A review of internal communication research in South Africa

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to assess the current state and determine the development of internal communication research in South Africa over the past 21 years (from 2002 to 2022), to provide direction for future research with a view to expanding the body of knowledge in the field from a South African perspective. Research articles on internal communication that were written from a corporate communication and public relations perspective that had been published in three peer-reviewed scholarly communication journals in South Africa were systematically reviewed. Authorship information, research topics, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and suggestions for future research indicated in 28 articles were analysed. It was found that most scholars focused on the implementation of internal communication management and internal strategies or plans in specific contexts or to attain certain outcomes. The most frequently used theories were relationship management theory and reputation management theories, and a qualitative research approach was the predominant methical approach used, with non-probability (purposive) sampling, even though questionnaires were the prevalent data collection tools. Although internal communication as a research field has grown globally, research in the South African context is lagging behind. Future research opportunities include: (1) more quantitative studies that employ large probability samples to generalise findings, (2) the digitalisation of communication channels, (3) developing and empirically testing local theories, frameworks and models, (4) including marginalised and diverse groups as a starting point for knowledge production, and (5) adapting the findings of research conducted prior to the post-COVID-19 setting.

Keywords

internal communication, internal communication research, South African context, systematic review, trend study

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is widely known that internal communication plays an important role in an organisation's survival and contributes to organisational success. There is a direct connection between internal communication and an organisation's results. As Dahlman and Heide (2021:1–2) argue, organisations with effective internal communication are "more likely to outperform the competition". Research strongly supports the high value and impact of internal communication (Lee & Li, 2020; Meng & Berger, 2012; Ruck & Welch, 2012).

Despite the practical importance of this function, several scholars have noted a lack of internal communication research in the past, particularly from public relations and corporate communication perspectives (Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Smidts et al., 2001; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Yeomans, 2006). However, internal communication as a discipline has since become a fast-growing specialisation in public relations and communication management (Verčič et al., 2012; Verghese, 2017). Men (2019) notes that internal communication is welcoming its best era. Similarly, Lee and Yue (2020:1) observe that "internal

communication research in public relations scholarships has exponentially increased since 2011".

However, although internal communication as a research field has grown globally, it seems that South African scholars are lagging behind in terms of the volume of studies produced. Lee and Yue (2020) published an article on the status of internal communication research in public relations in which they analysed 223 articles on the topic that had been published in nine international scholarly journals from 1970 to 2019. Worryingly, only 2.2% (n = 5) of those studies were carried out by South Africans and these five studies were the only ones conducted on the African continent. Similarly, Verčič et al. (2024:6) conducted a systematic review of 77 studies on the topic of digital internal communication published in 52 journals between 1990 and 2022, and only one article was conducted in Nigeria, Africa – "suggesting a Western bias in the field".

Therefore, Africa remains the most underrepresented continent regarding internal communication scholarship. Most research on internal communication is done by scholars from institutions in North America, the United Kingdom, some European countries and Asia (Lee & Yue, 2020; Verčič et al., 2024).

The limited research in the South African context on this important communication function necessitates an investigation of the standing of internal communication research by systematically identifying and analysing peer-reviewed articles in internal communication published in South African accredited journals.

Defining internal communication

Taking the interdisciplinary nature of internal communication into consideration (Lee & Yue, 2020), it makes sense that internal communication is often referred to with several different terms. Some of these terms include internal public relations, employee communications, business communications, employee relations, internal relations, internal marketing, intra-organisational communication, and staff communication (Verčič et al., 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007). However, according to communication and public relations scholars (Foreman & Argenti, 2005; Verčič et al., 2012) the term *internal communication* is the most favoured among practitioners, and is therefore the preferred term for this study.

Some definitions from a public relations and corporate communication viewpoint include the perspective of Welch and Jackson (2007:193), who focus on the strategic aspect of communication with various internal stakeholders: "The strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organisations across numerous interrelated dimensions, including internal line manager communication, internal team peer communication, internal project peer communication, and internal corporate communication". Similarly, Verčič (2019:196) highlights both managerial planning and interactions between employees in her definition by defining internal communication as "managing the flow of information, ideas, and emotions between an organization and its members to inform, motivate, engage, and co-create meaning, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness".

Other definitions focus more on the relational elements of internal communication with the focus on creating a community of trust and open relationships. Karanges et al. (2015:330) define internal communication as "an internal organisational process that provides and shares information to create a sense of community and trust among employees" and Men and Bowen (2017) explain it as a strategic approach to fostering mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and its employees.

The above definitions illustrate that not all scholars define the field the same, but they are aligned with the corporate communication and public relations focus of this study and therefore taken as a point of departure. Furthermore, the various definitions emphasise the diversity of the field and showcase the broad scope of internal communication as a discipline.

The current state of global internal communication research

The rapid growth of the internal communication field is evident from the amount of research that is being done globally on internal communication topics. From a public relations perspective, researchers have examined topics such as the influence of internal communication on organisational culture (Men & Yue, 2019; Sebastião et al., 2017; Thelen & Formanchuk, 2022); organisational change and change

management (Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Luo & Jiang, 2014; Men et al., 2020; Yue, Men & Ferguson, 2019); social media as an internal communication channel (Ewing et al., 2019; King & Lee, 2016; Van Zoonen et al., 2014; Verheyden, 2017); other digital channels for internal communication (Kovaitė et al., 2020; Lipiäinen et al., 2014; Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020); internal crisis communication (Kim, 2018; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016); employee behaviour (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2017); internal communication and diversity (Ni et al., 2018; Pompper, 2012); leadership (Lee & Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Men, 2014b; Meng & Berger, 2013; Thelen, 2019); employee engagement (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013; Karanges et al., 2015; Mishra et al., 2014; O'Neill et al., 2015; Verčič & Vokić, 2017), activism (Jin & You, 2023; Krishna, 2021; Lee, 2021); employee advocacy (Lee & Dong, 2023; Thelen, 2020; Thelen & Men, 2023); employee satisfaction (Men, 2014a; Thelen, 2021a; Verčič, 2021); internal relationship management (Kim, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Qin & Men, 2021); and internal brand management (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Leijerholt et al., 2022; Piehler et al., 2019).

Internationally, there has been a spike in internal communication research on the topic of COVID-19 from a public relations and communication management perspective (Charoensukmongkol & Suthatorn, 2022; Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021; Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021; Falkheimer et al., 2022; Horlait & Lambotte, 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Puyod & Charoensukmongkol, 2021; Santoso et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021 – to name a few). The way internal communication is done changed drastically because of COVID-19, and practitioners and scholars realised the importance of internal communication during the pandemic (Ruck & Men, 2021). The significance of the topic was highlighted by the *Journal of Communication Management*, which published a special issue on internal communication in 2021, during the pandemic. However, although internal communication research increased internationally during and after the pandemic (from 2021 to 2023), or scholars focused on COVID-19 within the discipline, this is not true for the South African context.

Interestingly, many dissertations and theses have been submitted on the topic of internal communication from a public relations and corporate communication management perspective, according to a search done on the National ETD Portal for South African Theses and Dissertations and on the Nexus Database System. Therefore, the argument can be made that South African students do research in the field of internal communication, but their research is never published in peer-reviewed journals. Furthermore, there are very few South African internal communication academics who publish in international journals. In 2014, there was a special issue of *Public Relations Review* on the topic of public relations and communication management in South Africa, in which two articles were published on internal communication practices, by Hume and Leonard (2014) and Le Roux (2014).

The South African internal communication context

It is argued that the South African internal communication context is unique. Organisations and practitioners are confronted with specific challenges, including the need to build bridges between internal stakeholders of differing cultures and 11 spoken languages, and to manage the effects of the previous apartheid regime on current racial tensions experienced internally, while facing difficult economic and political conditions in the workplace (Sutton et al., 2022). Rensburg (2002) argues that the South African culture is unique and has never been completely understood by Western scholars, probably partly due to the limited information on corporate communication and public relations generated in the country or in Africa (Anani-Bossman & Bruce, 2021; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023; Steyn, 2005). Given the country's context-specific problems and developing-world corporate environment (Maritz, 2002), communication practitioners in South Africa might be reluctant to adopt theories and solutions found in internal communication research that was published internationally. It is, consequently, vital to determine whether South African scholarship has progressed and whether it reflects the issues that organisations in the unique South African context are facing with respect to internal communication.

However, it is difficult to determine how internal communication research in the country has progressed over the past 21 years without a compilation of internal communication research in South Africa that could provide an overview of the scholarship in the discipline. To address this gap, the aim

of this study was to assess the development of internal communication research in the South African context. To accomplish this goal, research articles on internal communication written from corporate communication and public relations perspectives that were published in the three main peer-reviewed scholarly communication journals in South Africa from 2002 to 2022 were systematically reviewed. This was done to ascertain whether South African scholars published in South African journals, to understand the current state of internal communication research in South Africa and to provide direction for future research to expand the body of knowledge in the field from a South African perspective. As Shoemaker et al., (2004) indicate, scientific researchers should organise data obtained from numerous sources over a relatively long period to contribute to the growth of a field's knowledge base.

Research questions

With the above aim in mind, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What is the current status of internal communication research articles published in peer-reviewed journals in South Africa?

RQ2: What authorship and affiliation, dominant research topics, theoretical frameworks and methodological trends are featured in internal communication research articles published in peer-reviewed journals in South Africa?

RQ3: What future research opportunities have been indicated in internal communication research articles published in peer-reviewed journals in South Africa?

METHOD

A systematic review of the selected articles was conducted to determine the status of internal communication research in South Africa. This method is often used to locate and analyse the existing research in a specific field and to draw reasonable conclusions about what is known so far (Victor, 2008). In the past, the systematic review was mostly followed in clinical and medical studies, but is now widely used in social sciences and more specifically in public relations research (Ao & Huang, 2019; Arqoub & Dwikat, 2023; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023; Verčič et al., 2015; Verčič et al., 2024; Volk, 2016; Walker, 2010; Wang et al., 2021), because of its capacity to generate a balanced picture of the current state of knowledge (Volk, 2016). In this study, the literature was critically reviewed on specific research questions, allowing the study to expose how the research field in the South African context evolved.

Selection of journals and articles

In this study, the three local peer-reviewed communication journals on the Department of Higher Education and Training's list of accredited South African journals for 2023 were selected, namely *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa, Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, and *Communitas: Journal of Community Communication and Information Impact*. These are the three leading South African communication journals that are relevant to corporate communication and public relations research.[1] The choice to assess a limited sample of only peer-reviewed articles was made to ensure the sources' credibility, quality and reliability (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023; Volk, 2016) due to the thoroughness and objectivity of peer-reviewers prior to publication in journals. Therefore, other resources such as book reviews, opinion pieces, editorials, magazine articles, dissertations and theses, conference proceedings and bibliographic issues were excluded from the sample (Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ye & Ki, 2012).

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[1]   The author acknowledges that researchers from other fields, such as human resources and business management, also do research on internal communication from their perspectives and that internal communication is a multi-disciplinary field. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus was on internal communication research from a corporate communication management and public relations perspective; therefore, only these three local communication journals were chosen.

All the articles in these three journals' online databases (available on the journals' websites under the link to "previous issues", "list of issues" or "archives") that contained any of the following words in titles, abstracts or keywords were extracted and downloaded for review: employee, employee relations, employee relationship, internal communication, employee communication, internal relations, internal publics, or internal stakeholders. These keywords were the same as those Lee and Yue (2020) identified for their international trend study on the status of internal communication research. They were utilised for the South African study with a view to comparing local and international trends in the field. It emerged that South African authors often referred to "organisational communication" as part of their internal communication research; thus, these keywords were also included in the search terms.

Although there is no established set period for resources that should be used for a review, a 10-year span is the generally accepted term (Thomson, 2013). The coverage for this study was more than double that, covering a 21-year review.

The search of the three journals' databases led to a total of 33 articles published from 2002 to 2022. These articles were manually checked to ensure that they were written from a corporate communication or public relations perspective. Furthermore, the scope of the selected articles was limited to articles by South African authors and research conducted in the South African context. Articles by South African authors who conducted their research outside South Africa or did not focus on the South African context were excluded. Likewise, studies done by authors who were not South African but published in the three selected journals were also excluded. Two multi-authored articles had two South African authors and one international author, and the articles had a strong South African focus. It was decided to include those two articles, seeing that they contributed to internal communication research in South Africa. However, in the coding category in which the most productive authors and institutions were identified, the international author and affiliated institution were not coded. Based on these criteria, five articles were omitted from the initial 33, reducing the final number of articles selected for review to 28 to establish the status of South African research in the field of internal communication.

Measurement

Categories were drawn from previous trend studies in public relations research (Lee, 2017; Pasadeos et al., 2010; Ye & Ki, 2012), with a specific focus on Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman's (2023) recent study on the development of public relations research in Ghana (Africa) and Lee and Yue's (2020) study on the status of internal communication internationally, and designed to answer the three research questions posed in this study. Consequently, the selected articles were coded according to the following categories:

.   Category 1: General information

This category included coding of the journal's name, the title of each article, the year of publication, the authors' names and the institutional affiliation of each author. This information was used to determine yearly trends in internal communication research in South Africa and to identify the most common South African contributors to research in the field.

.   Category 2: Research topics and theoretical frameworks

The researcher inductively identified research topics as the articles were analysed. Each topic was coded and, as themes emerged, they were categorised into broader themes. The same process was followed to determine coding for the theoretical framework category. As the articles were analysed, the researcher coded all the theories identified in the articles. Many articles indicated the use of more than one theory for the study's theoretical framework; therefore the same article was coded in several theory categories.

.   Category 3: Methodological trends

In this category, the researcher first distinguished between qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups, qualitative content analysis, literature review and action research), quantitative research methods (questionnaire surveys) and a mixed-methods approach. Studies that followed the latter were coded in several method-categories.

Secondly, during the coding process, the sampling method identified in each article was categorised

as probability sampling (simple random and stratified random), quasi-probability sampling (systematic random), non-.probability sampling (convenience, purposive and snowball sampling) and census. This coding was used to understand which approaches, methods and sampling techniques were used most frequently.

.   Category 4: Suggestions for future research

The researcher also coded each article according to its suggestions for future research, to identify topics in the field of internal communication, with a specific focus on the South African context, that could provide South African scholars with an overview of the direction this field requires in the local context for future research.

The chosen categories for coding the articles in scholarly journals is in line with Ha and Boynton's (2014:33, 44) assertion that history and trend researchers "usually examine the content of academic journals in terms of productive authors and institutions, general research topics, research purposes, theoretical applications and research methods".

The tally sheet in the form of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet included the units of analysis (articles) and the units of observation (above defined categories) from which the systematic review and counting as a scoring procedure was followed to summarise the data as ratios and proportions, following descriptive statistical analysis which are presented in the Findings section below (see Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Du Plooy, 2009).

FINDINGS

Articles published from 2002 to 2022

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of articles published in the three selected journals. *Communicare* published the vast majority (64%, n = 18) of articles with an internal focus on the South African context, followed by considerably fewer articles in *Communicatio* (18%, n = 5) and *Communitas* (18%, n = 5). *Communicatio* and *Communitas* had a noticeably lower publication percentage in the discipline than *Communicare*. However, it seems that scholarly articles in the field are relatively rare overall.

Table 1: Number of internal communication articles published in South African peer-reviewed communication journals

Journal	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Communicare	18	64%
Communicatio	5	18%
Communitas	5	18%
TOTAL	28	100%

Figure 1 below shows that there was a slight increase in publications on internal communication in South Africa in 2006 (11%, n = 3) and 2022 (11%, n = 3). These were also the years with the highest publications recorded. The figure illustrates a marginal upward trend over the past 21 years. There were no publications in 2002, 2004, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016 in the internal communication field, while most years saw two articles published in the field (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2018 and 2019). The first 10 years saw exactly the same number of publications (14 articles from 2002 to 2011) as the past 11 years (14 articles from 2012 to 2022).
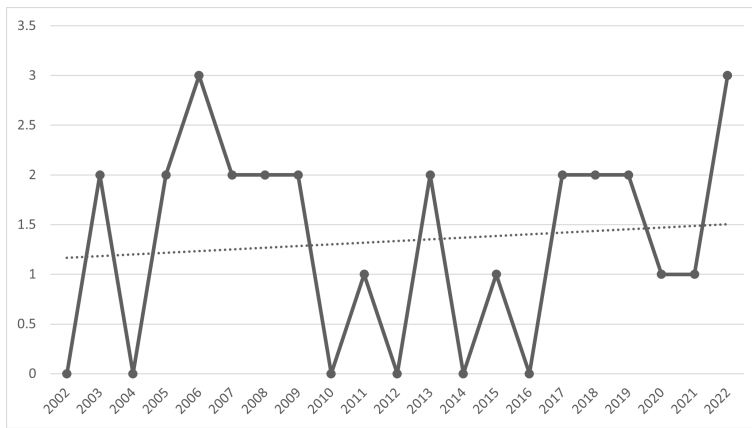
Figure 1: Yearly trend of internal communication research in South African journals

Authorship and institutional affiliation

The cumulative article credit method was followed (see Pasadeos et al., 1999) to calculate credits per author and institution. A credit of 1.0 was assigned to the author and institution when the article was written by a single author, a credit of 0.5 to each of the authors and institutions for a two-author article, a credit of 0.33 to each of the authors and institutions for three-author articles, etc.

As can be seen in Table 2, Y. Slabbert was the leading internal communication author, with the most published articles in the selected journals (3 articles, 3.00 credits). This author published almost double the article credits of L.M. Fourie (4 articles, 1.49 credits). E. de Beer published two co-authored articles, with one article credit, while a few published as single authors with one article credit (A. Oksiutycz, M. Delport, B. Mbatha, and W.J. Greeff). Other authors co-authored two articles with an article credit of 0.83 (R. Barker, G. de Wet, L. Holtzhausen and A.M.E. Naudé) and L.B. Sutton with an article credit of 0.66.

In terms of affiliated institutions, the University of South Africa had considerably more publications than the rest (8.5 credits), followed by the North-West University (4.48 credits), the University of Johannesburg (3.83) and the University of Pretoria (3.5). The Vaal University of Technology, the University of the Free State, and the Central University of Technology each merited one credit.

Table 2: Most published authors and institutions in internal communication in South Africa

Author	Number of articles	Article credits	Institution	Article credits
Y Slabbert	3	3	University of South Africa	8.5
LM Fourie	4	1.49	North-West University	4.48
E de Beer	2	1	University of Johannesburg	3.83
A Oksiutycz	1	1	University of Pretoria	3.5
M Delport	1	1	Vaal University of Technology	1
B Mbatha	1	1	University of the Free State	1
WJ Greeff	1	1	Central University of Technology	1
R Barker	2	0.83		
G de Wet	2	0.83		
L Holtzhausen	2	0.83		
AME Naudé	2	0.83		
LB Sutton	2	0.66		

Research topics and themes

As shown in Table 3, most scholars focused on the implementation of internal communication management and internal strategies/plans in certain contexts or to attain specific outcomes (such as developing a strategy to communicate affirmative action or an HIV policy to employees) (17.9%, n = 5); internal communication and organisational culture, diversity and the South African context (e.g., diverse

languages, diverse cultures, gender in the internal context) (17.9%, n = 5); and employees' perceptions (e.g., their perception of reputation, corporate identity, image, internal relationships and communication satisfaction) (17.9%, n = 5). These topics were followed by internal communication channels, media and technology (10.7%, n = 3); developing frameworks for a certain context or industry and implementing public relations theories in internal communication (e.g., developing or implementing a public relations model for the internal context or identifying internal stakeholders) (10.7%, n = 3); and internal change management (10.7%, n = 3). Other topics that were less researched included employee evaluation and measurement (including measurement instruments) (7.1%, n = 2), employee engagement (3.6%, n = 1) and leadership communication in the internal setting (3.6%, n = 1).

The focus of internal communication research in South Africa changed over time. From 2002 to 2011, the implementation of internal communication management and an internal communication strategy/ plan in certain contexts to attain specific outcomes was researched most (28.6%, n = 4), followed by internal communication and organisational culture, diversity and the South African context (21.4%, n = 3), employees' perceptions (14.3% n = 2) and internal communication channels, media and technology (14.3%, n = 2). During the second period, from 2012 to 2022, employees' perceptions (21.4%, n = 3) were the most researched topic, followed by internal communication and organisational culture, diversity and the South African context (14.3%, n = 2); developing frameworks for a certain context or industry and implementing public relations theories in internal communication (14.3%, n = 2); and internal change management (14.3%, n = 2). Notably, employee engagement (7.1%, n = 1) and leadership communication in the internal setting (7.1%, n = 1), which was not researched in the previous timeframe (2002–2011), started to receive attention in the 2012 to 2022 period.

Table 3: Research topics in internal communication articles in South African journals

Research topic	2002–2011		2012–2022		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
The implementation of internal communication management and an internal communication strategy/plan in certain contexts to attain specific outcomes (e.g., communicate affirmative action, implement HIV policy, etc.)	4	28.6%	1	7.1%	5	17.9%
Internal communication and organisational culture, diversity and the South African context (e.g., diverse languages, diverse cultures, gender in the internal context, etc.)	3	21.4%	2	14.3%	5	17.9%
Employees' perceptions (e.g., perception of reputation, corporate identity, image, internal relationships, communication satisfaction, etc.)	2	14.3%	3	21.4%	5	17.9%
Internal communication channels, media and technology	2	14.3%	1	7.1%	3	10.7%
Developing frameworks for a certain context or industry and implementing public relations theories in internal communication (e.g., public relations model for the internal context, identifying internal stakeholders, etc.)	1	7.1%	2	14.3%	3	10.7%
Internal change management	1	7.1%	2	14.3%	3	10.7%
Employee evaluation and measurement (including measurement instruments)	1	7.1%	1	7.1%	2	7.1%
Employee engagement	0	0.0%	1	7.1%	1	3.6%
Leadership communication in the internal setting	0	0.0%	1	7.1%	1	3.6%
TOTAL	14	100%	14	100%	28	100%

Theoretical frameworks

More than one theory was mentioned in the theoretical frameworks of many of the articles. Consequently, many articles were coded in more than one theory category. The most frequently used theories were relationship management theory (12.8%, n = 6) and reputation management theories (such as corporate image and corporate) (12.8%, n = 6), followed by stakeholder theory (10.6%, n = 5), systems theory (including cybernetics) (8.5%, n = 4), excellence theory (8.5%, n = 4) and change management theory (8.5%, n = 4). Other theories applied were mass communication theories (including information theory and media richness theory), organisational management theories (such as corporate culture), the reflective paradigm, social exchange theory, strategic communication management theory, structuration

theory, transformational communication theory, diffusion of innovation theory (DoI), feminist theory, leadership theory, human resource management theory, dialogical communication theory and several internal communication models (including the conglomerate communication model, the model of internal communication, top management communication outcomes model, the Twente organisational communication model, the integrated communication management model and the strategic employee communication model).

Applied theories varied at different times. In the years from 2002 to 2011, reputation management theories (such as corporate image and corporate) (16%, n = 4), systems theory (including cybernetics) (21.4%, n = 3), relationship management theory (21.4%, n = 3) and excellence theory (21.4%, n = 3) were applied most frequently. From 2012 to 2022, stakeholder theory (16.7%, n = 4) and relationship management theory (12.5%, n = 3) were the most frequently applied theories (see Table 4).

Table 4: Theoretical framework in internal communication articles in South African journals

Theory	2002–2011		2012–2022		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
None	1	4%	2	8.3%	3	6.4%
Reflective paradigm	1	4%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%
Systems theory (including cybernetics)	3	12%	1	4.2%	4	8.5%
Relationship management theory	3	12%	3	12.5%	6	12.8%
Stakeholder theory	1	4%	4	16.7%	5	10.6%
Excellence theory	3	12%	1	4.2%	4	8.5%
Mass communication theories (including information theory and media richness theory)	1	4%	1	4.2%	2	4.3%
Social exchange theory	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
Change management theory	2	8%	2	8.3%	4	8.5%
Strategic communication management theory	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
Organisational management theories (such as corporate culture)	2	8%	2	8.3%	2	4.3%
Reputation management theories (such as corporate image and corporate identity)	4	16%	2	8.3%	6	12.8%
Structuration theory	1	4%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%
Transformational communication theory	1	4%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%
Diffusion of innovation theory (DoI)	1	4%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%
Feminist theory	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
Leadership theory	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
Human resource management theory	1	4%	0	0.0%	1	2.1%
Dialogical communication theory	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
Internal communication models (including conglomerate communication model, the model of internal communication, the top management communication outcomes model, the Twente organisational communication model, the integrated communication management model and the strategic employee communication model)	0	0%	1	4.2%	1	2.1%
TOTAL	25	100%	24	100%	47	100%

Research approach

Overall, the qualitative research approach predominated (46.3%, n = 13), followed by the quantitative research approach (28.6%, n = 8) and the mixed-methods approach (25%, n = 7). In 2002 to 2011, the mixed-methods approach was used more (28.6%, n = 4) than the quantitative approach (21.4%, n = 3), with the qualitative approach being used in most research (50%, n = 7). While quantitative research (35.7%, n = 5) exceeded mixed-methods research (21.4%, n = 3) from 2012 to 2022, qualitative research remained the most used approach (42.9%, n = 6).

Research method

Some researchers used more than one method to collect data. Therefore, in many instances, one article was coded in more than one category. Quantitative questionnaires or surveys (37.5%, n = 15) and qualitative interviews (35.0%, n = 14) were used significantly more often than other data-gathering procedures, such as content analysis of documents (10.0%, n = 4), literature reviews (7.5%, n = 3), focus groups (7.5%, n = 3) and, in one case of action research, observation was used as the empirical data collection method (2.5%, n = 1), as illustrated in Table 5. It seems that the same pattern continued over

the 21-year period, with the same methods being used regularly (questionnaires/surveys and in-depth/semi-structured interviews).

Table 5: Research methods in internal communication articles in South African journals

Research method	2002–2011		2012–2022		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Questionnaires/surveys	7	36.8%	8	38.1%	15	37.5%
Interviews (in-depth and semi-structured)	6	31.6%	8	38.1%	14	35.0%
Content analysis of documents	2	10.5%	2	9.5%	4	10.0%
Literature reviews	2	10.5%	1	4.8%	3	7.5%
Focus groups	2	10.5%	1	4.8%	3	7.5%
Action research (observations)	0	0.0%	1	4.8%	1	2.5%
TOTAL	19	100%	21	100%	40	100%

Sampling methods

Because of the frequent use of the mixed-methods approach, some scholars employed more than one method to collect data; therefore more than one sampling technique was used. Consequently, in many cases, one article was coded into more than one sampling category. Three of the 28 articles did not provide information regarding the sampling method. Non-probability sampling (62.5%, n = 15) was used substantially more than probability sampling (29.2%, n = 7) and quasi-probability sampling (8.3%, n = 2). The same trend was evident throughout the 21 years.

Table 6: Sampling methods in internal communication articles in South African journals

Sampling method	2002–2011		2012–2022		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
None	1	7.1%	2	11.1%	3	9.4%
Census (whole population)	2	14.3%	1	5.6%	3	9.4%
Simple random sampling	1	7.1%	1	5.6%	2	6.3%
Stratified random sampling	3	21.4%	2	11.1%	5	15.6%
Systematic random sampling	1	7.1%	1	5.6%	2	6.3%
Purposive sampling	6	42.9%	8	44.4%	14	43.8%
Snowball sampling	0	0.0%	2	11.1%	2	6.3%
Convenience sampling	0	0.0%	1	5.6%	1	3.1%
TOTAL	14	100%	18	100%	32	100%

In terms of specific sampling techniques, purposive sampling (43.8%, n = 14) was applied exceptionally more than any other technique. Except for purposive sampling, which was dominant, stratified random (21.4%, n = 3) and census sampling (14.3%, n = 2) were mentioned most in the articles from 2002 to 2011, whereas stratified random sampling (11.1%, n = 2) and snowball sampling (11.1%, n = 2) were equally stated as sampling techniques from 2012 to 2022. However, snowball sampling (11.1%, n = 2) and convenience sampling (5.6%, n = 1) featured only in the 2012 to 2022 period, but not in articles published from 2002 to 2011 (see Table 6).

DISCUSSION

In answering research question 1, the findings show that there has been a slight increase in internal communication scholarship in South Africa over the past 21 years, but that there is still a lot to be done because only 28 articles that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were published in South African journals. Internationally, the number of internal communication articles has "exponentially increased since 2012, suggesting that internal communication research has become an important research specialty" in public relations and corporate communication scholarship (Lee & Yue, 2020:8). However, the same cannot be said for South African scholarship, because the 2002 to 2011 and 2012 to 2022 timeframes had the same number of published articles. Furthermore, internal communication research increased internationally during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Ruck & Men, 2021), but in the South African context there was only a small increase after the pandemic. Moreover, no article had a crisis or pandemic focus.

To answer research question 2, the authorship and affiliation, dominant research topics, theoretical frameworks and methodological trends were analysed. The assessment of the authorship of published

articles indicated that Y. Slabbert had a strong focus in the field and contributed most to internal communication research in South Africa. Although many authors received an article credit of only 0.5 or 0.33, these statistics could indicate a wide dispersal of individual and institutional contributors in the research field. The affiliated university with the greatest number of published articles was the University of South Africa, with a constant publication rate throughout the past 21 years. By far most of the articles on internal communication were published in *Communicare*, suggesting that this journal's scope is most relevant for the discipline in South Africa.

Because of the diverse South African environment with its many challenges (Sutton et al., 2022), it seems that research topics are often chosen to manage internal communication in this complex context. Topics such as affirmative action, HIV, diversity in terms of languages (South Africa has 11 official languages, which need to be managed in the internal context) and gender (several studies from a feminist approach) were evident. Organisational culture was also a topic of preference, probably because of the challenges associated with South Africa's apartheid history and racial tensions, which also need to be managed internally.

With respect to the theories, the inclusion of theoretical frameworks from 2012 to 2022 that were not used in the previous 10 years (such as social exchange theory, strategic communication management theory, feminist theory, leadership theory, dialogical communication theory and internal communication models) could suggest a slight increase in the sophistication of the field in South Africa. The traditional communication science theories are applied most often in internal communication research in South Africa, such as reputation management theories, systems theory, relationship management theory and the excellence theory, as is the case internationally (Lee & Yue, 2020). The inclusion of theories from disciplines that are not part of the traditional public relations framework, such as business management and human resources literature (e.g., social exchange theory, leadership theory, change management theory, human resource management theory, diffusion of innovation theory, stakeholder theory, etc.) supports the impression that internal communication research takes a multidisciplinary perspective and faces multidimensional challenges fundamental to effective internal communication (Lee & Yue, 2020; Verčič et al., 2024).

The analysis of methodologies indicated the dominance of the qualitative research approach. Moreover, many scholars employed an interview method to collect data. Therefore, it makes sense that the purposive know-group sampling method was the dominant sampling method. This finding is different from other international trend studies in public relations, in which the quantitative approach is more prevalent in public relations CSR articles (Lee, 2017) and online public relations articles (Ye & Ki, 2012). In internal communication research internationally, researchers have used the quantitative and qualitative approaches evenly (Lee & Yue, 2020). This is also true of public relations research in Latin America (Thelen, 2021b). However, in this study, the quantitative questionnaire survey research method was used in most cases, which could be because of the mixed-methods approach indicated in 25% of the articles. Furthermore, South African studies did not include methods such as experiments, Delphi studies or longitudinal studies, which other international scholars have called for (Lee & Yue, 2020; Verčič et al., 2012; Verčič et al., 2024).

Future research opportunities

In addition to the research findings and to answer research question 3, this study identified several research gaps and suggestions for future research to provide South African scholars with opportunities that the internal communication discipline requires in the local context.

First, most of the scholars whose studies had a qualitative focus suggested that a quantitative approach should be followed, and that probability sampling be used with a larger sample size to generalise the findings. Relatedly, many authors called for studies in other types of organisations and industries and on a larger scale to validate results. It would appear that scholars in South Africa are drawing on the methods in which they feel comfortable or were trained, or are using study cases or units which are easily accessible to them (such as available organisations for research), which are not necessarily the most

appropriate for exploring and clarifying practices, processes, and problems in internal communication. Furthermore, many organisations are not keen to allow quantitative methods (such as questionnaires) and probability sampling with their employees at all levels of the organisations. However, future research should consider larger samples and more cases to generalise and validate data on a national scale.

Second, existing studies called for more exploration into topics such as (1) effective leadership communication, (2) the development of measuring tools for internal communication to address limitations in the existing instruments that are outdated, (3) the potential of managing internal communication in a fully integrated manner, which will encompass other organisational functions, (4) reporting the financial and social performances of organisations to their internal stakeholders in an accountable, ethical and transparent manner, and (5) further inquiry into the purpose, scope and legitimacy of internal communication management as a profession and as an academic discipline.

Third, digitalisation has impacted internal communication channels. Yet only one study called for further analysis into the significance and role of e-newsletters in employee engagement, and one other study called for exploring the impact of telecommuting on internal communication. The evolvement of communication mediums based on online, electronic and social media platforms, and supplemented with artificial intelligence, is fundamentally changing the current modus operandi (Zimand-Sheiner & Lahav, 2022), and therefore warrants further investigation in the South African internal communication environment as well.

Fourth, the researchers who attempted to develop a conceptual framework suggested that the framework needed to be subjected to further empirical testing. The three frameworks that called for a more comprehensive investigation and testing of the practical applicability thereof include (1) the stakeholder-inclusive conceptual framework to strengthen internal corporate image (Slabbert, 2015), (2) co-change-orientated communication (co-COC) as a concept at high-change organisations (Slabbert, 2018a; Slabbert, 2018b), and (3) the framework for improving internal communication at South African multi-campus universities (Delport, 2020).

The current researcher would like to emphasise the importance of developing and testing conceptual frameworks and models in the South African context, seeing that studies in Africa have shown an over-reliance on Western philosophies and theories (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Mersham et al., 2011), which is not always applicable to or workable in the South African internal environment (Sutton et al., 2022). This also has an implication for the teaching of internal communication to students because South African universities aim to decolonise the curriculum, but academics will continue to depend on Western theories to teach the discipline of internal communication until local theories, frameworks and models are created.

Fifth, several authors suggested that the complex South African environment necessitated the inclusion of marginalised groups and diversity in cultures, races and languages as a starting point for knowledge production in the field. Based on these studies, future research should delve into diversity studies on women in different industries, perceptions of different generations in the workplace, the influence of language and culture on internal engagement, satisfaction and productivity, and explore the causes of intercultural conflict. These diversity topics could provide valuable data for corporate society in the increasing complexity of the organisational environment in South Africa, which face challenging issues.

Sixth, there is an obvious lack of South African internal communication research on the topic of COVID-19. The pandemic impacted several key issues relating to internal communication, such as employee well-being, remote or hybrid working, internal communication channels, organisational change and crisis communication. Future researchers might consider adapting the findings of research conducted prior to the post-COVID-19 setting.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was an exploration of the field of internal communication research in South Africa, which has not been rigorously investigated before. Therefore, the paper offers new insights into the development of the field in this specific context and thus an enhanced understanding of internal communication research

in the South African scholarly environment over the past 21 years. The study fills a gap in the academic milieu because, to the best of the current researcher's knowledge, it is the only trend study published to date that explores the status of internal communication research in the South African context – a unique setting with its own challenges.

Some South African scholars could have published in other interdisciplinary journals locally or internationally and contributed to the internal communication body of knowledge from a South African perspective. Therefore, a limitation of this study could be the inclusion and exclusion criteria utilised. However, this study clearly showed that internal communication scholarship in South African peer-reviewed journals with a focus on public relations or corporate communication is limited. Therefore, more emphasis on the field in the South African research context is called for. The current researcher also underscores the need for scholars to appreciate the importance of the internal communication function in the challenging South African environment and, consequently, to conduct more research.

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