

## **Scientific production on corporate communication: a systematic study in Scopus with COVID-19 as a determining factor**

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### **Structured abstract**

**Objective:** Searching, identifying and analysing the scientific literature on “corporate communication” published in scientific journals during the 21st century (2000-2021) and indexed in the Scopus database, as well as its possible relationship with COVID-19.

**Design/methodology/approach:** a systematic bibliographic search was carried out in Scopus and a subsequent analysis of the literature, based on variables such as year of

publication, authorship, original language of the text, most used terms and concepts, journal titles, keywords and possible allusions to COVID-19 or the pandemic.

Results: 2023 results were initially identified, but after applying the filters that limited the results in time (2000-2021) and discriminated —according to the type of document— the results only to scientific articles, the sample finally analysed was 1280 articles relating to “corporate communication”. It was found that these were mainly published in journals such as *Corporate Communications* and *Journal of Communication Management*, in English, and with an accentuated thematic dispersion, but mostly related to public relations, advertising and communication in general.

Originality: there is an article published in 2012, before the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Italian journal *Igiene e sanità pubblica*, which already established the relevance of researching the challenges and solutions to communication risks in health crisis situations.

## **Keywords**

Scientific articles; research articles; Scopus database; communication sciences; scientific communication; corporate communication; business communication; institutional communication; communication management; communication information management; systematic review; Scopus.

## **1. Introduction and state of the art**

Speaking of corporate communication is referring to a global concept that focuses on the way in which companies use communication to reach all of their target audiences. It is a concept that has been used in different ways, under the umbrella of business communication, organisational communication and even institutional communication to refer to public institutions. Regardless of its specific meaning, the term ‘corporate communication’ encompasses the institutional communication carried out by any company or institution, which Capriotti (1999, p. 72) defined as “the totality of communication resources available to an organisation to effectively reach its audiences”. Van Riel’s (1997, p. 26) definition, on the other hand, broadens Capriotti’s scope by stating that corporate communication is:

A management tool whereby all forms of consciously used internal and external communication are harmonised as effectively and efficiently as possible to create a favourable basis for relations with the audiences on which the company depends (1997, p. 26).

The debate on the scope and limitations of corporate communication has generated a still lively debate in academia in general, and in communication studies in particular, combining positions closer to the marketing approach (Kotler, 1989; Kotler and Keller, 2006) with positions closer to the communication discipline (Túñez and Costa, 2014; Villafaña, 2008), as established in the approach taken by Apolo, Báez, Paukel and Pasquel (2017). While some have argued that corporate communication acquires a systematic dimension that integrates people, processes and identities (Rincón, 2014, p. 50), others consider it to be a process faithfully linked to the holistic action and conduct of the institution or corporate organisation (Costa, 1995), and some definitions even consider profitability as a transversal axis in the approach to corporate communication (Castro, 2007).

Academic studies on corporate communication have evolved from the general to the particular, following the general trend in communication research (Hidalgo-Marí and Segarra-Saavedra, 2021). According to Costa (2012), the first reflections on the role of corporate communication arise almost at the same time as the development of business management models, around the 1930s. From the end of the Second World War onwards, according to Sotelo (2001), the transition from the production economy to the information economy and business specialisation in commercial, communication and advertising strategies led to a clear interest in corporate communication studies.

As Angel (2012) has already established, there is a lack of studies that analyse the trends in research in the field of organisational communication, and there are few studies that allow us to establish relationships between the theoretical models and research paradigms in this field of study (Bouzon, 2011).

Within this context, it is important to highlight that the first studies on communication in organisations were born in the mid-twentieth century from disciplines such as industrial psychology, sociology and administration (Godhaber, 1989), mostly limited to companies. However, in recent decades it has ceased to be a phenomenon exclusive to this type of organisation and has been addressed in institutions of different natures, such as public, non-profit or any social collective with defined purposes (Bouzon, 2011) where organisational communication has been consolidating as a space for social interaction, the construction of meaning and relationships:

It is through interaction that communication reveals its constituent character, being the interaction not an expression of transmission of meaning—which is the process of information—but the construction and negotiation of meanings—which is essentially the process of communication (Ramírez, 2014, p. 223).

In this sense, it is noteworthy that in recent years research in this field has taken an important turn by attempting to delve into aspects such as the meaning and processes in which communication is present, its impact on organisational culture and its role in the construction of an identity, rather than the means of communication applied or the difference between the internal and external sphere, which were approaches developed for several decades in the twentieth century (Mumby & Putnam, 2014).

Although the number of publications on communication has been growing, there are still insufficient studies that analyse recent research trends in the field of organisational communication (Angel, 2012), and it is even less frequent to find analyses that allow us to establish relationships between the theoretical references and research methods or paradigms on which this research is produced in, from and for organisations in the world today (Bouzon, 2011).

A conceptual study by Ulloa, Villalobos and Eduardo (2015), in a review of the different approaches applied to corporate communication, identifies three specific conceptual perspectives, which, according to the authors, are: a) corporate communication as a process, in which the perspectives of Martínez & Nosnik (1988) and Kreps (1995) stand out, b) corporate communication as an instrument, and c) corporate communication as a strategy, citing authors such as Álvarez (2012), Villafañe (2012) and Apolo et al. (2014). The establishment of these perspectives attributed to the knowledge of corporate communication serves as a precedent to underline the importance not only of knowledge about communicative execution, but also of the need to detect the notorious aspects surrounding the academic and professional knowledge of the communicative discipline, in order to establish possible trends, innovations and proposals for the future that can

contribute to improving the functioning of companies, institutions and organisations in terms of communication.

As far as systematic work on corporate communication is concerned, taking into account the overview by Palacios (2015), the publication by Watkins et al. (1993) stands out, as it established the thematic trends in research in the early 1990s. The study by Fernández (2007) highlighted the low representation of critical works compared to works with a functionalist approach in the production collected in the area of communication in the JCR (Journal Citation Reports). Another study on corporate communication production focused on Spanish academia (Castillo and Carretón, 2010) concluded that research in corporate communication was mostly quantitative and using the content analysis method, while the work of Castillo et al. (2012) highlighted the lack of collaboration between researchers in the area, detecting a high percentage of single authorship, which also revealed a trend in the involvement of women in the publications in the area in question.

All these studies have revealed a disparate situation in terms of corporate communication research. In this sense, the aim of this article is to continue advancing our knowledge of the scientific production on corporate communication by means of an in-depth analysis of the publications developed throughout the 21st century (including from 2000 to 2021). The aim of this work is, firstly, to continue describing the advances in knowledge on corporate communication and, secondly, to establish data, thematic trends and specific variables that allow us to assess current guidelines and styles that explain the research phenomenon around corporate communication and that also serve as a reference to identify needs and aspects on which to focus from the academy.

## **2. Objectives and methodology**

In these times, marked by organisational changes and the need to adapt to market circumstances and to an increasingly technological and digital society, it is essential to know the advances, techniques and innovative practices of corporations and companies, not only to know the advances and new trends in business communication, but also to identify good practices and success stories that can be communicative replicas and/or references for new ways of proceeding in the management of corporate communication. In this sense, the main objective (MO) of this work is to provide systematic data that show the state of the art in international corporate communication research. Other specific objectives derive from this main objective, which are as follows:

- (SO1) Offering a global quantitative in-depth analysis of the production on corporate communication in Scopus.
- (SO2) Understanding the evolution of the scientific production on corporate communication in Scopus.
- (SO3) Identifying the most prolific scientific journals when it comes to publishing papers on corporate communication, as well as the most common languages in the publication.
- (SO4) Finding the most relevant sub-themes in the context of corporate communication research.
- (SO5) Determining whether the pandemic situation has had an impact on the production on corporate communication in the last few years of the sample.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, a systematic search was carried out in Scopus. Scopus can be defined as:

A bibliographic database started in 2004 of abstracts and citations of scientific journal articles. It contains, apart from articles, more than 3,700 Gold Open Access indexed journals, more than 210,000 books and more than 8 million conference proceedings, as well as more than 8 million Open Access documents and 'Articles in Press' of more than 5,500 titles, all of this in more than 40 languages (Scopus, 2020, n.p.).

Scopus has been selected over other databases such as Web of Science (WOS) for several reasons. Firstly, Scopus was considered to cover a larger number of lower impact journals than WOS, which allows for more real and accurate data on the state of corporate communication research. Secondly, it was considered that, despite the fact that WOS covers a longer period of time, the time period of the present study could find the necessary temporal support in Scopus (Burham, 2006; López Illescas et al., 2008). Moreover, considering that most of the journals in WOS are English-language, the Scopus selection provides the possibility of detecting language trends in the production analysed (De Granda-Orive et al., 2013).

The search was conducted on 24 December 2021, using the search term “corporate communication” within the general search option returned by Scopus (Article title, Abstract, Keywords). This initial action gave 2023 results. A temporal filter was then applied, limiting it to cases published in the 21st century (years 2000-2021), which gave 1801 papers. Finally, a second filter was applied, limiting them only to scientific articles, thus discarding chapters, reviews and other analogous publications that do not fit the scientific article as such. This second filter determined the final sample, which consisted of 1281 scientific articles related to corporate communication (N=1280).

Once the final sample was obtained, it was analysed and classified in a csv file that was reviewed by the research team in order to detect possible inconsistencies or duplications in the search and the results. The units of analysis taken into account for the analysis of the results were:

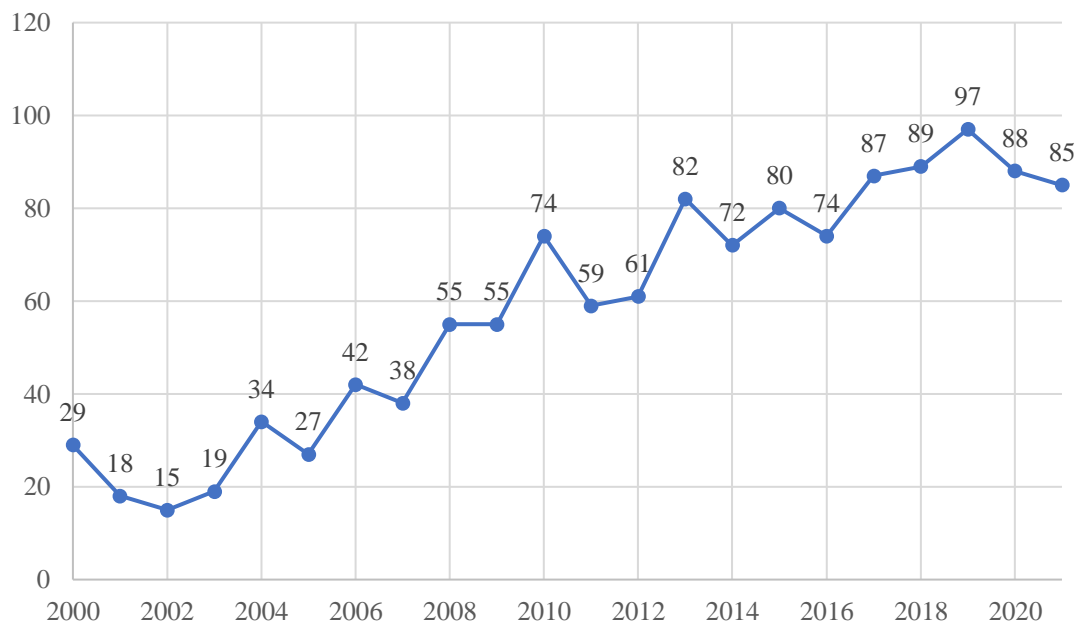
- Year of publication: the year in which the journal published the article was taken into account, considering that the sample covers all the years of the 21st century up to and including 2021.
- Authorship: the names and surnames of the authors were recorded according to the way in which the author was mentioned in the publication.
- Original language of the publication: the original language of the article in which it was published was taken into account.
- Title: the full title of the article was recorded in order to subsequently apply the content study on COVID-19.
- Journal: the title of the journal in its original language has been recorded and its indexing data in Scopus have been taken into account.
- Author's keywords: all the keywords proposed by the authors of the article and published in the journal were collected.
- Reference to COVID-19/pandemic: the linkage of the article with the terms “COVID-19” and “pandemic” was noted by means of a systematic search for subsequent qualitative analysis.

Once the sample (N=1280) had been obtained and processed, the information was analysed and classified, and the necessary statistical calculations were applied to the units of analysis in order to respond to the objectives set out. The analysis, coding and validation of data was carried out by the research team, made up of three people. Before the formal coding, two pre-tests were made that made it possible to share the validation criteria and ensure the coherence and alignment of the research team. All this was dumped into a spreadsheet created *ad hoc*, from which the statistical crosses were applied that allowed obtaining the results presented below. In order to establish thematic trends, the use of the keywords proposed by the authors was used as a reference. These keywords have been subjected to individual classification and pooled by consensus, in order to detect trends in the most commonly used concepts and tags.

### 3. Results

The sample we have worked on, consisting of 1280 scientific articles published between 2000 and 2021, indicates, in general terms, that there is a constant upward trend in corporate communication research. If we look at the information in graph 1, we can see that, from the beginning of the 21st century (with 29 published articles) to the closing year of this study (2021, with 85 published articles), the volume of publications has practically tripled.

**Graph 1: Evolution of articles per year**



Source: own elaboration

The first years of the 21st century saw a decline in the publication of articles on corporate communication, which quickly, after the first five years of the century, took on an upward trend—with decreasing nuances in 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2020 and 2021. The year 2019 stands out as the year with the most articles published, with 97, and 2001, with 18 papers, the year with the lowest number of publications. Nevertheless, the trend line gives a glimpse of a consolidated commitment to the discipline which, despite showing a

slight decrease in the most recent years, maintains a constant upward trend when compared with the data from the beginning of the century.

### 3.1. Distribution according to scientific journals

Once the journals in which the articles are published have been analysed, it has been found that the total production of corporate communication in the 21st century has been published in 511 different scientific journals. However, despite the large number of journals with publications on corporate communication, it should be borne in mind that there is a considerable concentration.

In order to find out and investigate the most prolific journals in terms of publications on corporate communication, we have selected those journals that have published more than 10 articles, which allows us to provide a ranking of the journals with the most papers on the subject (see table I).

**Table I: Journals with most published articles**

	<b>Journal</b>	<b>No. papers</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Quartiles</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>H-Index</b>	<b>Area</b>	
1	<i>Corporate Communications</i>	176	United Kingdom	Q2	Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.	56	Business, Management and Accounting	
2	<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>	76	United Kingdom	Q1	Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.	38	Business, Management and Accounting	
3	<i>Public Relations Review</i>	45	Netherlands	Q1	Elsevier BV	82	Business, Management and Accounting	
4	<i>Profesional de la Informacion</i>	35	Spain	Q1	El Profesional de la Informacion	28	Social Sciences	Computer Science
5	<i>Corporate Reputation Review</i>	26	United Kingdom	Q3	Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.	60	Business, Management and Accounting	
6	<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>	14	United Kingdom	Q1	Routledge	47	Business, Management and Accounting	
7	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	13	Netherlands	Q1	Springer Netherlands	187	Business, Management and Accounting	

8	<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	12	United Kingdom	Q1	Emerald Group Publishing Ltd.	100	Business, Management and Accounting
9	<i>Communication</i>	11	United Kingdom	Q3	Routledge	13	Social Sciences
10	<i>International Journal of Business Communication</i>	11	United Kingdom	Q2	SAGE Publications Inc.	53	Business, Management and Accounting
11	<i>International Journal of Strategic Communication</i>	10	United States	Q1	Routledge	21	Social Sciences
12	<i>Revista Latina de Comunicacion Social</i>	10	Spain	Q2	Universidad de la Laguna	16	Social Sciences

Source: own elaboration

In the analysis of the results, it was detected that the journal *Corporate Communications* and the journal *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* coincided in their ISBN, so it has been interpreted that they are the same journal, although it has been coded separately by Scopus. For this reason, the data for these two variables have been unified and the results have been presented under the label of *Corporate Communications*. It can also be seen that the publication volume of those journals that have published more than ten articles in the 21st century totals 492 articles, which corresponds to 38.43% of the total number of articles published on the subject. Based on this concentration, it can be said that there is a certain concentration in the publication of articles by the journals listed in the table above (table I).

It can also be seen that in the ranking of the most prolific journals when it comes to publishing articles on corporate communication, the journals from United Kingdom stand out, occupying 58.3% (n=7) of the total number of journals in the ranking, followed by Spain and Netherland, which occupy 16.6% of the ranking (n=2) each, and a residual presence of United States (n=1).

In terms of the journal's current position in the international ranking, 58.3% (n=7) occupy the first quartile (Q1) of the Scopus classification (taking into account the quartile of the journal's most favourable area), 25% occupy quartile two (Q2) (n=3) and the remaining 16.6% occupy quartile 3 (Q3) (n=2).

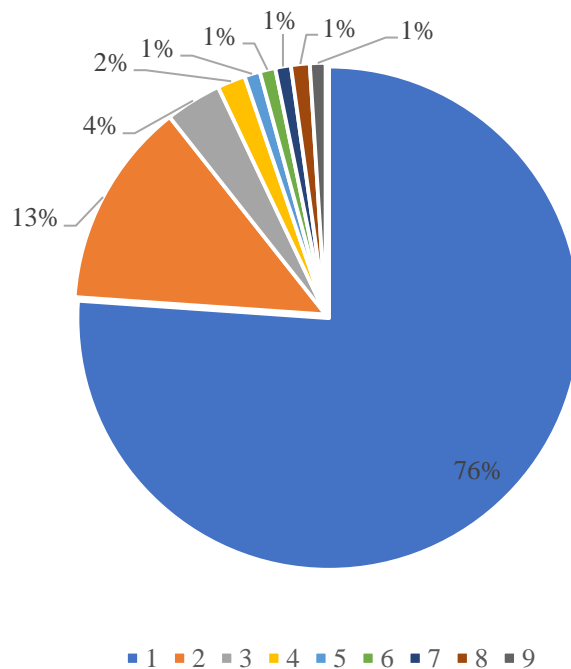
As for the publishers, the involvement of journals from two specific publishing groups stands out: United Kingdom's Routledge Publishing Group, which is present in 25% of the journals in the ranking (n=3) and Emerald Group Publishing Ltd., which also occupies 25% (n=3). The remaining 50% is split between scattered publishing groups, such as Profesional de la Información or the University of La Laguna (Spanish publishing groups), or SAGE Publications Inc. (United States), Springer (Netherlands), Elsevier BV (Netherlands) or Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. (United Kingdom).



66.6% of the journals with the highest number of articles are indexed in the area of “Business, Management and Accounting”, although it should be borne in mind that they have been coded on the basis of the area with the best quartile as recorded by Scopus and that the journals selected could have other additional links. The remaining 33.3% are journals indexed in the “Social Sciences” area, bearing in mind, once again, that the area with the most favourable quartile has been considered.

However, it is interesting to note the dispersion existing in the rest of the journals that have not published more than 10 articles (see Graph 1). Of the total number of journals detected, 76% (n=379) of the journals indexed in Scopus have only published one article on corporate communication in the 21st century. Thus, 13% (n=66) of the journals analysed have only published two articles in the entire 21st century and 18 journals have published three articles, which is undoubtedly a determining factor that corroborates the existing dispersion in the context analysed.

**Graph 1: Number of publications per journal**

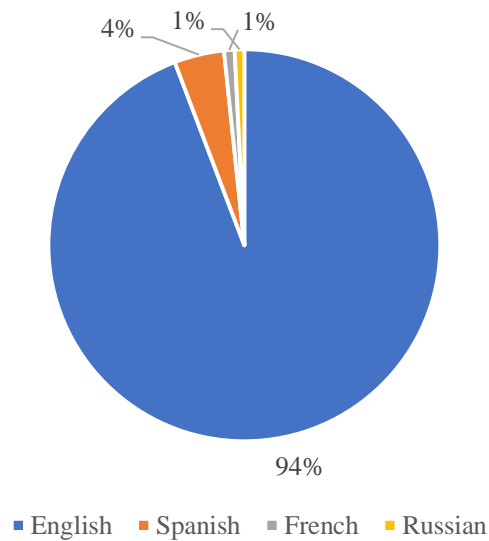


Source: own elaboration

### 3.2. Distribution of journals by language and country

The articles collected in Scopus in the 21st century are characterised by the fact that the vast majority are published in English, this language accounting for 94% of the total sample analysed. Graph 2 highlights those languages that appear in more than ten articles, which has made it possible to identify that 4% of the works are published in Spanish, a figure of small quantitative magnitude, but which places publications written in Spanish in second place in the global scientific production. Other languages that have been detected in more than ten cases are French and Russian, although it is true that both occupy 1% of the total sample analysed (see Graph 2).

**Graph 2: Distribution by language**



Source: own elaboration

Although they are not included in the previous graph, it should be mentioned that there is a residual presence of other languages that occupy less than 1% of the total sample analysed, such as German (n=6), Lithuanian (n=3), Italian (n=3) or Catalan (n=2). In addition, one publication in Malay and one publication in Slovak have been found.

The linguistic distribution makes sense if two determining factors are taken into account: firstly, and as mentioned in the previous part, the most common origin of the most prolific journals when it comes to publishing, which was United Kingdom, followed by Spain and the Netherlands. In addition, the globalisation to which academic and research activity is subjected and the original language of the publishing groups behind the most prolific journals in the publication of articles on corporate communication.

If mention is made of publications in Spanish, as they occupy second place in the percentage of publication, it should be noted that 17 Ibero-American journals have been identified whose vehicular language is Spanish and which publish texts in Spanish and English. These journals occupy 3.3% of the total number of journals identified (n=17) and have published a total of 93 articles, representing 7.2% of the total sample analysed. This ratio confirms a relevant position in the total number of articles analysed, placing Spanish-language publications at the second level in terms of language of publication.

### 3.3. Thematic trends in research

The classified count of the keywords used by the authors to index their texts gives a total of 9351 different words, which, beforehand, indicates a certain dispersion in the indexing of corporate communication research. The authors have used an average of 7.3 different words in their indexing. An in-depth review and classification of the authors' keywords revealed that, despite this dispersion, 55.8% (n=715) of the articles analysed used the term "corporate communication" or "corporate communications" to classify the works. However, this result is not surprising when it coincides with the term used in the Scopus search.

The next most recurrent term in the keywords of the articles analysed is “public relations”, which occupies 10.9% (n=140), followed by “corporate social responsibility” (n=126), “social media” (n=86), “communication” (n=71), “communication management” (n=56) and “corporate identity” (n=56). The rest of the terms used appear less than 50 times (see Image 1).

**Image 1: Most used keywords**



Source: own elaboration

Analysing the least recurrent words —i.e., those that appear in less than 20 articles—, the presence of the keyword “content analysis” (n=21) is noteworthy, present in 1.61% of the works analysed. This data allows us to identify the most recurrent methodology in the works on corporate communication, according to the indexing of the authors. Also revealing are the coincidences in the keyword “Facebook”, which occupies another 1.61% of the total number of articles, positioning Mark Zuckerberg’s social network as the social media scenario most present in research on corporate communication. Other minority concepts in the indexing, such as “strategy” (n=20) or “crisis communication” (n=20) allow us to identify specific trends in the topics of the articles analysed, which show the interest of the research community in these objects of research.

#### *3.4. An exploratory study of recent pandemic research*

The social changes resulting from the COVID-19 health crisis deserve special treatment as far as this systematic study is concerned. Since the health crisis began, companies, organisations and institutions have been involved in the need to manage their global communication in a certain way, which makes it necessary to take into account the impact of the health crisis on their communication management at all levels. In this sense, we have considered the need to specifically analyse the articles that, during the 21st century, have highlighted the relationship between corporate communication and the pandemic

derived from COVID-19. Being aware that the relevance of the studies on the health crisis would appear in the last two years of the sample, coinciding with the start of the pandemic, we proceeded to detect and classify those works that contained, in their key words, the terms “COVID”, “pandemic” and/or “health crisis”. This classification showed that only 1.17% (n=15) of the papers in the sample were related to this subject.

Looking at the time range of publication since the start of the health crisis, of the 88 works published in 2020 on corporate communication, 6.81% had the health crisis as a theme. In 2021, of the 85 papers published, only 9.41% of them dealt with the connection between corporate communication and the pandemic.

Finally, it is interesting to note that there is one paper published in 2012 that has been registered as containing the term “pandemic” among its keywords. This is a paper published in Italian in the journal *Igiene e sanità pubblica*, which established challenges and solutions for health communication risks in crisis situations, through a case study of influenza A in Italy. This study, despite representing only 0.07% of the total number of studies analysed, shows that, although the treatment of health crises was non-existent until the arrival of COVID-19, some researchers had already highlighted, almost a decade earlier, the need to combat health crises through communication.

#### **4. Discussion**

In line with Angel (2012) and Bouzon (2011), it is confirmed that there is a scarce presence of works on corporate communication compared to the global production on business and communication. However, there is a growing trend in terms of the subject, as the evolution over the century shows that production has tripled.

The relationship established by Godhaber (1989) pointed to the dissemination of topics related to corporate communication from other related social disciplines. In this sense, the present study has confirmed that a large part of the works published in the 21st century is directly related to similar disciplines, such as public relations, branding or advertising.

The study of keywords allows us to establish that content analysis is the most prolific methodology in the works published in the 21st century, giving rise to an interest in the instrumentalisation of corporate communication. However, the importance of works indexed under the label of strategy suggests a recent interest in strategic communication, as shown by previous works by Álvarez (2012), Villafañe (2012) and Apolo et al. (2014). While Watkins et al. (1993) defended the organisational theme as the focus of corporate work, research in the 21st century indicates that systematic application and crisis communication are substantial axes as far as current trends are concerned.

This study also reinforces the conclusions of Castillo and Carretón (2010) by determining that content analysis continues to be the most widely used methodology in corporate communication studies, to the detriment of other studies not indexed as such by the authors.

#### **5. Conclusions**

After the presentation of this paper, it can be concluded that there is a growing interest in research on corporate communication, which has acquired a significant volume throughout the 21st century. This commitment to the increase in scientific production on

corporate communication, however, is dispersed in the general area of research, as the thematic trends identified obtain very low percentages compared to the total sample.

However, despite this limitation, the direct relationship between studies on corporate communication and related social disciplines, such as public relations, advertising or communication in general, is clear. Of greater importance are works on crisis management and communication management, as well as research on communication strategy and public relations.

We cannot ignore the relevance of works linked to the digital world, such as the Internet or social networks, especially Facebook, which are postulated as specific case studies. This confirms the migration of corporate communication to the digital world, trying to get closer to the new habits and media consumed by audiences, consequently, to the research needs of organisations and, therefore, of the international scientific community.

The concentration of journals with the highest volume of papers allows us to affirm that there is an evident specialisation in corporate communication issues, although there is evidence of a generalised interest in corporate communication studies in journals, albeit in a very minority way. In this sense, a specific study would be necessary to relate the areas of knowledge of the journals with the volume of publication in order to find out, in a concrete way, the editorial dispersion in these publications. Replicating the study in other databases such as Web of Sciences (WOS) is also identified as a future line of research.

The linguistic nature, as well as the origin of the most prolific scientific journals in the publication of works on corporate communication, confirms that English is the language of research in general, and of specific research in particular. However, it is worth highlighting the role of Latin American scientific journals, which are the second most prolific in terms of publication volume.

A detailed study of those papers that have addressed the pandemic allows us to affirm two relevant facts: firstly, that health crises had not been the subject of study until the arrival of COVID-19, with the exception of a single paper that analysed in 2012 the health crisis arising from influenza A. Secondly, it augurs a radical change in scientific trends, due to the growth of these studies in 2020 and 2021.

As a note for future research, an informal search in Scopus at the beginning of 2022, filtering only for that year, gave 14 scientific papers that related corporate communication to the pandemic, which suggests an exponential growth of papers on corporate communication whose main or cross-cutting theme is precisely the health crisis.

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## Acknowledgments

This paper has been translated by Lucía Otaola.

This article has been produced with the support of the Research Network “Análisis comparativo de las guías docentes de las asignaturas de Gestión de la Información en los estudios universitarios del Área de Ciencias de la Información en España. De la búsqueda

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