.

4.6. Sample type and size

A total of 191 articles (85.7 %) identified the sample types used.

Table 4
Research methods investigated in internal communication research from public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

		1970–1990		1991–2000		2001–2010		2011–2019		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Quantitative	Survey	11	58	13	37	21	34	64	42	109	41
	Experiment	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	3	1
	Content analysis	1	5	0	0	0	0	7	5	8	3
	Sub-total	12	63	13	37	21	34	74	48	120	45
Qualitative	In-depth interview	1	5	5	14	16	26	42	27	64	24
	Focus group interview	0	0	1	3	3	5	7	5	11	4
	Content analysis	1	5	1	3	4	6	9	6	15	6
	Case study	1	5	7	20	7	11	8	5	23	9
	Critique/essay	2	11	7	20	6	10	1	1	16	6
	Book/literature review	1	5	0	0	4	6	8	5	13	5
	Observation	1	5	1	3	1	2	2	1	5	2
	Others (e.g., delphi method, ethnographic study)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	1
	Sub-total	7	37	22	63	41	66	79	52	149	55
	Total	19	100.0	35	100.0	62	100.0	153	100.0	269	100.0

Among these articles, 35 % ($n = 79$) used employees from multiple organizations (see Table 5). A total of 13 % ($n = 29$) focused on employees in one single company, and 12 % ($n = 26$) recruited employees in managerial levels only (e.g., executives, CEOs). Nine percent of the articles ($n = 19$) focused on employees in a specific industry. In addition, 9% ($n = 19$) of the studies used documents as samples, such as posts, articles, images, texts, or existing surveys. Practitioners from the communication profession, including public relations, marketing communication, corporate communication, or internal communication practitioners were also used as samples ($n = 15$, 7%). Students ($n = 4$, 2%) were the least used type of sample.

The sample sizes varied depending on the research methods employed. A total of 54 qualitative studies (e.g., in-depth interviews) reported sample sizes. Sample size ranged from 1 to 10 for 5 studies (9.3 %), 10–20 for 17 studies (31.5 %), 21–40 for 20 studies (37.0 %), and 40+ for 11 studies (20.4 %). For quantitative studies (e.g., survey), 104 articles indicated sample sizes. In summary, 25 articles (24 %) had less than 100 participants, 31 articles (29.8 %) had a sample size from 201 to 400, 28 articles (26.9 %) had a sample size from 401 to 600, and 19 studies (18.3 %) had more than 600 participants.

4.7. Country of study

As shown in Table 6, the identified studies were conducted across

Table 5
Sample types in internal communication research from public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

	1970–1990		1991–2000		2001–2010		2011–2019		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Employees from multiple organizations	4	24 %	5	19 %	14	27 %	56	44%	79	35 %
Employees in a single company (e.g., airline, university, IT company, etc.)	1	6%	3	11 %	11	22 %	14	11 %	29	13 %
Managers/supervisors only (e.g., executives, CEOs)	2	12 %	5	19 %	6	12 %	13	10 %	26	12 %
Employees in specific industry (e.g., airline, bureau, government, bank, healthcare, non-profit etc.)	3	18%	2	7%	4	8%	10	8%	19	9%
Practitioners (e.g., PR, marketing, corporate communication etc.)	1	6%	1	4%	1	2%	12	9%	15	7%
Documents (e.g., existing surveys, Facebook posts, articles, images, corporate documents, magazine, texts, newsletter, webpage etc.)	3	18%	0	0%	4	8%	12	9%	19	9%
Students	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	3	2%	4	2%
N/A	3	18%	11	41 %	10	20%	8	6%	32	14 %
Total	17	100 %	27	100 %	51	100 %	128	100 %	223	100 %

Table 6
The countries examined in internal communication research from public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

		n	%
North America		113	50.7 %
	United States	111	49.8 %
	Canada	2	0.9%
Europe		75	33.6 %
	United Kingdom	25	11.2 %
	Denmark	11	4.9 %
	Sweden	6	2.7 %
	Italy	6	2.7 %
	Netherlands	5	2.2 %
	Ireland	5	2.2 %
	Germany	4	1.8 %
	European countries	4	1.8 %
	Finland	3	1.3%
	Belgium	2	0.9%
	Croatia	2	0.9%
	Norway	1	0.4%
	Spain	1	0.4%
Asia		24	10.8%
	Korea	8	3.6 %
	China	6	2.7 %
	India	5	2.2 %
	Malaysia	2	0.9%
	Asia	1	0.4%
	Indonesia	1	0.4%
	United Arab Emirates	1	0.4%
Oceania		6	2.7 %
	Australia	5	2.2 %
	New Zealand	1	0.4%
Africa		5	2.2 %
	South Africa	5	2.2 %
Total		223	

25 countries. A large portion of studies was carried out in North America ($n = 113, 50.7 \%$), with 111 articles (49.8 %) in the United States. Approximately 33.6 % of the studies ($n = 75$) were conducted in Europe, with United Kingdom ($n = 25, 11.2 \%$), Denmark ($n = 11, 4.9 \%$), Sweden ($n = 6, 2.7 \%$), and Italy ($n = 6, 2.7 \%$) at the top of the chart. In the context of Asia, Korea ($n = 8, 3.6 \%$) and China ($n = 6, 2.7 \%$) were the two main countries of internal communication research. Finally, 2.7 % of the articles ($n = 6$) were implemented in Oceania, such as Australia ($n = 5, 2.2 \%$). The results further revealed that the recent decade (2006–2019) has witnessed a substantial increase in studies conducted in non-US countries. More specifically, only 30 studies were conducted in non-US countries before 2006, but this number increased to 82 after (including) 2006, accounting for 52 % of the articles published in this period. In comparison, studies conducted in the US increased from 35 before 2006 to 76 after (including) 2006, accounting for 48 % of the articles published.

4.8. Statistics

Among 223 of articles including both quantitative and qualitative research, a total of 160 articles (70 %) mentioned the type of statistical analysis used. Overall, articles using and reporting statistical results increased after the year of 2001 ($n = 131, 73 \%$), compared to before the year of 2000 ($n = 29, 60 \%$). In total, advanced statistics, such as SEM ($n = 31, 14 \%$), regression analysis ($n = 30, 13 \%$), and factor analysis (e.g., EFA, CFA) ($n = 23, 10 \%$), along with descriptive analysis ($n = 22, 10 \%$), were the most frequently used statistical analyses. Correlation analysis ($n = 18, 8\%$) and analysis of variance (e.g., ANOVA, ANCOVA, MANOVA) ($n = 22, 10 \%$) were also used, followed by t -test ($n = 7, 3\%$), chi-square test ($n = 6, 3\%$), and mediation/moderation analysis ($n = 6, 3\%$) (see Table 7). Before 2000,

Table 7
Application of statistics in internal communication research from public relations scholarship between 1970-2019.

	1970–1990		1991–2000		2001–2010		2011–2019		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Statistics										
EFA/CFA	2	12	2	6	2	4	17	14	23	10
SEM	0	0	0	0	2	4	29	23	31	14
ANOVA/MANOVA/ANCOVA	0	0	2	6	5	9	10	8	17	7
Correlation analysis	6	35	3	10	3	5	6	5	18	8
Descriptive analysis	1	6	6	19	6	11	9	7	22	10
Regression	2	12	1	3	6	11	21	17	30	13
Chi-square	0	0	2	6	1	2	3	2	6	3
Mediation/Moderation	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	5	6	3
t-test	0	0	2	6	2	4	3	2	7	3
Total	11	65	18	58	27	48	104	84	160	70
No statistics	6	35	13	42	29	52	20	16	68	30
Total	17	100.0	31	100.0	56	100.0	124	100.0	228	100.0

correlational analysis ($n = 9$, 19 %) and descriptive statistics ($n = 7$, 15 %) were mainly used by the researchers. Notably, after 2001, the proportion of studies using SEM ($n = 31$, 17 %) and regression analysis ($n = 27$, 15 %) increased significantly.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the trends in internal communication research in public relations scholarship. A total of 223 articles published between 1970 and 2019 from nine peer-reviewed journals were coded. Through a quantitative content analysis approach, this study analyzed and reported a wide range of research topics, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and authorship information in internal communication scholarship. By including articles grounded in rigorous theoretical frameworks (e.g., articles from JPRR, PRR) as well as practice-oriented and case-specific research (e.g., articles from CCIJ, PRJ), this study provides important implications and future directions for internal communication research.

First, the findings showed that scholarly interest in internal communication has steadily increased over the past decade. In particular, the number of articles exponentially increased since 2012, suggesting that internal communication research has become an important research specialty in the public relations scholarship. This trend has largely kept pace with the recent development of internal communication practice as a strategic public relations function (Men & Bowen, 2017).

Second, the current study contributed to identifying diverse topic areas in internal communication research relevant to public relations scholarships. Although the topic on description of internal communication practice topped the list throughout 1970–2019, this topic showed dominance in literature before 2000. Notably, topics on employee behaviors (e.g., employee voice, dissent, communicative behaviors, and organizational citizenship behavior) (e.g. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017) have exponentially increased since 2000. In addition, research on *issue and crisis management* within the internal context (e.g. Gallicano, 2013; Kim, 2018) and *employee engagement* (e.g. Men, 2012; Verčič & Vokić, 2017) has demonstrated growth. In other words, descriptive studies illustrating features, functions, and models of internal communication took center stage in the early history of internal communication research. However, researchers have gradually become interested in the role of internal communication in influencing employee and organizational outcomes. As such, diverse topics focusing on different employee responses, such as job satisfaction, work engagement, organizational identification, employee voice, and advocacy, have emerged. Meanwhile, research on internal communication concerning public relations, media and technology, leadership, and change management have steadily attracted the attention of scholars. This result implies a growing trend in applying an interdisciplinary approach to researching internal communication.

Third, this study identified theoretical frameworks that have been applied in internal communication research. The proportion of articles that explicitly mentioned theories (58 %) was considerably higher than that of theory-driven articles in other public relations domains, such as online public relations (44.3 %, Ye & Ki, 2012), CSR (48.1 %, Lee, 2017), and global public relations (30.7 %, Ki & Ye, 2017), which speaks to the theoretical rigor of internal communication research. A total of 39 of the 130 articles that used theoretical frameworks employed public relations theories. Among these articles, the OPR framework was most cited, especially since 2011. That is, internal communication research examined through the lens of relationship management increased with the growth of OPR research in the early 2000s (Ki & Shin, 2006). Other classical theories/frameworks in public relations, such as the symmetrical communication model, the situational theory, and the excellence theory, have been used since 2011 but only to a lesser extent. In particular, dialogic theory are underutilized throughout the history of internal communication research despite its potential usefulness. Internal communication scholars have also

referenced theories and frameworks from other disciplines, such as mass and organizational communication, business and management, human resources (HR), organizational behavior, and industrial/organizational psychology (I/O psychology). For example, some frequently referred theories/frameworks include social exchange theory, social identity theory, mass and organizational communication theories (e.g., information richness theory, communicative constitution of organizations), and leadership theories (e.g., LMX). Given the fact that more than half of the theories and frameworks are outside public relations discipline, it further reinforces the notion that internal communication research takes a multidisciplinary perspective.

Fourth, our review on methodologies demonstrated a balance of using quantitative and qualitative methods. This finding is different from earlier systematic reviews examining global public relations (Ki & Ye, 2017) and online public relations (Ye & Ki, 2012), in which quantitative research is dominant. Throughout the history of internal communication research, survey was found to be the predominant method. Case studies and critiques/essays were frequently used before 2010, while an increasing number of studies have used in-depth interviews since 2011. In terms of sampling methods, non-probability sampling was used more often than probability sampling. Scholars have primarily sampled regular employees from multiple organizations in all periods of time. This is in part due to recruiting research participants via research companies, whose participant panels are not limited to one company or industry. While many studies had their sole focus on employees in managerial positions (e.g., supervisors, executives) in the early phase (before 2000), researchers have begun to sample employees in a single company after 2000. Throughout history, a steady number of articles have focused on employees from multiple organizations and practitioners working in corporate communication, public relations, and marketing. Student samples have also been adopted after 2000. Overall, a large portion of studies over the years either used employees from multiple organizations to generalize findings or focused on one single organization to delve into a communication phenomenon. Furthermore, the proportion of articles using statistics has considerably increased. In particular, during 2011–2019, statistics were featured in more than 84 % of all 124 articles. Notably, unlike other topics in public relations (e.g., CSR, online public relations) (Lee, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012), advanced statistics (e.g., factor analysis, SEM) have been continuously used across the entire period of internal communication research. This may suggest that internal communication researchers increasingly attempt to suggest a holistic model through advanced statistical techniques that help to advance a theory-building in the discipline.

Finally, the analysis of the authorship and institutional affiliation was provided in the current study. The most productive authors, with the exception of Mary Welch, are affiliated with universities in the U.S. These authors did not appear on the lists of most published authors in other public relations research (e.g., Lee, 2017). Except for Aarhus University, most productive institutions, such as the University of Florida (e.g., Lee, 2017), Purdue University (e.g., Ki & Ye, 2017), and the University of Maryland (e.g., Ye & Ki, 2012), are also listed among the most productive institutions in public relations research, according to prior systematic reviews. These institutions are also all located in the U.S. This result indicates that internal communication research has largely been contextualized in the West, with approximately 83 % of published studies based in the U.S. and some European countries, including U.K., Denmark, and others.

This review also contributes to the public relations scholarship as the first study to examine the state of internal communication research as a subfield of public relations. The social, economic, and technological transformations have created new opportunities and challenges for internal communication practice. For example, as social media have challenged the traditional one-way flow of internal communication (Men & Bowen, 2017), employees are now positioned as strategic brand ambassadors communicating outside their organizations (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Multiple challenges introduced by the changing workforce

dynamics, business environment, and media landscapes also demand effective internal communication to foster emotional engagement of employees, elicit their support during organizational change, and harness their goodwill in external advocacy. As internal communication scholars, we endeavored to understand how internal communication research has progressed over the last few decades, what has been accomplished, and what questions have remained answered. Drawing from the findings of the current study, we believe that internal communication has come of age as an independent discipline that enriches public relations literature.

5.1. Suggestions for future research in internal communication

An increasing number of internal communication research from diverse theoretical viewpoints and methodologies have contributed to the development and legitimization of its academic identity in public relations. Based on our findings, we offer the following suggestions for future internal communication research to consider.

First, ethics or ethical issues must be addressed in future studies. Public relations needs to be incorporated into organizational decision-making because it acts as corporate conscience (Men & Bowen, 2017). Ethics is thus inherently a vital component of effective internal communication. For instance, recent studies highlight CSR practice from an internal perspective (e.g., Chen, Hong, & Occa, 2019; Lee, 2019). From a critical perspective, Kennan and Hazleton (2006) pinpointed that internal public relations “frequently becomes a kind of exploitative activity where employees are asked to provide ‘more’ toward organizational goals and objectives without a true and continuing commitment of the organization to them” (p. 319). Different from the mainstream functionalist approach, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) provided insights into how public relations can enhance internal communication function by understanding how employees perceive and experience engagement. Given that public relations can be more ethical if practitioners take an activist stance in their organizations (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) as “critical worker researchers” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 147), we suggest that future research focus on how public relations can effectively and ethically represent the interest of internal publics for the sake of their well-being.

Second, methodological diversity is needed. Although quantitative and qualitative methods have been equally applied, methods such as experiment (Smith, Stumberger, Guild, & Dugan, 2017) and longitudinal design (Meng & Berger, 2019) have been rarely used. It is inadequate to argue for causal links between variables by using cross-sectional survey design. Future research should apply quasi-experimental designs and intervention studies to strengthen a causality statement. The investigation of specific topics (e.g., organizational culture, change management) also warrants time-lagged designs and ethnography approach. A growing application of computational methods, including agent-based modeling, social/semantic network analysis, and visual analysis, has been observed in the communication discipline. Similarly, the computational method may also be a useful tool for internal communication scholars to untangle the complex internal communication phenomena. For example, van Zoonen, Verhoeven, and Vliegenthart (2016) relied on the computational method to analyze work-related Twitter posts of employees (N = 38,124) and provided a typology for work-related Twitter use.

Third, cross-cultural comparative studies on internal communication are important but lacking. Organizational and national culture play critical roles in shaping internal communication practices (Sriramesh, Grunig, & Dozier, 1996; Men & Bowen, 2017). Studies have compared internal communication practices across a few Western countries (e.g., Mazzei, 2014). In addition to this line of comparison, we suggest that future researchers investigate similarities and differences of internal communication between the East and the West. Only by accumulating empirical evidence from a variety of cultures and systems can scholars make the first step in establishing a normative model of internal

communication.

This study has some limitations that should be considered to guide future research. The researchers collected and analyzed articles only from journals published in English. Thus, future scholars must examine literature from a non-western context to depict a more holistic picture of the internal communication research in the public relations discipline. Furthermore, future studies should compare how other disciplines – such as organizational communication, HR, organizational behavior, sociology, and I/O psychology – define internal communication in order to attain a more fine-grained understanding of internal communication from the public relations perspective. To get a holistic picture of the development of public relations as a scholarly discipline and a practice, future research should also include book chapters, trade journals, and magazines published by professional organizations (e.g., Institute for Public Relations, International Association of Business Communicators). For instance, *The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication and Gower Handbook of Internal Communication* are great sources of expert insights from both scholars and practitioners. Lastly, to address the inherent limitations of content analytical approach used in this study, it is necessary for future researchers to conduct surveys or interviews with internal public relations scholars and practitioners to provide a deeper understanding of the current and the future of internal communication research. Despite these limitations, the current study helps researchers and practitioners understand the current status and trends of internal communication research from public relations viewpoint and provides future directions for public relations scholars with a specialization in internal communication research.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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