

# Between progress and struggle: young PR-scholars' contribution to theory building and progress in public relations research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper aims to analyze the contribution of young academics to the field of public relations (PR) and shows which authors exert most influence on them. The study thereby contributes to the assessment of the state of the art of theory building in the field. The authors analyzed the study data against the background of two approaches on progress in the field: Nothhaft *et al.*'s (2018) idea of strategic communication as an elusive concept and Winkler *et al.*'s (2021) narrative approach.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study comprises two parts. First, the authors conducted a survey among participants of the EUPRERA PhD-workshops between 2007 and 2019, asking respondents about their perception of the state of the field. Second, the authors performed a bibliometric (co-)citation analysis of the young scholars' most important works.

**Findings** – Results indicate that though the field has progressed in terms of quantity and diversified with regard to established paradigms, it has not matured in a sense that it has settled on a generally accepted theoretical underpinning. However, the data show how the dominant paradigms in the field map onto the co-citation networks that emerged out of the works of young scholars. The authors' findings imply that this new generation might signal their allegiance to a paradigm by citing the works of its emblematic authors.

**Originality/value** – Unlike most bibliometric studies, this one uses an author-centered approach, thus studying works that matter most to young academics themselves. Not only do the authors thereby contribute to the analysis of the state of theory building in PR research, but also expand the scope in looking at research as a social system, in which young researchers need to position themselves.

**Keywords** Bibliometrics, PR-Theory, Young scholars, Scientific progress, Narrative approach, Co-citation analysis

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Max Planck once wrote in his *Scientific Autobiography*: “A new scientific truth does not generally triumph by persuading its opponents and getting them to admit their errors, but rather by its opponents gradually dying out and giving way to a new generation that is raised on it.” (1949, p. 22) More pointedly: Science advances one funeral at a time. For the field of Public Relations/Strategic Communication, the period of mourning has not yet started. But with its major areas of research, e.g. the dialogic framework (Kent and Taylor,



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2002), crisis communication (Coombs, 1998), or the management paradigm (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) having been developed more than two decades ago, is it pertinent to ask what the contribution of the next generation of scholars is and in what direction they are taking the discipline.

Nothhaft *et al.* (2018) have characterized the discipline with regard to Schneider (2009) as being in a state of invention and proto-maturity at the same time. A voluminous body of knowledge is safeguarded, while new ideas constantly flow into the discipline. And yet, the discipline lacks breakthroughs in methodology and the application of its findings beyond its own borders. The scientific discipline in our case comprises a diverse amalgam, including fields such as Public Relations (PR), Strategic Communication, Relationship Management, CSR-Communication, to mention just a few. As so many authors have noticed before, what is PR (or communication management, strategic communication, etc.), is a question that is not easy to answer. For practical reasons, we will subsume all the diverse labels mentioned above under the umbrella term of PR, fully knowing that these fields, while overlapping at many points, are also distinct from each other.

To determine the state of the art in PR and to analyze the progress the field has achieved, many introspective studies (e.g. Ferguson, 1984; Pasadeos and Renfro, 1992; Sallot *et al.*, 2003; Ki *et al.*, 2019) turn to bibliometrical approaches to determine central authors and their ideas and theories, and how often they co-occur with other authors in relevant texts. In other words, researchers establish who is influential, hence central in a citation network, with which works. As these studies get repeated over the course of decades, a picture of PR as an evolving field emerges, showing how authors maintain their position, move in or out of the center. The academic works at the center, so the inherent assumption, form the backbone of the fields' dominant paradigm, since it is the conceptual papers that get cited again and again, if and when researchers set out to put theories to the test. This approach though, leaves the fringes of the discipline, the frontier, where young academics explore new pathways to knowledge, out of the picture. With the spotlight on the grand theories of the field, hardly anybody poses the question of what kind of future this new generation of scholars is seeding in terms of new concepts and their connection to the big frameworks of the present day. Therefore, we want to explore the contribution of young scholars to the discipline and how they shape its future prospects against the background of Nothhaft *et al.*'s (2018) proposed taxonomy and Winkler *et al.*'s (2021) narrative approach (see next section).

We have chosen to base our analysis on these two concepts, thus leaving out large parts of the discourse in the philosophy of (social) science (e.g. Kuhn, Popper or Lakatos) on purpose. There are two main reasons for that decision: First, the debate about the philosophy of the social sciences (Rosenberg, 2018) is complex and therefore rather unsuitable as a starting point for our empirical operationalization. We wanted to provide an empirical contribution on the state of the art of the field, and thus needed operationalizable concepts from the field itself. And second, both concepts are explicitly grappling with the Kuhnian concept of scientific progress (2012), especially Winkler *et al.* (2021) who provide a nuanced review of Kuhn's views on progress and paradigms, and are thus having the greater debate in mind. A broader conceptual take, including a consideration of the multi-paradigmatic nature of the social sciences (Kornmesser and Schurz, 2014) would have facilitated a more complex analysis. But we rather decided to narrow our focus in order to assess the current state of the field through the works of young scholars.

The young scholars in the scope of our study are the participants of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) PhD-workshop, that has been convened since 2007. Between then and 2019, 103 students attended the workshop. This paper looks at the referenced works in the publications of those young academics and surveys their perception of the field. Our goal is to elicit the prospects for the field, as these young scholars are poised to form a new generation of researchers in PR,

probably the first who grew up within the field entirely. Will they bring in new theoretical approaches or will they align themselves with existing paradigms? The analysis will consist of two parts. The first section will be focused on the participants' personal perceptions of the field. To that end, young scholars have been surveyed on their current state of career, how they got there, how they perceive the state of the discipline, and what they think the future prospects of the field are. The second part of the analysis focuses on their publications, thereby identifying, publication topics, citations and co-citations and methodologies.

### Literature review

Almost no study on the state of the art of PR escapes the shadow of variety and diversity that is so characteristic for the field. Already in the 1970s, [Harlow \(1976\)](#) identified more than 470 different definitions of PR. Unlike other major disciplines, especially in the natural sciences, PR is still in search of a precise definition of its research object. On the upside, that leads to a huge variety of approaches imported from the neighboring fields and disciplines, thus promoting innovation, novelty, and creativity. On the downside, however, this constant influx of new understandings and the permanent refocusing of the scope, makes it hard for a conceptual nucleus to form. The consequence is perhaps best illustrated by [Broom \(2006\)](#), who observed that researchers in the field cite other disciplines, but do not get cited by them in return, i.e. PR is not recognized as an independent field of scientific inquiry. That is not to say that no progress can be seen – the theoretical scope has narrowed considerably since Harlow set out to chart the conceptual understandings of PR. However, even with a few dominant paradigms in the field (e.g. excellence theory, relationship management, strategic communication, crisis communication, dialogic framework), we are far from a universally accepted definition of its object of research. [Nothhaft et al.'s \(2018\)](#) hit the nail on the head when they argue:

Strategic communication surely has a particular object of research—the community is just not entirely clear about what exactly it is. Surely there is a body of knowledge, a specific terminology, a set of specific research methods; there is just very little agreement on what they are. Undoubtedly, scholars from many fields have contributed to strategic communication research; it is just not clear what their common denominator is, what to make of the diversity, and how to integrate the plurality. (p. 353)

This statement, we suggest, can be applied to PR at large. Following [Shneider \(2009\)](#) and [Nothhaft et al.'s \(2018, pp. 354–355\)](#) propose to analyze the field using a four-stage typology which describes the evolution of the academic discipline. Stage one is marked by creativity and innovation as researchers open up new fronts for development in theory. In stage two, scientists build upon these new ideas and realize breakthroughs in methodology as they begin to stack up empirical insights. With stage three, the discipline's apex is reached and “although genuine breakthrough discoveries are rare, most of the useful knowledge is produced here” ([Nothhaft et al., 2018, p. 355](#)). Finally, in stage four, disciplines are fully mature in the sense that they mainly safeguard “the body of knowledge, with emphasis on the refinement” (p. 355). In this view, academic progress is an evolutionary process that is marked by the cumulation of knowledge, derived from the empirical testing of novel theories. The goal is to slowly but steadily stack up empirical evidence to ultimately put the dominating theories on firm footing. Regarding the discipline of strategic communication, they assert that “the discipline is oscillating between stage one and proto-four” (p. 364), hence it is still very much a field at the frontier.

[Winkler et al. \(2021\)](#) on the other hand propose a narrative approach, to assess progress in PR research. Featuring four different plots: tragedy, comedy, romance and satire, these

narratives, in the view of the authors, correspond to the “functional, co-creational, social-reflective, and critical-cultural paradigm” (Winkler *et al.*, 2021), packed into stories that appeal to the researcher’s personality. Winkler and colleagues describe these four paradigms as (1) “ontological efforts to establish PR as (a) genuine management function” (p. 6; *functional paradigm*; Broom *et al.*, 2013; Grunig and Grunig, 1992; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018), (2) a “public and relationship oriented ontological positioning of the PR discipline” (p. 6; *co-creational paradigm*; e.g. Botan and Taylor, 2004; Kent and Taylor, 2002; Hallahan, 2004), (3) “describing PR as a communicatively precarious and complex [...] organizational practice (p. 6; *social-reflective paradigm*; e.g. Falkheimer, 2007; van Ruler *et al.*, 2009; Wehmeier, 2006), and as (4) placing “growing epistemological emphasis on the deconstructive properties of PR as counter-hegemonic practice” (p. 6; *critical-cultural paradigm*; e.g. Berger, 2005; Edwards, 2018; L’Etang *et al.*, 2016). The above-mentioned narratives correspond to these paradigms in the sense that they represent “normative convictions of progress” (p. 8) which “adhere to implicit narrative patterns that promote particular axiologies” (p. 9). Hence, these narratives shape how research in PR should ideally develop. For individual researchers, this is as much psychologically of interest as it is sociologically. Winkler *et al.* (2021) argue, for example, that scholars of the functional paradigm adhere to “a heroic narrative of transcending a fatal status quo, which holds ever-changing variants of managerial ontology and positivist epistemology together” (p. 17). In other words, they (supposedly) sign up to the paradigm, because it fits their own worldview best. And thereby the narrative creates its own social group of like-minded researchers.

Both approaches stand for different views on how to conceptualize the field and its progress. Nothhaft *et al.*’s (2018) adaptation of Shneider suggests to look at the contributors and their contributions and how they provide input to the field. If that input is diverse, creative, and innovative, in terms of theory as well as methodology, one would assume that this indicates that PR research is still very much a stage 1–2 discipline. Ultimately it is an argument that the success of the institutionalization of a discipline lies in its ability to develop and test theories, that is to find out whether they are true or not.

Winkler *et al.* (2021) on the other hand advance a more social view of the field, where researchers decide with which narrative they align best and thus position themselves accordingly. PR as a discipline is a game of paradigms that struggle with each other for influence by appealing to the underlying convictions of researchers. Central to Winkler *et al.* is not whether something is true, but how the field is constituted socially and how young researchers “find” their paradigm. By referencing works of the established scholars, they signal their allegiance to the paradigm these scholars represent.

The former approach describes progress as a function of accumulated and empirically tested knowledge. The latter understands progress as striving for more sophistication and insight, with which scholars form paradigmatic camps and try to argue their case. We decided to use both works as the conceptual basis for our paper to assess the current state of the field. In a sense, both concepts are incommensurable since Nothhaft *et al.* (2018) argue from a point of consilience, drawing from a more positivist understanding of progress, borrowed from the natural sciences. Winkler *et al.* (2021) on the other hand seem to embrace a multi-paradigmatic view of the field, where progress is driven by implicit normative convictions of researchers, who are constantly debating each other against the background of their respective paradigms. Both concepts represent different takes on what progress in the field of PR and strategic communication is. But more specifically, we wanted to test Nothhaft *et al.*’s (2018) prediction that “the discipline is oscillating between stage one and proto-four” (p. 364). Winkler *et al.*’s taxonomy therefore provided a paradigmatic segmentation of the field through its most prominent authors. Simultaneously, this also allowed us to assess the extent of the multi-paradigmatic nature of the field.

With regard to both approaches, two research questions can be stated to guide our study:

- RQ1.* What do the cited works in young scholars' publications reveal about the state of the art of PR as a field of research?
- RQ2.* How do references in the works of young scholars correspond to narratives of axiological progress in the field of PR?

To analyze the state of the art of the field of PR research, most scholars have settled for bibliometric analyses of citations and co-citations (e.g. [Ki et al., 2021](#); [Morehouse and Saffer, 2018](#); [Sallot et al., 2003](#)). Naturally, those approaches highlight the contribution to academic development as measured by the frequency of citations of authors and their works. However, due to different scopes, the results are only partially comparable. Most straightforward are the studies of Pasadeos and colleagues ([Ki et al., 2019](#); [Pasadeos et al., 2010](#); [Pasadeos and Renfro, 1992](#); [Pasadeos et al., 1999](#)), that have been conducted over the span of three decades, starting in 1992, and that established who the most cited authors in the field of PR between 1975 and 2019 are. [Ferguson \(1984\)](#) and [Sallot et al. \(2003\)](#) were more focused on the state of theory building in PR by assessing the different topics of research in the field. Other studies like [Ki and Ye \(2017\)](#), [Ki et al. \(2021\)](#), or [Morehouse and Saffer \(2018\)](#) have concentrated their analysis on sub-fields like global PR or dialogic research. Yet another direction was explored by [Buhmann et al. \(2019\)](#) who studied the diffusion of Habermasian thinking in PR research.

The results of these studies suggest that while the field has certainly expanded in terms of quantity, theoretical development is dominated by a small number of established scholars and the theoretical frameworks they represent ([Ki et al., 2019](#)). The earliest emerging paradigm is the excellence cluster based upon the works of [Grunig and Hunt \(1984\)](#) and [Grunig and Grunig \(1992\)](#), to which most clusters that develop later refer to at some point or another ([Pasadeos et al., 1999](#)). The 1990s then saw the emergence of the three other dominant paradigms in the field, i.e. the dialogic framework ([Kent and Taylor, 1998, 2002](#)); the relationship management approach ([Broom et al., 1997](#); [Ledingham and Bruning, 1998](#)); and the nexus of crisis communication theory, most notably represented by [Coombs and Holladay \(2002, 1996\)](#). While the former two are closely connected to the excellence cluster and show fairly strong co-citations between each other, the latter formed mostly independent, relating mostly to Benoit and the image repair theory ([Benoit, 1997](#)). Looking at the results of [Ki and Ye \(2017\)](#) and [Ki et al. \(2019, 2021\)](#), one can also see a new group of ascending authors who formed the latest cluster to date, the strategic communication paradigm ([Hallahan et al., 2007](#)). In comparison to these results, we put forward the following research questions:

- RQ3.* Who are the most influential authors in the works of young PR scholars?
- RQ4.* What theories and methods do young scholars apply for their research?
- RQ5.* How do the citations of authors in the works of young scholars compare to the findings with regard to the field in general?

### Methodology

Research into the state of the art of an academic field or discipline is naturally difficult. It is hard to establish who counts as a scholar who is part of the field, what literature needs to be recognized in terms of cited works, and what it actually is that makes a field distinct from other academic entities.

Researching and analyzing the contribution of young scholars to the field is problematic for a variety of reasons. First, unlike established authors, academic juniors lack visibility and are thus hard to identify as potential members of tomorrow's generation of scholars. Second, the expansion of the field has also led to an increased intersection with other fields and disciplines. Hence,

establishing what defines a PR scholar and identifying them, are no main tasks. We therefore decided to resort to a self-sampling process by relying on participants of the EUPRERA PhD-workshop which is held annually since 2007. Since EUPRERA is an organization that brings together researchers from across Europe, its PhD-workshop is equally likely to attract pan-European, young scholars. Being the association for research, practice, and education in the field of PR, we could also assume a thematic fit between their PhD projects and the field at large.

We rely on a sample of young scholars who participated at least once at the EUPRERA PhD-workshops between 2007 and 2019, which gives us a sample of predominantly young scholars who started their PhD in the last 10 to 15 years. This allows us to analyze publications of scholars who entered the discipline in the last decade, trying to position themselves in the field and thereby often bringing along experiences from other fields.

Our study proceeded in two steps. For the first part, we developed a questionnaire largely based upon the European Science Foundation's career tracking survey of PhD-holders (Boman *et al.*, 2017). Therein we focused on the participants' views of the state of the field with regard to theories and topics, their perceived influence, and dominant research methods. Furthermore, we were interested in their academic career and their contributions to the field. We specifically asked what, in their opinion, their five most important publications were, which could include the PhD thesis, but not necessarily. Second, we took those publications and performed a bibliometric analysis, further coding the cited authors (regardless of position in the list of authors), publications' themes, keywords, methodology, and publication outlet. For the 50 most prominent authors, we also coded the works with which they were cited.

Bibliometric analysis is a method for uncovering publication patterns. By summarizing citations on a topic or within a scientific discipline, it shows which publications are cited how often by other publications. It thus clarifies which authors and works have an influence in the field, and which ones form the main research stream. It can be used to construct how knowledge emerges and how the field develops with its literature and theories (Pasadeos and Renfro, 1992). Furthermore, it also allows to analyze paradigms and to highlight a paradigm shift within a given time period (Pasadeos *et al.*, 2010). The bibliometric analysis includes the co-citation analysis, which measures the frequency of joint citations of authors and publications in the same body of work, thus clarifying which publications were frequently cited together. It analyzes pairs of publications by different authors for the frequency of their joint citation, thus highlighting the intellectual, cognitive links between individual publications. The resulting clusters, which can also be displayed visually, allow conclusions to be drawn about the internal structure of disciplines and paradigms. They show central concepts and their links to other concepts in the field (Ki *et al.*, 2021).

For all workshops between 2007 and 2019, we were able to identify 104 unique participants (some participated more than once), of whom 91 could be contacted by e-mail. Of these, 32 participated in the survey, 23 of them provided us with a list of their most important publications (five max.). The analysis of the survey data was conducted using SPSS.

Of the 32 participants, 20 identified as female, nine as male, and three chose not to answer. Age ranged from 28 to 71, with a mean value of 43. The respondents were citizens from 24 different countries [1], featuring only Germany (six), Belgium (two), and the UK (two) more than once. In terms of their current institutional affiliation a similar variety was observed with only Lund University (Sweden) being named more often than once (three times). Participants, at the time of the study, were employed as (senior) lecturers (nine), full professors (six), associate professors (two), assistant professors/post docs (four), researchers (three), PhD students (two) and PR professionals (two).

With regard to the citation analysis we were able to identify and download 81 texts of the participants. Of these, 20 were published in a PR journal [2], 16 in general communication journals, 16 were either chapters, monographs or contributions to conference proceedings, eleven appeared in journals in marketing, management and/or business, and another 10 in

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journals that were categorized as social sciences broadly. In all of these we were able to code 10.784 authors, alongside 97 applications of methods, and 124 themes of research. To code the citations and create the co-citation networks, we used MAXQDA.

## Results

### *Survey*

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Our main concern was to determine how young scholars contribute to the development of the field and which theories made an impact on them. According to the participants, the most influential theoretical frameworks for their works were organization-public relationships and relationship management (OPR, 11), followed by the excellence theory (seven), the dialogic theory (six), and crisis communication (five). When we asked for their opinion what they perceived to be the most influential theories in the field at large, almost half opted for OPR (15), one-fifth thought the dialogic theory to be most important (seven), followed by excellence theory (four), crisis communication (two), and critical and cultural PR theory (two).

When asked for influential theories from outside the field, respondents named more than 40 different theories. Most prominently featured were cultural and critical theories, communication constitutes organization and systems theory, strategy and strategic management, (neo-)institutionalism, sense making, and evolutionary psychology.

With regard to the field's impact on other disciplines, the echo of Broom's lament (2006) was paramount. One researcher rendered an especially harsh verdict by stating:

PR/SC research does not yield any influence on other fields. We are living in a self-inflicted marginalized silo which has become very convenient with our own conferences, journals, etc. We tend to import a lot of theories but do not contribute to the discussion in other fields, because we are not participating or publishing in the relevant journals. Splendid isolation with no impact, totally missing out in the rigor and relevance fields. (Researcher 6)

But respondents also pointed out the potential of the field, as another researcher did by observing:

It should. We're at a pivotal moment in the discipline that advertising and marketing are trying to move into PR, recognizing the importance of strategic frameworks and the foundations of stakeholder relations that have become critical to the advertising and marketing cycles. Although I didn't list Crisis Comm in my top three, it is also now simply required as we seem to live in constant crisis. We're seeing that shift rather dramatically in the US. Marketers, advertisers, and HR professionals are not well equipped to address the complex issues of stakeholder relationships in an unprecedented era of social justice reform. (Researcher 3)

The huge amount of influential theories indicates, that the field is still very much stuck in stage 1, as [Nothhaft et al. \(2018\)](#) have suggested. Interestingly, crisis communication – as can be seen in the citation analysis later – is not regarded to be at the core of the field.

A look at the usage of methods by the respondents and their perception of methodology in the field paints a similar picture: As perceived by the participants, the most important methods were surveys (seven), followed by grounded theory (six), expert interviews and experiments (five each), and qualitative content analysis (three). Among the analyzed texts the application of an explicitly stated method could be coded 97 times. Most often appeared content analysis (32; including qualitative and quantitative approaches), interviews (12), surveys (nine), literature reviews (eight), ethnographic and observational methods (seven), case studies (five) and others (four). Additionally, 18 texts represented conceptual/theoretical works, which we also included in the category, even though it is not a method, strictly speaking. The methodology toolbox is fairly aligned with communication science in general, hence there is no observable breakthrough in terms of methods that are novel to the field, as stage 2 would require.

*Bibliometric analysis*

To make our results comparable, we decided to use the study by *Ki et al. (2019)* as a benchmark. Similar to their approach, our first goal was to establish who the most cited authors in the works of our participants are (see *Table 1*).

The co-citation network (see *Figure 1*) represents all citations of, and co-citations between, referenced authors in the publications selected (see also *Table 1*) by the participants of study one as their most important works. All authors who accounted for at least 15 citations were included in the analysis.

The figures show how often and with which connections to others an author was cited. The closer two authors are, the more citational resemblance the texts have they were cited in. The more co-citations there are (min. 3 for all figures), the thicker the line that connects the two authors. The colors represent authors that belong to the same cluster. However, these clusters are not theoretically derived but assigned by the program based on co-citations in the analyzed texts. The farther away two authors are from each other in the figure, the less often they co-occurred in the same text.

Unlike the studies of Pasadeos and colleagues (1999, 2010; *Ki et al., 2019*), our results show a skew toward European authors, which is not surprising given our sample of researchers, who were predominantly from European countries themselves. Nevertheless, as the data in *Table 1* and *Figure 1* indicate, authors who are cited often in PR journals also get cited often in the works of young scholars (who also frequently publish in these journals, naturally). While James Grunig is still one of the three most-cited authors (71), only Ansgar Zerfass (126) and Dejan Verčič (74) are referenced more often.

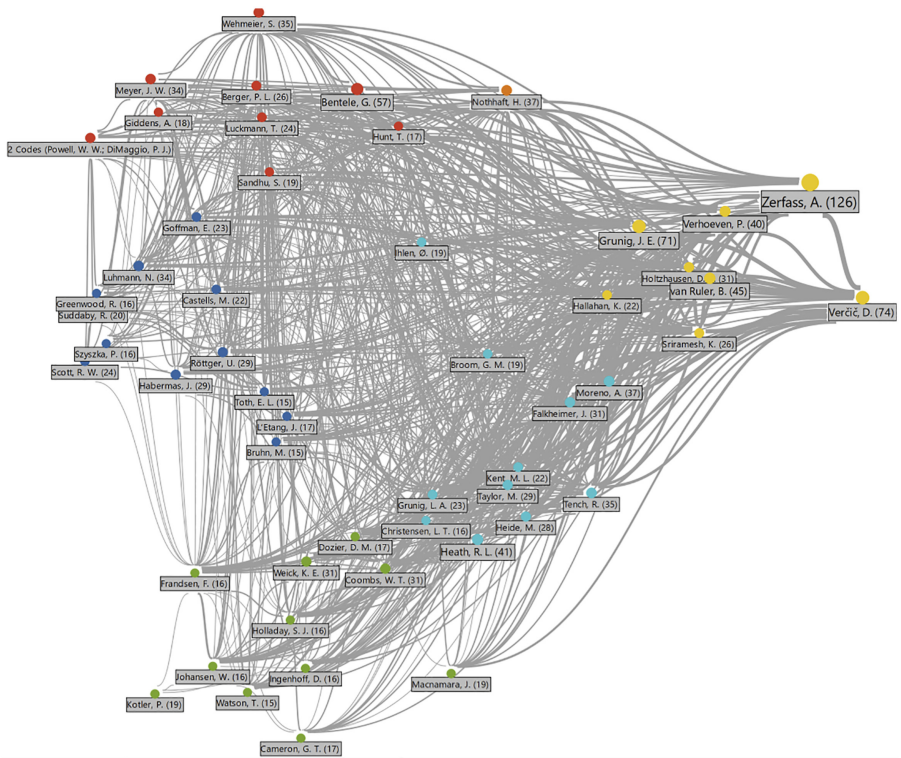
But in terms of appearances in texts, Grunig is still the most referenced author (in 32 out of 81 documents), followed by Verčič (29), Zerfass (24), van Ruler (22), and Verhoeven (21). It is also notable that the co-citation network around Zerfass, Verčič, Moreno, Tench and Verhoeven is particularly strong because the five of them co-authored the various editions of the European Communication Monitor since 2007 (*Zerfass et al., 2008*), which is frequently cited (in 13 different documents out of 81 at least once) by young scholars.

Cites	Author	Cites	Author	Cites	Author	Cites	Author
126	<i>Zerfass, A.</i>	31	<b>Weick, K. E.</b>	22	<b>Kent, M. L.</b>	16	Frandsen, F.
74	<b>Verčič, D.</b>		<b>Coombs, W. T.</b>		Castells, M.		<i>Holladay, S. J.</i>
71	<b>Grunig, J. E.</b>		Falkheimer, J.	22	<b>Hallahan, K.</b>		Powell, W. W.
57	Bentele, G.		<b>Holtzhausen, D. R.</b>	20	Suddaby, R.		<b>Christensen, L. T.</b>
45	<i>van Ruler, B.</i>	29	<i>Habermas, J.</i>	19	Kotler, P.		Ingenhoff, D.
41	<b>Heath, R. L.</b>		Röttger, U.		Sandhu, S.		Greenwood, R.
40	<b>Verhoeven, P.</b>		<b>Taylor, M.</b>		Macnamara, J.		Szyska, P.
37	Moreno, A.	28	Heide, M.		<i>Ihlen, Ø.</i>		Johansen, W.
	Nothhaft, H.	26	Berger, P. L.		<b>Broom, G. M.</b>	15	DiMaggio, P. J.
35	Wehmeier, S.		<b>Sriramesh, K.</b>	18	Giddens, A.		<b>Toth, E. L.</b>
	<b>Tench, R.</b>	24	Scott, R. W.	17	<b>Dozier, D. M.</b>		Bruhn, M.
34	Luhmann, N.		Luckmann, T.		<b>Hunt, T.</b>		Watson, T.
	Meyer, J. W.	23	<b>Grunig, L. A.</b>		<b>L'Etang, J.</b>		
			Goffman, E.		<b>Cameron, G. T.</b>		

**Note(s):** Authors in italics are also among the top-cited authors in *Ki et al.* overview of all pr-journals (2019). Authors in bold are also among the top authors among the international journals in their study

**Table 1.** Most cited authors (min. 15 citations) in young PR scholars publications

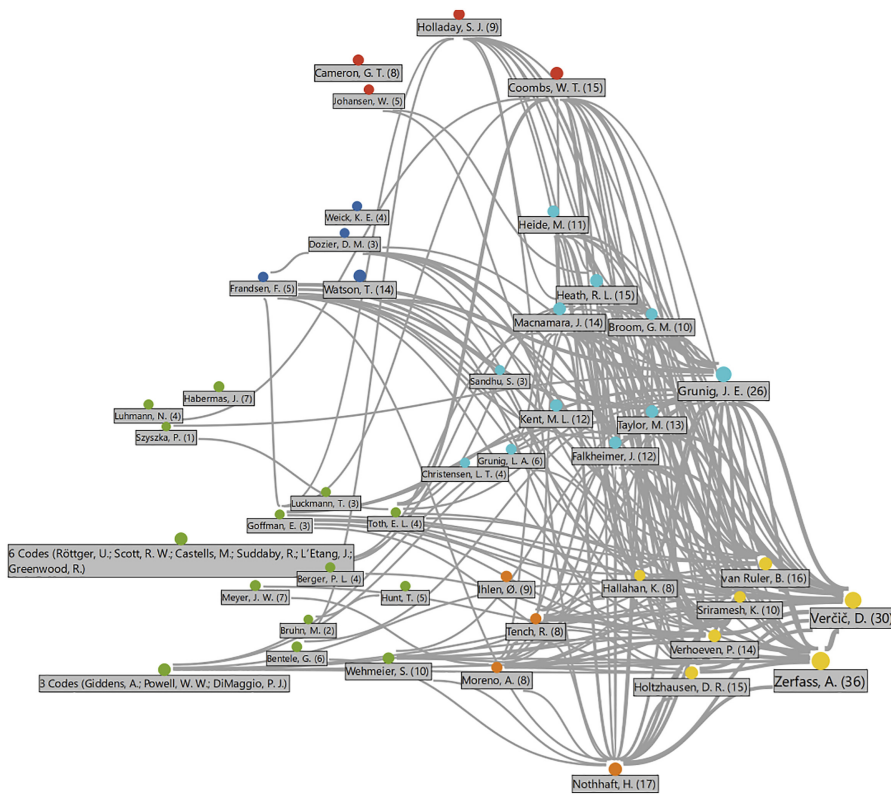




**Figure 1.**  
Most cited authors in  
young PR scholars  
publications

**Note(s):** The closer two authors are, the more citational resemblance have the texts they were cited in. The more co-citations there are (min. 3 for all figures), the thicker the line that connects the two authors

What is remarkable furthermore, compared to the analysis of *Ki et al. (2019)*, is the relatively strong citation of non-PR authors, especially from the field of sociology (see *Figure 1*). With Meyer (34), Luhmann (34), Weick (31), Habermas (29), Berger (26), Luckmann (24), Goffman (23), Castells (22), Kotler (19), and Powell and DiMaggio (16 each), a sizeable outside influence is visible. Of these, only Habermas is listed by *Ki et al. (2019)* as one of the most influential authors in the field. To make results more comparable to previous studies, we split our sample into articles in PR journals (see *Figure 2*, footnote 2) and in all others (see *Figure 3*). We assume that books take a wider look at broader topics, compared to the detailed but narrow aspects that journal articles address. In this way, books cover a big extract of a topic with thorough exploration referring to a broader body of literature, whereas journal articles cover a smaller and more specialized sub-topic referring to citations that are more specific. Books form the basis of essential publications in the social sciences and have also driven the field of PR. Addressing topics broader and in bigger parts, the influence of books on the field is often longer and more constant. In recent years, however, the importance of journal articles has grown strongly. In the last decade, in particular, journal articles have replaced the status of books: If in the earlier decades books still dominated the discourse and represented the most cited sources, since around 2010 journals have become the most important and most cited sources in PR (*Ki et al., 2021*). Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the influence of books on the discipline, which makes both sources relevant for our analysis.

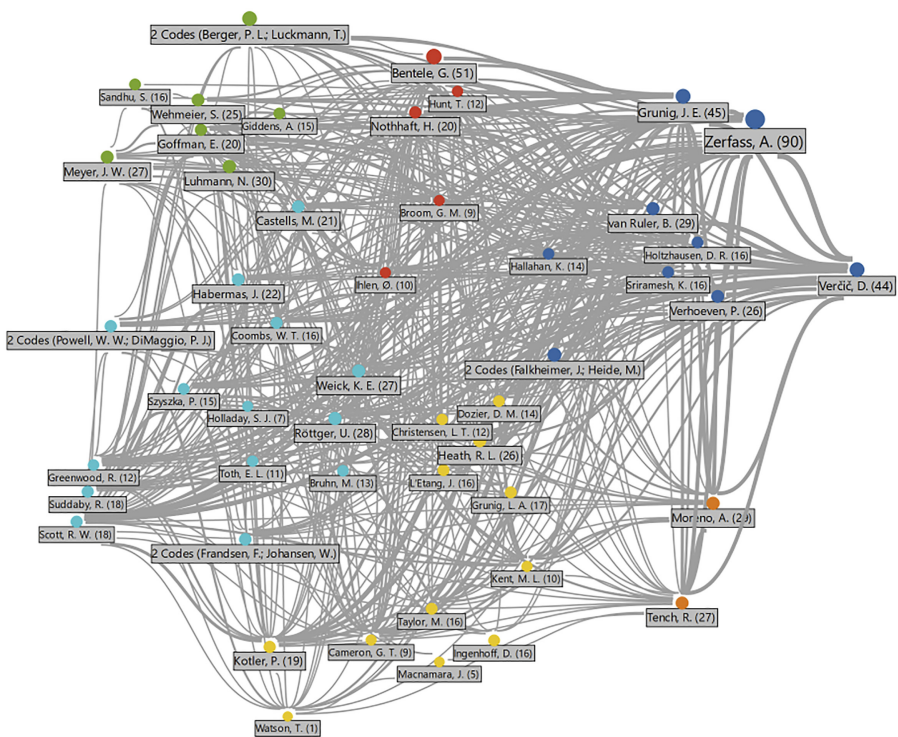


**Figure 2.** Most cited authors and co-citations in PR journals

What is most remarkable in comparing both analyses is the difference in outside influence as represented by citations. While the non-PR publications make ample references to non-PR authors, only few such references can be found in the PR journals. While the influence from outside the field is there and becomes obvious the further down you go in the list of citations, the top is dominated by established scholars of the field. Only in publication outlets and monographs that are not subject to peer-review by the scholars in the field, so it seems, can outside influencers establish a sizeable foothold.

To dig deeper into the divide between outside influence and inside focus, we further compared the participants' PhD theses (we could assess 18, of which five were part of the overall analysis, since they were listed among the participant's five most important works) to the works that were not part of a PhD project. Figures 4 and 5 show a similar tendency as was apparent in Figures 2 and 3.

Again, the PhD-network, which most often included monographs, shows a much more stronger reference to authors who are not among the fields most influential (e.g. Bentele (62), Luhmann (35), Weick (33), or Mintzberg (22) according to *Ki et al. (2019)*, or who are even from outside. It is also notable that Zerfass, who usually forms a closely knit co-citation network with his co-authors from the European Communication Monitor, is now (see *Figure 5*) much farther removed from this cluster. This implies that young scholars, in their PhD-theses, cite Zerfass in a different way than they do when they publish in established journals in the field. One can also observe that the entire co-citation network in *Figure 4* is much denser compared



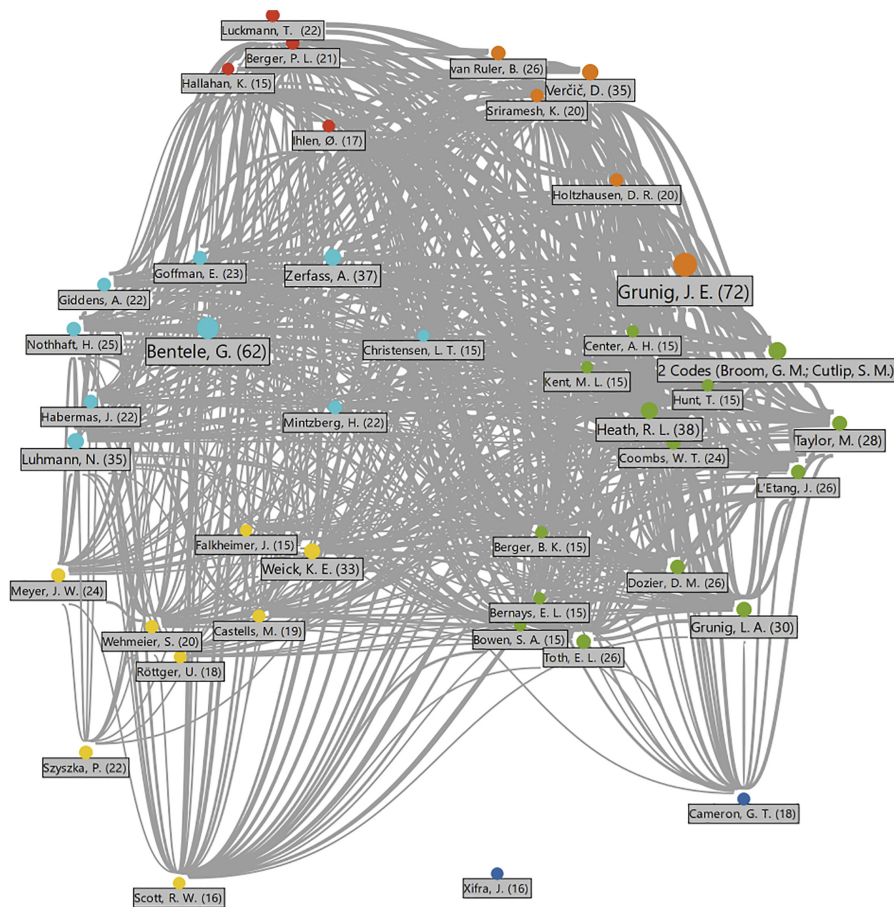
**Figure 3.**  
Most cited authors and  
co-citations in non-PR  
publication outlets

to Figure 5. A possible interpretation would be, that PhD-theses draw a much more complex picture of their research objects and thus establish much more conceptual cross-links. All these findings so far suggest – as was already indicated in the survey – that the field is still stuck in a stage 1 phase, with many different theoretical paradigms competing for supremacy (see Table 1).

But while the data suggest that the field does not progress in a Shneiderian sense, the discipline can very well be sorted along the lines of the narratives that Winkler *et al.* (2021) proposed. To map these narratives as co-citation networks, we clustered all the authors according to their paradigmatic affiliation (see Table 2) as they were cited by Winkler *et al.* (2021) in their descriptions of the respective paradigms. We only added Bruning and Ledingham for the obvious reason that they are prototypical scholars of the co-creational paradigm, while Verhoeven was the only author being cited in two paradigms.

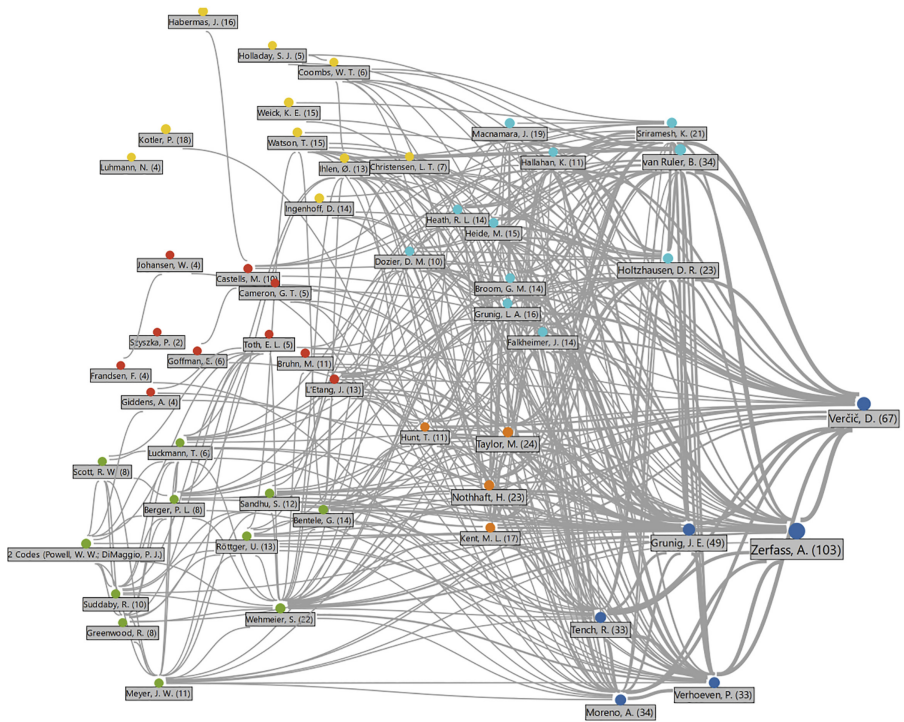
The functional paradigm around authors like Ansgar Zerfass, Dejan Verčič and James Grunig combine for the most citations by far (500), clearly showing the dominance over the other paradigms as predicted by Winkler *et al.* (2021), which combined together for 391 references only.

Figure 6 shows that the empirical reality of these paradigmatic narratives does not map neatly onto the emerging co-citation network. While the colors of the dots show how the four narrative clusters emerge from the data, the graphic dividing lines show the authors' paradigmatic allocation in theory (green and continuous line = functional; cyan and dashed line = social-reflective; blue and dotted line = co-creational; yellow and dashed-dotted line = critical-cultural). In fact, many authors appear to be children of more than one world.



**Figure 4.**  
Citations and  
co-citation networks  
in PhD theses

Holtzhausen, Hallahan (who are frequently cited with their definition of strategic communication; Hallahan *et al.*, 2007) and van Ruler are the most clear-cut examples for authors, who have ties to the functional paradigm but are in theory also associated with the critical-cultural, the social-reflective and the co-creational paradigm, hence their central position lies at the boundaries between two paradigms. This position stems not at least from their co-authorship of the seminal article “Defining Strategic Communication” in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007), together with Dejan Verčič (a representative of the functional paradigm) and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh. Ironically this would imply that instead of converging onto an agreed theoretical underpinning, the sub-field began at a common point of origin only to diverge from there. Furthermore, unlike in the model developed by Winkler *et al.* (2021), not the functional and social-reflective paradigm seems to be opposed to each other, but rather the functional and the critical-cultural paradigm, as these two show the least overlap and their representatives are the farthest away from one another, except for Holtzhausen. Nevertheless, our analysis supports the idea that paradigmatic clusters form and do emerge from the references cited in young scholars’ texts.



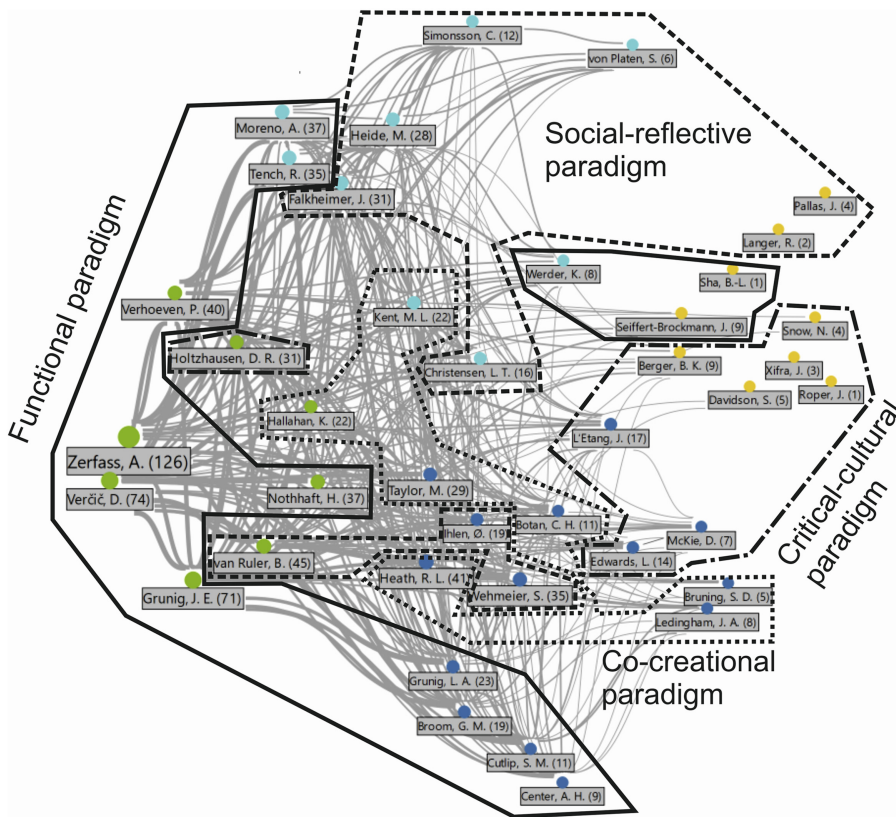
**Figure 5.** Citations and co-citation networks in non-PhD texts

**Table 2.** Representative authors of the four paradigms according to Winkler *et al.* (2021), who were also coded in the citation analysis

Functional	Co-creational	Social-reflective	Critical-cultural
G. Broom, A. Center, S. Cutlip, J. Grunig, L. Grunig, A. Moreno, H. Nothhaft, J. Seiffert-Brockmann, B. Sha, R. Tench, D. Vercić, P. Verhoeven, A. Zerfaß	C. Botan, S. Bruning, K. Hallahan, Heath, J., M. Kent, Ledingham, M. Taylor	L. Christensen, M. Heide, O. Ihlen, J. Falkheimer, S. Holmström, R. Langer, J. Pallas, C. Simonsson, B. van Ruler, P. Verhoeven, S. von Platen, S. Wehmeier	J. L'Etang, J. Roper, B. Berger, D. Holtzhausen, L. Edwards, S. Davidson, D. McKie, J. Xifra, N. Snow
500 citations	127 citations	153 citations	91 citations

Against the background of Nothhaft *et al.*'s (2018) analysis and Shneider's model (2009), our results are a mixed bag. On the positive side, the repeated reference to the European Communication Monitor may be proof of the emergence of a stronger focus on methodology as is characteristic for a stage 2 discipline. Observing phenomena and gathering data has always been a key element in achieving scientific progress. On the other hand, the field, as the analysis of Winkler and colleagues' (2021) narratives have shown, is still very much fractured, maybe even more so as compared to the past. As Nothhaft *et al.* (2018) point out, this could become problematic down the road:

The term's diffuse explanatory power, the ambiguity of subject (perspective) and object (material and manifest basis), and the widespread wishful thinking about the discipline's status and consequently the fragmentation of effort, become problematic only in transition from Stage 1 to 2, and especially 2 to 3. It is here that progressers and sophisticators part ways. (p. 364)



**Figure 6.** The four paradigms according to Winkler *et al.* mapped onto the co-citation network of the most cited authors

After decades of PR research, the field has clearly made progress in the sense, that it expanded in scope and approaches. But young scholars, it seems, are still working at the frontier of a stage 1 discipline.

### Discussion

The survey of participants of the EUPRERA PhD-workshops was conducted for two reasons. On the one hand, the survey provides an insight into the theories and methods that the young scholars consider to be formative for the discipline. On the other hand, they were asked to name some of their own publications that are most important and seem most relevant to the field to them. These publications formed the sample for the bibliometric analysis.

The survey showed that the theories relevant to the young scholars' individual work overlapped strongly with the theories they rated as most influential for the discipline. With the four most frequently mentioned frameworks organization-public relationships and relationship management, excellence theory, dialogic theory, and crisis communication, the frameworks that have already been among the most frequent and influential within the field for years were also mentioned. This indicates that the discipline is in [Nothhaft \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#) or [Shneider \(2009\)](#) stage 1: the frameworks used can be seen as a consolidated foundation; no significant breakthroughs are being made with them. A similar picture emerges when looking at the methods. There is only a marginal difference between the methods that the

participants considered most important (surveys, grounded theory, expert interviews, experiments and qualitative content analysis) and the methods they used in the publications mentioned in the questionnaire (content analysis, interviews, survey and literature reviews); nevertheless even these methods do not go beyond the basics of a stage 1 discipline. The methods mentioned and used show that the toolbox of methods is a sample of the most relevant methods of communication science in general. To evolve from a stage 1 discipline to a stage 2 discipline, according to [Nothhaft \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#), methods and approaches are required that can achieve new, concrete and precise results. Thus, it seems that the field with the mentioned theories and methods is still stuck in stage 1.

By asking the participants in the survey about their most important publications, a sample of 81 texts could be created for the bibliometric analysis. Following the study by [Ki \*et al.\* \(2019\)](#), it was found that the authors cited by the young scholars are mostly also the authors who are among the top-cited authors in all PR journals and the top authors among the international journals in the study by [Ki \*et al.\*](#) Thus, publications by authors who are frequently cited in PR journals are also among the publications that young scholars frequently refer to. Concerning the citation of authors from different disciplines, it was found that young scholars predominantly cite authors from the field of PR. Authors from other disciplines, on the other hand, are cited less frequently and predominantly in publications that do not have to undergo a peer review process for a PR journal. Sociology, in particular, showed an outside influence on the field of PR. Also, PhD theses, most of which were published as stand-alone monographs, show that there are influences from other disciplines, but the top of the field continues to be dominated by established scholars. Even though there are clear influences from other disciplines, which were especially visible in the PhD theses and publications from non-PR journals, the bibliometric analysis showed that the core of the discipline continues to be the playing field of existing theories and long-established authors. Using the approach of [Nothhaft \*et al.\* \(2018\)](#), it is thus also clear at this point that the discipline continues to be in stage 1.

### Limitations

The results of the study are not generalizable for three reasons: First, this is not a study analyzing a representative sample of young career scholars in the field of PR. Every population sample is necessarily skewed in one way or another. In this study, only 31 participants of the EUPRERA PhD workshop took the survey and of those, only 23 contributed texts as a basis for the citation analysis. These scholars came from diverse scientific and cultural backgrounds, which proved to be difficult in terms of comparability. Looking at PhD theses for example, this means that national scientific cultures, e.g. writing long monographs as opposed to short monographs, skew the data on how many references are put into the text. Bibliographic studies of the field usually limit themselves to peer-reviewed academic journals, whose articles are comparable in terms of length and style. Here we worked with what the respondents provided us. Second, we collected our sample by letting respondents select their most important works themselves. What counts as important though is probably different from author to author and while some may value peer-reviewed journal articles most, others might look for their most cherished papers in terms of ideas, regardless of the publication outlet, or maybe monographs they have written themselves. Third, some of the most prolific authors in the field of PR also served as PhD advisors to some of our participants. Therefore their impact on the works of their students could be outsized compared to other young scholars. Finally, it is true for all bibliometric studies that they take the frequency of a cited author as a measure of the impact of her works. However, especially in large corpora, single authors who were very influential on some young scholars might have been drowned out. It is thus hard to figure out what really made a conceptual impact without analyzing the content of these works as well.

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However, this analysis can serve as a benchmark for further studies of comparable samples, which would give a comprehensive overview of the careers and contributions of young academics in PR and Strategic Communication research worldwide. It would also provide insights into the alignment processes that underlie the careers of young scholars and how that influences the process of maturation of PR as a field of scientific inquiry.

## Conclusion

Our analysis has demonstrated that in the works of young scholars in the field of PR, the overarching trend that has been established in past bibliometric studies (Ki *et al.*, 2019; Pasadeos *et al.*, 1999, 2010), can be identified as well: The field mostly references itself. In contrast to Broom's lament, only few outside references could be found in the literature, which was even more true for the field's academic journals. PR as an academic discipline, it would seem, is largely occupied with itself. However, in their dissertations and in non-PR publication outlets, young scholars make ample references to thinkers from outside the field, from all sorts of academic disciplines.

But while progress toward a more mature stage of the field, which should be the case for a proper scientific discipline as Nothhaft *et al.* (2018) argue, is hardly discernible, the socio-political game very much is. Counter to the idea of scientific progress as proposed by Shneider (2009), the expansion of the field has not led to its maturation, but the results indicate that, as Nothhaft *et al.* lament, the field has jumped from stage one to proto-four. But it nevertheless developed into distinguishable camps.

Ki *et al.* (2019) argued that,

This quantitative growth demonstrated that the field of PR has matured. Qualitatively, although many new theories may not have been introduced during this decade, existing theories (e.g. SCCT, OPR and dialogic theory) were extensively tested, developed, and expanded by applying different contexts that helped enhance their generalizability. (p. 21)

Maturation in a scientific sense would imply that the field converges on a theory/paradigm that is best supported by empirical findings. It rather appears as if the field is getting more fractured instead, with each paradigm digging, armed with its own set of axiomatic beliefs. For young scholars this means that their research needs to align with what is fashionable and promising in terms of future job prospects. With their publications, they signal their allegiance by citing scholars from their respective school of thought, smuggling in new ideas and theories only at the margins. In an age where identity is the key to the socio-political standing of the individual in society, it is hardly surprising that young scholars align with the paradigm that reflects their worldview best.

Instead of following an established paradigm and working within its framework to come up with empirically tested knowledge, the current generation of young scholars still very much continues the work of pioneering at the frontier. But they are not standing before an open sky, the direction of development being theirs to choose. Instead, they see bandwagons pulling in different directions, leaving it up to them to decide which one is the most promising to follow.

The takeaways from our analysis, and the conclusions drawn therefrom, are very much dependent on the eye of the beholder. It may very well be that believing that scientific progress in the field means the emergence of a unifying theoretic framework. Looking at the state of the field as Ki *et al.* (2019) did can very well lead to the conclusion, that it has fared pretty well in the previous decades and has developed a solid foothold as a social science, that it is thriving not because of unifying efforts, but because of its multi-paradigmatic nature. In that view, the plurality and parallelism of concepts is the progress as an ongoing discussion of insights from research. However, the absence of such a unifying framework could also



mean that while the field enjoys lively discussions, the explaining of the how and why of PR and strategic communication is done somewhere else, e.g. in fields like cognitive science or marketing. Perhaps, this renders the field scientifically irrelevant in the long run and reduces its significance to a training ground for future practitioners, which would raise the question of why the field should be institutionalized at universities, and not mainly at institutions of applied sciences. Thus, with regard to its credentials as a scientific discipline, the question remains very much open, which pathway is the more promising one: a multi-paradigmatic approach or a unifying effort.

### Notes

1. These countries included: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the USA
2. Public Relations Review (seven), *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (seven), *Journal of Communication Management* (three), *Journal of Public Relations Research* (one), Public Relations Inquiry (one), *Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management* (one)

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