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# Developments and trends in internal communication research in Africa: a historical view from 1990 to 2024

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Internal communication plays a significant role in an organisation's success and the discipline is experiencing significant global growth. Africa, however, lags in its contribution and remains underrepresented. Facing particular difficult economic, political and diversity issues, Africa could make a substantial contribution. This study addresses the gap by assessing the published academic growth of internal communication research conducted in Africa, to highlight historical trends.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study was conducted through a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles on internal communication, published between 1990 and 2024, to evidence the growth in the field. The Web of Science and Scopus databases were used to capture articles containing specific keywords. A screening process then followed. The authorship and institutional information, publication journals, African country of research, theoretical frameworks, methodological trends and future research suggestions found in 79 articles were analysed.

**Findings** – There is clear evidence that internal communication is developing as a discipline in Africa. A strategic approach, diversity and limited African contributions to international discussion, have been ongoing themes. The research published is mainly found in African journals and is limited to only ten African countries. The lack of African insights restricts an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the field.

**Originality/value** – This review, which addresses a notable gap in the literature, offers valuable insights into the development of internal communication in Africa over the past 35 years. This article calls for researchers to develop African-centred approaches to internal communication and participate in global discussions.

**Keywords** History, Internal communication, Internal communication research, Africa, Systematic review

**Paper type** Research article

## 1. Introduction

Internal communication plays a significant role in an organisation's success and survival (Ruck and Welch, 2012), and awareness of this important function has increased considerably after the COVID-19 pandemic (LaGree *et al.*, 2024). Given its importance and value, some scholars argue that internal communication is the fastest-growing specialisation field in public relations (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2012; Verghese, 2017), with a particular global increase in research on internal communication in the 2010s and onwards (Men, 2019; Lee and Yue, 2020; Yue *et al.*, 2024).

Although internal communication as a research field is growing, there is a view that the developing world, particularly Africa, is lagging in the number of studies produced (Sutton, 2023). Lee and Yue (2020) analysed 223 articles published in nine international scholarly journals from 1970 to 2019 and found that more than 85% of those studies were conducted in the developed world. Only 2.2% of the studies were carried out on the African continent. Similarly, Tkalac Verčič *et al.* (2024) conducted a review of 77 digital internal communication

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studies published in 52 journals between 1990 and 2022, and found that only one article dealt with research conducted in Nigeria, representing the African continent. From these studies, it appears that developing countries, including countries on the African continent, remain the most underrepresented in internal communication scholarship.

In addition, most research on internal communication is conducted by scholars from institutions in North America, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australia (the Global North) with some research from Asia (Lee and Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2024). Consistent with this prior research Yue *et al.*'s (2024) review of peer-reviewed articles published in six public relations journals between 2012 and 2022 illustrates that the majority of leading scholars in internal communication over the past decade are located in the USA and select European countries. This highlights the underrepresentation and gap of contributing perspectives of African countries, which are part of the Global South, in global internal communication discourse.

With 54 African countries and Africa representing almost 20% of the world's population (World Data, 2024), it could be argued that more research on internal communication from these countries should be available. It should also be borne in mind that organisations and internal communication practitioners in African countries often face difficult economic and political conditions, societal issues and greater challenges in the workplace than in developed or First World countries (Sutton *et al.*, 2022), and therefore would need to adapt First World theories, or originate their own views (Carrozza and Benabdallah, 2022; Maritz, 2002). Yue *et al.* (2024) rightly call for internal communication research to test its theories and applications in intercultural settings. Drawing on the aforementioned studies makes it clear that insights from the African continent do not prevail, which limits an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the field.

To address this gap, the aim of this study was to assess the academic and publication growth of internal communication research conducted in Africa, with a view to highlighting both historical trends and development. To accomplish this goal, research articles on internal communication written from a public relations perspective that were published in peer-reviewed scholarly communication journals from 1990 to 2024 were reviewed (see Victor, 2008).

## 2. Defining internal communication

Internal communication is an interdisciplinary field studied across various disciplines, including public relations, organisational science, human resources and marketing (Men and Bowen, 2017; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021). Because of its diverse scope, it is referred to by various terms, including "employee communications", "internal relations", "employee relations", "internal public relations", "internal marketing", "intra-organisational communication" and "staff communication" (Welch and Jackson, 2007; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2012). However, "internal communication" is the preferred term scholars and practitioners use in public relations (Foreman and Argenti, 2005; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2012). While the field has evolved through different lenses, the focus of the review in this study is on the public relations perspective of internal communication. Scholars argue that public relations provides a comprehensive and holistic framework for understanding internal communication that positions internal stakeholders within the broader organisational and societal context (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Lee and Yue, 2020; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021).

Within this broader framework, several definitions highlight different dimensions of internal communication. Kalla (2005) offers an integrated perspective that categorises internal communication into four distinct, yet interconnected domains: (1) business communication, (2) management communication, (3) organisational communication and (4) corporate communication. This multidisciplinary perspective illustrates the complexity and multidimensional nature of internal communication, incorporating both formal and informal channels of communication at various levels within the organisation.

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Welch and Jackson (2007) extend this definition by including the strategic role of internal communication in managing relationships at various levels, which further solidifies internal communication as a central pillar in organisational functioning and relationship management. Welch and Jackson (2007, p. 193) define "internal communication" as "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, Tkalac Verčič (2019, p. 196) focuses on both managerial planning and employee interaction, describing "internal communication" as the process of "managing the flow of information, ideas, and emotions" to inform, motivate, engage and enhance organisational effectiveness.

Other public relations scholars emphasised the role of internal communication in fostering relationships: for example, Karanges *et al.* (2015, p. 330) define "internal communication" as an "internal organisational process that provides and shares information to create a sense of community and trust among employees". Men and Bowen (2017) describe "internal communication" as a collaborative and strategic process aimed at cultivating long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its internal stakeholders. These perspectives underscore the understanding of internal communication as not just a tool for information sharing, but a strategic function that plays an important role in building trust, fostering a sense of community and employee satisfaction, and managing long-term relationships within the organisation.

## 3. A brief overview of the development of internal communication in Africa

The history and development of internal communication in Africa are deeply intertwined with the continent's colonial past, its quest for independence and the efforts to establish cohesive national identities post–independence. Aregbeshola and Adekunle (2024) argues that during the colonial period (pre-1960s), communication systems in African countries were primarily controlled by European powers, and designed to reinforce colonial authority and suppress African voices. With the wave of independence movements that swept across Africa in the 1960s–1980s, many African countries gained sovereignty and the need for national unity became more urgent. Mlambo *et al.* (2024) posit that with independence, communication in Africa has evolved from colonial methods of top-down communication to more community-driven and localised forms of communication, shaped by technological innovations, political developments and cultural shifts. Both these trends could be argued to be reflected in internal communication through those time periods. In recent times, oral communication through traditional channels, such as organisational leaders, storytellers and gatherings, play a more prominent role in internal communication in organisations.

In the 1980 and 1990s, many African countries began to experience the effects of globalisation, and international communication technologies took root, particularly with the rise of early intranets and facsimile machines. As these technologies enabled faster and more efficient communication, organisations began to invest in more sophisticated internal communication strategies. In the 2000s, the mobile telephone, in particular, became a critical tool for internal communication in Africa. With more people owning mobile telephones than ever before, mobile technology is often used for internal communication (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2005; ITU, 2013; Pew Research Centre, 2018). This was especially the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, where employers often looked at and used short message systems (SMSs) to disseminate vital healthcare information. However, Internet access, especially in rural areas, remains an issue for internal communication (Sutton *et al.*, 2022) and the digital divide remains an African challenge.

The mid-20th century saw a rise in public relations as a professional field, which sometimes included internal communication as one of its functions. From a global perspective, scholars such as Grunig and Hunt (1984) argued that public relations should encompass both external

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and internal communication to build organisational legitimacy and foster a positive organisational culture and identity. The importance of internal communication for employee engagement, satisfaction and overall organisational effectiveness grew worldwide (Kalla, 2005). While communication within organisations has always been essential for operations, it is only in the last few decades that it has emerged as a distinct field of study and practice (Yue *et al.*, 2024).

On the African continent, many public relations bodies were established to promote professionalism among public relations practitioners and set standards for public relations practice (Blankson and Anani-Bossman, 2023). Some of these bodies include the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), the Institute of Public Relations in Ghana (IPR), the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA), the Public Relations and Communication Professionals Association of the Republic of Mauritius (PRCPA-M), the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) and the African Public Relations Association (APRA), to name a few. Even though these bodies encompass internal communication by default, none of them has a pure focus on internal communication practice or research. Contrarily, the global phenomenon is supported by numerous professional bodies and research centres focusing solely on the internal communication discipline; for example, the Institute of Internal Communication in the United Kingdom, the Organizational Communication Research Center in the USA, IC Kollectif in Canada, the Centre for Employee Relations and Communication at IULM University in Italy and the Communication Research Hub at the University of Florida in the USA.

The global development of professional bodies and research centres focusing specifically on internal communication highlights its growing importance (Yue *et al.*, 2024). As a result, there is an increasing demand for a thorough understanding of internal communication on the African context, which seems to be underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This includes exploring its history, current trends and future direction. While literature is available globally to evidence the essential function of internal communication, the understanding of the role and development of internal communication from a public relations perspective on the African continent remains limited (Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman, 2023; Sutton, 2023).

With the aforementioned knowledge gap in mind, the following *research question* was posed for this study:

> What are the African historical developments and trends in internal communication research articles published in peer-reviewed journals from 1990 to 2024, based on (a) scholars and institutions, (b) journals of publication, (c) African countries in which research was conducted, (d) theoretical frameworks, (e) methodological trends, and (f) future research suggestions?

## 4. Method

A systematic review of the literature was conducted in this study, which involved a structured and methodical approach to collecting and analysing research on a specific topic (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Volk (2016) and Hayhoe (2020) highlighted the fact that systematic reviews allowed for unbiased, rigorous and transparent synthesis of research. This approach enhances the validity and reproducibility of the study.

This study reviewed articles on internal communication published in peer-reviewed academic and scholarly journals from 1990 to 2024. Thomson (2013) mentions that a review period of ten years is usually acceptable in most instances. Therefore, the analysis of over three decades in this review seemed more than sufficient. As Shoemaker *et al.* (2004) indicate, data obtained over a relatively long period would best enable the researchers to evidence the growth of the knowledge base of a field.

For academic rigour and to ensure the quality of this review, the sources consulted were limited to articles published in international peer-reviewed academic and scholarly journals

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because of their credibility. Other sources, such as books, book chapters, conference papers and dissertations and theses were excluded.

Two databases were used, namely Web of Science and Scopus, to capture a wide range of scholarly articles. From these databases, all articles that contained any of the following keywords in their titles, abstracts or keywords were obtained: "employee", "employee relations", "employee relationship", "internal communication", "employee communication", "organisational communication", "internal relations", "internal publics" and/or "internal stakeholders". Thereafter, filters for the year range of 1990–2024, all African countries and articles written in English were applied. The scope of articles selected was limited to those written in English, primarily because of the researchers' language capabilities. More than 20,000 articles were downloaded and the reviewing process then started.

First, the title and abstract were screened, followed by a full-text review to filter those articles that were written from a public relations perspective. Most articles retrieved were from human resource management, psychology or public administration perspectives and were therefore excluded.

Second, the articles were verified to ensure that the research was conducted in an African context. Some articles with African authors were eliminated where the study was not conducted and data collected on African soil. Likewise, a study was included if research was done within Africa, even though the authors worked at institutions outside the African continent.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 79 articles were identified. The above inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in this study are consistent with other systematic reviews in the communication and public relations disciplines, such as that of Lee (2017), Ao and Huang (2019), Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023), Volk (2016) and Wang *et al.* (2021).

The articles were then coded on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, according to the following categories: (1) General information such as the name of the journal, the title of each article, the year of publication, the authors' names and the institutional affiliation of each author; (2) The African country in which the research was conducted; (3) Theoretical frameworks; (4) Methodological trends such as research approach and data collection method; and (5) Suggestions for future research. These categories are presented as the findings.

Both authors were involved in the screening process of the article selection, data extraction, coding and synthesising the findings to ensure accuracy and reliability and to eliminate bias (see Babbie and Mouton, 2001). First, the researchers independently extracted articles according to predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and thereafter coded the selected articles according to predetermined categories. Inter-coder reliability was established through continual discussion and consensus (see O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). Discrepancies in extraction and coding were jointly reviewed and resolved to ensure consistency and shared interpretation of the criteria and coding (see Halpin, 2024). Ethical clearance for the study was received from [Information masked for review] (ethics number: [Information masked for review]).

## 5. Findings and discussion

A total of 79 articles from 1990 to 2024 were selected that addressed internal communication from a public relations perspective in Africa. The findings from the systematic review of these internal communication articles are presented to answer the research question posed for this study: *What are the African historical developments and trends in internal communication research articles published in peer-reviewed journals from 1990 to 2024, based on (1) scholars and institutions, (2) journals of publication, (3) African countries in which research was conducted, (4) theoretical frameworks, (5) methodological trends and (6) future research suggestions?*

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*5.1 Number of articles published per year*

Figure 1 provides an overview of the number of articles published each year. Over the 35 year-period there has been limited research on internal communication in Africa, compared with the rest of the world. For example, in a similar period, focusing on only one aspect of internal communication (i.e. digital internal communication), Tkalac Verčič *et al.* (2024) found 77 studies published in 52 journals between 1990 and 2022.

Africa has seen a growth in publications from 2013 onwards, with a significant increase in recent years (from 2017 onwards), similar to the international trend suggested by Men (2019) and Lee and Yue (2020). A substantial number of articles were published in 2022 ($n = 9$) and 2023 ($n = 8$), compared with prior timeframes.

For the rest of the findings, three stages were identified, namely 1990–2011, 2012–2019 and 2020–2024, due to the expansion of articles, new thoughts and author changes.

*5.2 Countries in which the studies were conducted*

Table 1 provides an overview of the respective countries in which the internal communication study was conducted. It is notable that for the first 22 years, internal communication research was only done in one African country, namely South Africa (from 1990 to 2011). Thereafter, the research in Africa started to broaden to Ghana, Zimbabwe and Nigeria (2012–2019). Even though more African countries have published on internal communication from 2020

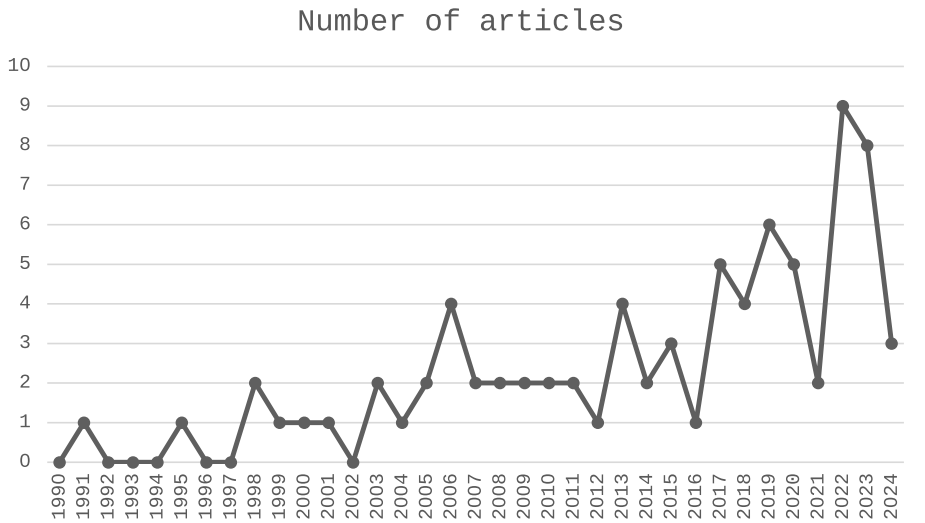


**Figure 1.** Number of articles published in Africa per year. **Source:** Authors' own work

**Table 1.** African countries in which studies were conducted

| Year | South Africa | Ghana | Zimbabwe | Nigeria | Kenya | Malawi | Egypt | Lesotho | Ethiopia | Tanzania |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990–2011 | 21 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2012–2019 | 21 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | | | | | |
| 2020–2024 | 13 | 1 | 5 | | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 55 | 3 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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onwards, the majority of research is still conducted on South African soil. Knowing that there are 54 African countries, it could be argued that the research is still not representative, as only 10 countries feature in the analysis.

The dominance of South African studies in the reviewed articles likely reflects broader structural disparities across the continent, such as unequal research resources and the dominance of English-language and Western-indexed journals that privilege South African scholarship in international databases (see Hammett *et al.*, 2024; Heugh and Stroud, 2019). As a result, voices from other African contexts remain underrepresented. This imbalance underscores the need for greater regional research support and collaboration to ensure a more representative understanding of internal communication scholarship across Africa.

In total, five conceptual studies were conducted before 2012: one in 2004, two in 2006, one in 2010 and one in 2011. These studies are not linked to a specific African country, as empirical research was not conducted in a specific country. The articles remained part of the sampling, since the authors represent the African continent with their conceptual internal communication research, and contributed to the historical development of the field in Africa.

### *5.3 African authorship and institutions*

To investigate the productivity of individual authors and their affiliated institutions, each author's name and affiliation in the selected articles were coded. The most frequently published authors in the field of internal communication in Africa were E.M. Kadembo (six articles), A. Makasi (six articles) and B. Nyagadza (six articles), followed by W.J. Greeff (five articles), L.B. Sutton (five articles), R. Barker (four articles), L.M. Fourie (four articles) and A. Leonard (four articles). The numbers could be skewed due to a specific postgraduate study that led to the publication of six articles by the three authors involved, namely Kadembo, Makasi and Nyagadza.

The affiliated institution with the most publications was the University of South Africa (South Africa) ($n = 19$ articles), followed by the University of Pretoria (South Africa) ($n = 13$ articles), the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) ($n = 10$ articles), the North-West University (South Africa) ($n = 10$ articles), Namibia University (Namibia) ($n = 6$ articles), Tshwane University of Technology (South Africa) ($n = 4$ articles) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (South Africa) ($n = 3$ articles). All the other affiliations have one or two published articles.

It should be noted that the names of some of the institutions changed over the years and that the new names are referenced in this study.

The results indicate that internal communication research on the African continent has largely been contextualised in South Africa (also see section 5.2 of this article). The most productive authors, except for Kadembo, Makasi and Nyagadza, are affiliated with universities in South Africa. The aforementioned authors are affiliated with Namibia University (six articles) but the empirical research was conducted in Zimbabwe, which could point to the diaspora.

It should be noted that some researchers moved out of this research area, retired, moved between institutions or emigrated to other countries. However, there are a large number of researchers with two or three articles on the topic, which highlights the opportunity for new emerging researchers to advance the field in Africa.

As indicated in Table 2, in seven cases, African scholars co-authored with international authors. Most of the co-authorship was with scholars from the USA or the United Kingdom. In one case, all the authors who conducted empirical research and wrote about internal communication in Ghana were international and from the USA. It is worth noting that five of these international authors were originally from Africa and later emigrated. These results show that most African studies in the field are conducted by African scholars, which could contribute to the North–South divide. However, international collaboration could also aid in generating a bigger global audience for their work.

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**Table 2.** International authors' countries of residence and collaboration

| Year | International author country of residence | African country collaboration | Authorship |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2011 | United States of America | South Africa | Second author |
| 2019 | United States of America | – | All three authors |
| 2020 | United Kingdom | Zimbabwe and Namibia | Second author |
| 2022 | United Kingdom | South Africa | Second author |
| 2022 | United Kingdom | South Africa | Second author |
| 2022 | Malaysia | Malawi | First author |
| 2024 | United Kingdom | South Africa | Second author |

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

This finding is consistent with the broader public relations discipline. For example, a recent article published by Rechavi *et al.* (2024) who did a social network analysis of international collaboration, research communities and co-authorship in the public relations discipline found that most public relations research discussions were facilitated in the Global North. There are a few co-authorships between South African and scholars in the United Kingdom, but no other Northern or Western countries or Africa in the public relations sphere. This seems to confirm the notion that African scholarly work forms a limited part of the global public relations academic community. Rechavi *et al.* (2024) called for increased awareness in academic public relations circles about the need for a more diverse, equitable and inclusive research community that fostered representation of different perspectives and backgrounds.

### *5.4 Journals of publication*

As seen in Table 3, most articles have been published in African journals, published by some of the main universities in South Africa, such as *Communicare: Journal of Communication Studies* (published by the University of Johannesburg), *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research* (published by the University of South Africa) and *Communitas: Journal for Community Communication and Information Impact* (published by the University of the Free State). It is clear that *Communicare* is the journal of choice for internal communication-related research in Africa.

It could be that African scholars believe that their research is not fit for international journal publishing, which limits African participation in international discussions. While some African scholars may perceive their research as less aligned with the expectations of international journals, it is equally important to acknowledge the potential role of international publication biases and limited interest in regionally focused studies, which possibly contributes to the underrepresentation of African scholarship in global academic discourse. Another possibility is that some African scholars may be hesitant to engage with Global North journals because they perceive aspects of the publication system as reflective of colonial legacies. A further challenge for many African academics and institutions could relate to the cost of accessing scholarly resources. Historically, Western publishing models, particularly institutional subscription packages, have been expensive for many African universities. However, initiatives such as the SANLiC agreement have begun to mitigate these inequalities by negotiating reduced rates and expanding access for African scholars and institutions. In the most recent four years of this review, there have been more publications from African internal communication scholars in international journals, which is a positive development.

### *5.5 Article titles*

The titles of the 79 articles clearly stated the topic of the studies across the board – no "flowery" topics were identified. Furthermore, the titles of the articles mostly pointed to a specific

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**Table 3.** Journals of publication

| Year | *Communicare: Journal of Communication Studies* (UJ) | *Communicatio; South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research* (UNISA) | *Communitas: Journal of Community Communication and Information Impact* (UFS) | *African Journal of Business Management* (Stellenbosch University Business School) | Other African journals | All Africa-specific journals | Cogent Business and Management (Taylor & Francis. United Kingdom) | Various international journals | All international journals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1990–2011 | 16 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 23 | | 4 | 4 |
| 2012–2019 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 18 | | 7 | 7 |
| 2020–2024 | 7 | 3 | 4 | | | 12 | 3 | 10 | 12 |
| TOTAL | 29 | 14 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 55 | 3 | 21 | 24 |

**Note(s):** Key: UFS = University of the Free State, South Africa; UJ = University of Johannesburg, South Africa; UNISA = University of South Africa
**Source(s):** Authors' own work



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industry or organisation that was under investigation in the empirical research conducted. This was the case across all three periods: $n = 11$, 1990–2011; $n = 11$, 2012–2019; $n = 15$, 2020–2024. The terminology in the titles moved away from "communication management" to "internal communication" or "employee communication" and, with that, the words "internal stakeholders" were more regularly used from 2020 onwards (see Table 4). This can point to internal communication evolving as a specific discipline.

There is a strong cohort of articles with "branding" elements in the titles of the articles, which shows an encroachment of marketing on the field of internal communication. Worryingly, "ethics" or elements of morality were only mentioned in titles of articles in the first period ($n = 2$, 1990–2011) and did not repeat for the later periods. The disappearance of ethics as a focus in internal communication research after 2011 raises important questions about shifting scholarly and organisational priorities. The decline in ethics-focused research could also reflect limited institutional support for critical studies, with researchers prioritising applied or management-oriented topics that more likely attract funding. This contradicts the strong global focus on ethics in internal communication research (e.g. Akhmetshin *et al.*, 2020; Ruck, 2022; Thelen and Formanchuk, 2022). Re-engaging with ethics as a research focus is essential to ensure that internal communication scholarship in Africa remains reflective, socially responsible and aligned with broader debates about trust, accountability, transparency and integrity in internal communication practice. Now, more than ever, scholarship about the ethical use and understanding of artificial intelligence in public relations and internal communication becomes crucial (Bowen, 2024), and Africa needs to contribute to the conversation (Anani-Bossman *et al.*, 2024).

### *5.6 Theories framing the research*

The most frequently used theories or frameworks were internal communication ($n = 21$) and stakeholder relationship management ($n = 18$).

There was little variation in the applied theories used at different times. In the years between 1990 and 2011, communication management/corporate communication ($n = 5$), culture-related theories ($n = 5$) and stakeholder relationship management ($n = 5$) were applied most frequently. From 2012 to 2019, internal communication ($n = 10$) and stakeholder relationship management ($n = 6$) were the most frequently applied theories. In recent studies, from 2020 to 2024, internal communication ($n = 7$), stakeholder relationship management ($n = 7$) and culture-related theories ($n = 5$) were again applied most often. Conflict management was only used once and in the first period (1990–2011).

Notably, all the theories and frameworks applied in the articles were Western theories or from the Global North but applied to the African context (see Table 5). Therefore, this article is

**Table 4.** Words mostly used in article titles in African journals

| Word | 1990–2011 | 2012–2019 | 2020–2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethics or moral(s) | 2 | | |
| Internal or employee communication | 3 | 3 | 11 |
| Internal stakeholders | | | 5 |
| Organisation- or industry-specific wording | 11 | 11 | 15 |
| Communication management or corporate communication management | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Multicultural or diverse or changing context | 8 | 5 | 4 |
| Branding or internal branding | 2 | 4 | 6 |

**Note(s):** *Articles could have more than one category of keywords in their title, and therefore the total is higher than $n = 79$

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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**Table 5.** Theories framing the research

| Theory | 1990–2011 | 2012–2019 | 2020–2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Communication management or corporate communication | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| Conflict management | 1 | | |
| Cultural communication or corporate culture or organisational culture or multicultural communication | 5 | 3 | 5 |
| Excellence theory | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| Internal communication | 4 | 10 | 7 |
| Internal marketing or branding | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Organisational change of change management | 3 | 2 | |
| Reputation management | 3 | | 1 |
| Stakeholder relationship management | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Two-way symmetrical communication | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Systems theory | 2 | | 2 |
| Organisational communication | 4 | 2 | |
| Practitioner roles | 2 | | |
| Development communication | | 1 | |
| Dialogical communication | | 1 | |

**Note(s):** *Articles could have used more than one theory and therefore the total is higher than $n = 79$

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

an urgent call for African philosophies, theories and frameworks to be introduced and contributed by African thinkers to international internal communication research discussions.

*5.7 Methodological trends*

As shown in Table 6, conceptual studies were used in earlier years ($n = 8$, 1990–2011) but not thereafter. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches were quite balanced throughout the periods. Quantitative questionnaires throughout the periods were favoured more than expected, which could speak to the notion that researchers believe that their work needs to show numbers in order to be considered *serious* academic research. The case study approach was mainly used to combine research methods or to focus on a single organisation or industry in the empirical research. A steady increase in the mixed methods approach over time is evident (see Table 6).

Some scholars used more than one method to collect data. Therefore, in many instances, one article was coded in more than one category. As seen in Table 7, qualitative questionnaires or surveys ($n = 43$) and qualitative interviews ($n = 36$) were used significantly more often than other data collection methods. This pattern was consistent over the periods. Action research,

**Table 6.** Research approaches used

| Research approach | 1990–2011 | 2012–2019 | 2020–2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Conceptual | 8 | | |
| Mixed methods | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Qualitative | 7 | 9 | 10 |
| Quantitative | 6 | 8 | 11 |
| Case study | 4 | 4 | 1 |

**Note(s):** *Some articles used a case study approach to combine research methods, and therefore the total is higher than $n = 79$

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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**Table 7.** Research methods used

| Research method | 1990–2011 | 2012–2019 | 2020–2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Questionnaires or surveys | 11 | 15 | 17 |
| Interviews (in-depth and semi-structured) | 10 | 12 | 14 |
| Focus groups | 2 | 4 | 2 |
| Content analysis of documents | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| Action research (observations) | 1 | 3 | |

**Note(s):** *Articles could have been coded in more than one category, and therefore the total is higher than $n = 79$
**Source(s):** Authors' own work

such as observations, was the least-used method to collect data and no African scholar utilised this method for internal communication data collection from 2020 to 2024.

*5.8 Future research suggestions*

It is worth noting that very few articles made suggestions for future research. The suggestions in those that did, focused on research approaches and the expansion of methods, and were quite predictable. Usually, if the study was conducted from a qualitative research approach, the suggestion was to repeat it or to test the findings in a quantitative study to generalise the findings. Furthermore, if the empirical research was conducted in a certain sector or organisation, then the suggestion would be to extend the research to other sectors or to test the results in other types of organisations and on a larger scale to validate the results. It was encouraging to see some calls for developing an African view or theorisation as part of the future research suggestions. However, this should be encouraged more cogently.

Based on the gaps identified from the articles reviewed, the authors of the present article propose that research in African internal communication should move beyond descriptive analyses to critical examination of contextual influences shaping internal communication practices; for example, how country-specific cultural dynamics, such as hierarchy, respect for authority and collectivist values, affect internal communication effectiveness within African organisations.

Furthermore, in line with emerging global trends, the future directions for internal communications research in Africa should include the role of technology and artificial intelligence in transforming internal communication, the digital divide in Africa and barriers to the adoption of digital tools.

Finally, scholarship should explore strategies to enhance African researchers' visibility in global academic forums, including capacity-building for scholarly writing, mentorship and collaboration with international research networks, to address the reluctance of African scholars to publish in Western journals. Such efforts could strengthen the empirical base of African internal communication research and advance its contribution to global theory-building.

## 6. Implications and conclusion

The study was designed to assess the African contribution and publication growth of internal communication research conducted in Africa by analysing 79 peer-reviewed articles published in academic and scholarly journals between 1990 and 2024. The aim was to highlight historical trends and the development of the internal communication discipline on the African continent, which had not been done before. In addition to the findings and discussion in the previous section, three main inferences can be deduced from the overview of the articles:

First, theoretical implications include a growing acknowledgement over time of the importance of developing local theories, rather than relying solely on universal or Western

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developed theories and frameworks. It was evident from this study that in the period from 1990 to 2011, further conceptual thinking on internal communication was encouraged, although not specifically African-focused thinking. In the period that followed (from 2012 to 2019), it was generally noted in some articles that Global Northern theories needed to be adapted to the Global Southern context. In more recent years (2020–2024), there was one call for *ubuntu* (an African philosophy value systems that emphasise the interconnectedness of individuals with their surrounding societal and physical worlds) to be incorporated into African internal communication theories and frameworks. This single call aligns with African public relations scholars who noted previously that there was an over-reliance on Western philosophies and theories, which were not always applicable or workable in the African context (Anani-Bossman *et al.*, 2023; Blankson and Anani-Bossman, 2023; Mersham *et al.*, 2011). However, African scholars will continue to depend on Western theories in their internal communication research until local theories, frameworks and models are created.

When African perspectives remain underrepresented, the global body of knowledge continues to be dominated by Western systems that may not fully capture the social, cultural and organisational realities of African-specific contexts. This imbalance risks reinforcing theoretical dependency, where African research primarily applies Western models rather than developing locally grounded frameworks. Sharing African-centred perspectives enables the development of contextually relevant theories and practices that reflect indigenous values and norms. In doing so, African scholarship could further contribute to communication strategies and interventions within African organisations that are evidence-based and culturally resonant, strengthening practical outcomes across the continent.

Furthermore, the authors of this article advocate for African scholars to tell the African story so that the African narrative is shared with, and understood by, the rest of the world. The findings underscore the critical need for African scholars to share their narratives and contextual experiences in order to shape a more inclusive global understanding of internal communication.

One other article under review in this study identified a need to redefine who should be included as internal stakeholders, since the general definition of "internal stakeholders" was not necessarily applicable to the local environment. The attempt in this article to redefine internal stakeholders for a local context emphasises the need to develop and integrate African theory into the internal communication discipline.

A second implication identified in the overall analysis of the articles under review was that of strategy. Throughout the periods reviewed, the importance of employee communication for organisational success had always been highlighted. From 1990 to 2011, there were very clear and repeated calls for strategic communication management in the internal environment. Thereafter, from 2012 to 2019, a focus on the strategic communicator role and a need for a communication strategist in organisations was prevalent. There was also a rise in research about the application of a communication strategy to the internal context of non-profit organisations and governmental organisations. In the most recent period (2020–2024), it became evident that a clear communication strategy was crucial for organisations and an implementer thereof for the internal context should be a basic requirement, which aligns with recent global internal communication studies' (e.g. Adamu *et al.*, 2024; Dahlman and Heide, 2020; Kim, 2021). It would therefore seem that a strategic approach has developed from a method that should be applied to a non-negotiable standard practice.

The third implication acknowledged throughout the general review of articles centred on diversity. From 1990 to 2011, the clear focus was on diversity and adjusting for diversity, including discussions on diversity management, cultural adaptations and variations of communication channels. During this period, power sharing was key. In the next timeframe (2012–2019), it became evident in the research that two-way symmetrical communication supported diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, it was emphasised that diversity impacted on the employee experience of internal communication. Lastly, in this period, the importance of organisational values and leadership styles in employee relationships was noted in

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transcending diversity. In the most recent timeframe (2020–2024), a deep understanding of the employee was underscored in research. The link between servant leadership styles and transparent communication for the diverse contexts was emphasised and the need for a two-way symmetrical communication approach to adjust for diversity was mentioned. Diversity, therefore, seems to be a recurring theme over all three periods, although each period had a slightly different, nuanced approach. When situated within broader internal communication scholarship, the above African perspectives on diversity, specifically from 2012 onwards, revealed similarities to Western approaches, which often conceptualise diversity in terms of demographic representation and inclusion strategies, with emphasis on leadership styles (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2021; Men *et al.*, 2023; Suh and Lee, 2016; Wolfgruber and Einwiller, 2023).

It seems that future African internal communication scholarship could focus more on diversity within the context of multilingualism, cultural pluralism and socio-economic inequalities that shape communication dynamics in organisations. This contextual focus should explore the intersection of culture, identity and communication in the diverse African context, emphasising relational harmony and respect within hierarchical structures, which are dimensions that are less prominent in Western models. This is another opportunity for African scholars to expand internal communication theory by offering contextual insights into global discussions on organisational inclusivity.

In conclusion, this study undertook a review of internal communication research in Africa, addressing a notable gap in the literature, as there is no other study that has specifically reviewed internal communication research on the African continent. As such, it offers valuable contributions to understanding the development of this research area in Africa over the past 35 years.

A limitation of this study could be the inclusion and exclusion criteria used, specifically by only including English articles. Many different languages are spoken on the African continent, stemming from the respective countries' colonial history, such as French, Portuguese, Spanish and Afrikaans. Therefore, African scholars may have published relevant internal communication work in languages other than English. Nonetheless, this study clearly illustrates that Africa has fewer published articles on internal communication from a public relations and corporate communication perspective than the rest of the world. It would seem that African internal communication scholars are holding academic discussions in separate forums, which leads to less representation and collaboration on the international stage. Furthermore, there is a need for more insight into the North–South divide in academic research on internal communication. The authors of the present article agree with Rechavi *et al.* (2024) that a more diverse, equitable and inclusive global research community is needed to foster representation of different perspectives and backgrounds for increased academic engagement in this domain.

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