

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY RESEARCH IN *PUBLIC RELATIONS* REVIEW (2000–2024): A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF 25 YEARS

Álvaro Elgueta-Ruiz

Escola de Negócios e Governação, Universidade de Cabo Verde, Praia, Cabo Verde
Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation,
methodology, visualization, writing – original draft

Carmen Lucía Domínguez Águila

Departamento Currículum e Instrucción, Facultad de Educación, Universidad de Concepción,
Concepción, Chile
Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing – review & editing

Daniela Bento Almeida

Escola de Negócios e Governação, Universidade de Cabo Verde, Praia, Cabo Verde
Data curation, investigation, validation, writing – review & editing

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, public diplomacy (PD) has consolidated its position as a strategic field of communication and a central instrument of countries' foreign policy, drawing increasing attention in international public relations scholarship. However, despite the growing body of literature and academic interest in these areas, systematic approaches to PD research remain limited. To address this gap, the present study examines the state of research in this field through qualitative and quantitative content analysis of all articles on PD published in *Public Relations Review* between 2000 and 2024 ($n = 52$), out of 1,991 articles published during this period. This analysis identifies the main authors and their affiliated universities, the networks they form, their objectives, research questions, hypotheses, the methodologies employed, the types of studies conducted, and the theories, findings, and conclusions presented, among other relevant aspects. Finally, the study discusses the theoretical and practical implications of PD research for the broader field of public relations and related areas.

KEYWORDS

public diplomacy, systematic review, content analysis, *Public Relations Review*, international public relations

INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE DIPLOMACIA PÚBLICA NA *PUBLIC RELATIONS REVIEW* (2000–2024): UMA REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA DE 25 ANOS

RESUMO

Nas últimas duas décadas, a diplomacia pública (DP) consolidou a sua posição como domínio estratégico da comunicação e instrumento central da política externa dos países, suscitando uma atenção crescente na investigação sobre relações públicas internacionais. Contudo, apesar do crescente volume de literatura e do interesse académico nestas áreas, continuam a ser limitadas as abordagens sistemáticas à investigação sobre DP. Para colmatar esta lacuna, o presente estudo analisa o estado da investigação neste domínio através de uma análise de conteúdo

qualitativa e quantitativa de todos os artigos sobre DP publicados na *Public Relations Review* entre 2000 e 2024 ($n = 52$), de um total de 1.991 artigos publicados durante este período. Esta análise identifica, entre outros aspetos relevantes, os principais autores e as universidades a que estão afiliados, as redes que formam, os seus objetivos, as questões de investigação e hipóteses, as metodologias utilizadas, os tipos de estudos realizados e as teorias, resultados e conclusões apresentados. Por fim, o estudo discute as implicações teóricas e práticas da investigação sobre DP para o campo mais amplo das relações públicas e áreas afins.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

diplomacia pública, revisão sistemática, análise de conteúdo, *Public Relations Review*, relações públicas internacionais

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, public diplomacy (PD) has consolidated its position as a strategic field of communication and a central instrument of national foreign policy, drawing increasing attention in international public relations (IPR) scholarship. Since the term was coined by Edmund Gullion in the 1960s, PD has been defined as the process by which a government communicates with foreign publics to foster understanding of its values, culture, and policies (Tuch, 1990), and has evolved to incorporate increasingly interactive, dialogical, and collaborative practices that reflect the technological, sociopolitical, and communicative transformations of globalisation (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

This hybrid field (at the intersection of IPR and strategic communication) has been characterised by ongoing theoretical and practical convergence with IPR (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Wang & Chang, 2004). Rather than being limited to message transmission, modern PD seeks to build long-term relationships based on credibility, intercultural dialogue, and reputation management (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Grunig, 1993).

Despite growing academic interest, gaps remain in how PD is conceptualised, applied, and evaluated, particularly within *Public Relations Review* (PRR). The literature shows that PD now involves both State and non-State actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), corporations, and transnational networks (Gregory, 2011; Kim, 2015; Sevin, 2015). Moreover, its practices are shifting toward relational, collaborative, and network-oriented models (Yang et al., 2017; Zaharna et al., 2013).

Despite this evolution, systematic and critical analyses of the knowledge produced on this topic remain scarce. It is still unclear, for instance, how studies published on PD over the past 25 years have reflected (or failed to reflect) the theoretical and practical transformations in the field; which predominant themes, analytical paradigms, conceptual frameworks, and emerging models have guided research; and how these have evolved over time.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to analyse articles published in PRR between 2000 and 2024 ($n = 52$) that focus on PD. The objective is to understand how

public relations scholarship has addressed this field, highlighting trends, gaps, conceptual convergences, and evolving approaches.

The specific objectives are: (a) to systematise the main definitions and conceptions of PD present in the articles; (b) to identify the public relations theories and models used as a basis for the analysis of PD practices; (c) to map the main actors, strategies, and instruments of PD discussed in the journal; (d) to examine the presence of relational, dialogical, or collaborative approaches in the practices described; and (e) to assess the evolution of themes and analytical approaches over the period analysed.

The following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- RQ1: how has PD been conceptualised in articles published by *PRR* between 2000 and 2024?;
- RQ2: what are the most recurrent theoretical and methodological approaches to PD in these studies?;
- RQ3: what transformations and trends can be observed in the journal's literature over time?; and
- RQ4: to what extent do these studies reflect a convergence between public relations and PD?

Finally, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- Hypothesis 1: PD has been increasingly approached from a relational and collaborative perspective, as opposed to unidirectional or propagandistic models;
- Hypothesis 2: the literature published in *PRR* reflects a growing intersection between the fields of PD and IPR; and
- Hypothesis 3: the predominant theoretical approach is influenced by paradigms of strategic communication and relationship management, such as Grunig and Hunt (1984) two-way symmetrical models.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. DEFINITION AND EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF “PUBLIC DIPLOMACY”

PD has traditionally been understood as the process by which a government communicates with foreign publics to promote understanding of its ideas, ideals, institutions, culture, goals, and national policies (Tuch, 1990). This widely cited definition provides the foundation for distinguishing PD from traditional diplomacy between States, emphasising its focus on direct engagement with foreign audiences (Simons, 2015; Storie et al., 2014). From a communication perspective, diplomacy is not merely an instrument of communication but is fundamentally constituted by it: communication coordinates actions, creates relationships, and sustains the very existence of diplomatic practice (Cotton & Sebastião, 2022).

Throughout its development, the term has been debated and has evolved conceptually. Although Edmund A. Gullion is credited with coining the term in 1965, outlets such as *The New York Times* (Wang, 2007) have documented its use since World War I. Since

then, PD has been recognised not only as a tool of foreign policy but also as a field of strategic communication deeply rooted in public relations (Grunig, 1993; Wang, 2007).

During the Cold War, PD became established as an instrument of ideological and cultural influence. Its role as a channel for the “transmission of values” was central to the period’s geopolitical confrontation, particularly through State-run broadcasters and cultural exchange programs (Chang & Lin, 2014; Pamment, 2014). However, in recent decades, the approach has shifted from an informational, one-way model to a relational model based on dialogue and trust-building (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Melissen, 2005; Zaharna et al., 2013). This evolution has been traced as a diachronic progression across distinct historical periods, moving from path-dependent State diplomacy through resource-dependent and transparency-driven phases to the networked, digital diplomacy of the present (Cotton & Sebastião, 2022). Central to this evolution is the role of trust, understood not as an end in itself but as a vector for reducing complexity in diplomatic relations and enabling actors to engage under uncertainty.

This relational turn has been driven by sociotechnological transformations and the rise of digital media, which have required a more interactive, participatory, and network-oriented form of PD. In this context, PD increasingly converges with IPR practices, sharing objectives such as reputation management, relationship cultivation, and promoting mutual understanding (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; White & Radic, 2014).

2.2. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONVERGENCES

Numerous studies highlight the conceptual proximity between PD and IPR, identifying a growing convergence between the two. This connection is not new: as early as the 1990s, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) argued that both disciplines “often pursue the same objectives, to influence public opinion in favour of their respective organisations or nations” (p. 137). Since then, they have increasingly been described as “sister fields” (Fitzpatrick, 2007; L’Etang, 2009).

Both fields share strategic communication functions centred on relationship building, symbolic persuasion, and perception management (Grunig, 1993; Signitzer & Wamser, 2006). As Wang and Chang (2004) assert, PD can be regarded as a form of IPR, insofar as their objectives, tools, and guiding principles converge significantly. This affinity is reinforced by White and Radic (2014), who argue that “public diplomacy is, in fact, the international public relations of a nation-state” (p. 459). Beyond shared instruments and objectives, both fields ultimately pursue what Cotton and Sebastião (2022) define as the “licence to operate”: the legitimacy and credibility that an organisation or State must continuously earn from its publics to sustain its activities and relationships.

Accordingly, PD is not limited to informing or persuading but assumes a proactive role in building mutually beneficial relationships, much like the most strategic dimensions of public relations. Fitzpatrick (2007) contends that PD should be developed from

a relational paradigm centred on building supportive relationships with a diverse range of actors — both State and non-State — who influence a country's foreign policy.

Moreover, the concept of “excellence” in public relations (grounded in two-way symmetrical communication and the integration of communication at the strategic level) has also been applied to the study of PD (Grunig, 1993; Grunig & Repper, 1992). This framework illustrates how governments can enhance the effectiveness of their public diplomatic campaigns by adopting principles similar to those used in organisational public relations.

In sum, the reviewed literature suggests that PD, far from being an isolated domain, belongs within the broader universe of public relations, particularly in its global and strategic manifestations. This convergence has enabled theoretical and methodological cross-fertilisation between the two disciplines, enriching the understanding of communication's role in contemporary international affairs.

2.3. ACTORS, TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Although the State remains the primary agent of PD — determining both the strategic and tactical course of diplomatic action within the framework of foreign policy — the literature increasingly recognises the active participation of non-State actors such as NGOs, international media outlets, multinational corporations, and citizens (Gregory, 2011; Sevin, 2015; White & Radic, 2014). Here, a conceptual distinction is necessary: while the diplomatic profession remains an exclusive domain of State institutions, diplomatic practice has progressively opened to non-State participants, who operate both as resources mobilised by States and, in some cases, as relatively autonomous agents whose activities scholars have begun to conceptualise under adjacent terms such as “corporate diplomacy”, “organisational diplomacy”, and “citizen diplomacy” (Gregory, 2011; Zaharna et al., 2013). This expansion of the diplomatic ecosystem reflects a shift toward a more inclusive and distributed model of international communication, though the State remains the primary structuring force.

This expansion raises unresolved questions about legitimacy and accountability: as Cotton and Sebastião (2022) note, these new diplomatic actors are often non-accredited and may not represent official entities, prompting critical questions about how their role and impact can be identified, evaluated, and legitimised within the broader diplomatic system.

In this environment, scholars such as Signitzer and Wamser (2006) propose that PD has adopted a more multidirectional approach, oriented toward dialogue and cooperation. Indeed, Cull (2008) identifies five key functions of contemporary PD: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and international broadcasting. These functions enable States and other actors to cultivate meaningful relationships with foreign publics and to promote mutual understanding beyond traditional propaganda.

Common tools include media campaigns, exchange programs, international broadcasting, opinion pieces, and, more recently, social media (Golan & Carroll, 2012; Storie et al., 2014; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). These platforms extend diplomatic reach and enable more interactive, personalised communication.

The relational strategy has gained traction as an operational paradigm. According to Fitzpatrick (2007), effective PD builds long-term relationships based on trust and credibility. Similarly, Leonard (2002) and Yang et al. (2017) emphasise that a PD campaign's success depends on its ability to move beyond immediate persuasive messages and to establish enduring connections based on shared values and collaboration.

Furthermore, public-private partnerships and collaborative networks have emerged as key mechanisms for implementing PD initiatives in resource-constrained contexts (Cull, 2009; Zaharna et al., 2013). These partnerships not only contribute logistical and symbolic resources but also enhance the legitimacy and reach of diplomatic actions by engaging local actors (Wu, 2016).

Thus, the literature reveals a growing sophistication in PD strategies, moving away from the unidirectional, propagandistic model toward more collaborative, relational, and culturally sensitive approaches. This shift transforms not only the forms of international communication but also the very foundations upon which global influence is defined and assessed.

2.4. IMPACT EVALUATION AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

One of the main challenges facing contemporary PD is assessing its effectiveness. The literature agrees that measuring the actual impact of PD campaigns is complex, owing to both the intangible nature of its objectives — such as perceptions, attitudes, and reputation — and the multi-actor and multidirectional character of its communicative processes (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Sevin, 2015).

As Sevin (2015) notes, although evaluation has become an expected component of PD programs, persistent challenges remain due to the lack of agreed-upon indicators and robust methodological frameworks. While some studies use content analysis and public opinion surveys to capture immediate cognitive reactions, others focus on intermediate and long-term effects, such as sustained relationship development or the accumulation of soft power (Gilboa, 2008; Yang et al., 2017).

The literature also warns that many diplomatic initiatives still focus primarily on one-way message dissemination and pay insufficient attention to active listening, dialogue, or relationship assessment (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Simons, 2015). This lack of systematic feedback limits institutional learning and hampers strategic campaign adaptation.

A useful framework for addressing this evaluative gap is Cowan and Arsenault's (2008) three-layer typology of PD, which distinguishes between monologue, dialogue, and collaboration as distinct modes of engagement. Since each layer operates through

different communicative logics and pursues different relational outcomes, each also requires different evaluation criteria: monologue is best assessed through reach and message clarity; dialogue through reciprocity and relationship quality; and collaboration through the durability of trust and shared achievement. Applying this typology to evaluation design would allow practitioners and researchers to move beyond aggregate impact measures toward more precise, layer-specific assessments of PD effectiveness.

Conversely, incorporating public relations theories (such as organisational relationship management and two-way symmetrical communication) has proven useful in addressing these gaps. Grunig (1993), for instance, argues that PD programs can benefit from evaluation frameworks similar to those used in organisational contexts, measuring not only message transmission but also the quality of the relationships established.

Finally, the emergence of digital tools such as social media and data analytics opens new possibilities for real-time evaluation of diplomatic strategies, while also raising ethical and operational dilemmas concerning data use and privacy (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

2.5. THEORETICAL GAPS AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the field's substantial growth, the literature on PD still has significant gaps. Many studies focus on specific cases, countries, or normative frameworks, while neglecting broader, more systematic analyses of how the discipline has been treated within academic production itself. As Sevin (2015) and White and Radic (2014) point out, a clear taxonomy of the theoretical frameworks applied, predominant methodologies, and the field's thematic evolution within academia remains lacking.

Additionally, conceptual dispersion continues to hinder the consolidation of a coherent theoretical *corpus*, especially when PD is conflated with “propaganda”, “nation branding”, or “media relations” (Pamment, 2014; Simons, 2014). Given this diversity, it is necessary to systematically map the research landscape to identify convergences, tensions, and future directions.

In this context, the present study seeks to address this gap by systematically analysing all articles on PD published in *PRR* between 2000 and 2024. By focusing on this representative *corpus*, the research aims to reveal how the discipline has evolved within one of the field's leading academic platforms, providing a critical perspective on its theoretical, thematic, and methodological development.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study combines bibliometric analysis, quantitative content analysis, and qualitative systematic review (Dixon-Woods, 2011). The *corpus* consists of all academic articles about PD published in *PRR* between 2000 and 2024 ($n = 52$), excluding non-research content such as editorials, letters, book reviews, and advertisements. To this end, all

articles published by *PRR* between 2000 and 2024 were reviewed and classified, from which the database for the present study was compiled.

The dataset was coded across 21 analytical categories, including bibliographic information (volume, issue, year, pages, title), authorship and institutional affiliation, geographic location (country), keywords, research objectives, hypotheses, RQ, methodologies, research type, techniques, results, conclusions, thematic classification, graphic elements, type of research (introspective, applied, and theoretical; following Ferguson, 2018), and theoretical frameworks. Objectives and hypotheses were classified using a double set of criteria from already established frameworks (for objectives: Bloom, 1956; Hernández Sampieri et al., 2010; and for hypotheses: Hernández Sampieri et al., 2010; Méndez, 1998), while thematic categories were derived from the taxonomies of the International Communication Association and the Public Relations Society of America, resulting in 68 topics, including the addition of three more: “engagement”, “organisation-public relationships”, and “artificial intelligence”. All data were systematised in a structured Excel database.

The decision to focus exclusively on *PRR* responds to both methodological and disciplinary considerations. *PRR* stands out as the field’s leading journal, publishing far more articles than similar publications such as the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, and *Journal of Communication Management*, among others. At the same time, it covers a wide range of topics and draws contributions from an international pool of scholars. Rather than comparing multiple journals, this study takes a focused approach, examining *PRR* alone to trace how themes, methods, and theoretical perspectives have developed over time in a single, sustained body of work.

Focusing on just one journal might seem narrow, but *PRR*’s role in the field makes it a useful lens. It sits at the centre of public relations scholarship, offering a clear vantage point for observing how the discipline evolves. For this reason, this study favours depth over breadth, using *PRR* as a longitudinal case study to uncover patterns in research priorities, tensions in how knowledge is produced, and shifts in what scholars choose to investigate.

To ensure consistency, the team followed a three-step review process. First, one researcher coded every article according to the full scheme (codebook). Next, a second researcher independently checked the coded data and flagged any disagreements, especially in areas requiring interpretation (such as thematic classification or how objectives and conclusions were characterised). Finally, a third researcher (the main author) reviewed disputed cases by revisiting the original articles and resolving differences through discussion and consensus among the three project researchers.

This approach aligns with Neuendorf’s (2002) definition of “consensus-based reliability”, which works best when coding demands careful judgment rather than

straightforward categorisation. Not reporting statistical measures such as Cohen's kappa or Krippendorff's alpha is consistent with established practice. On this point, Krippendorff (2018) notes that these metrics assume clear, mutually exclusive categories, which is hard to achieve when variables depend on reading entire texts. Thereby, Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) make a similar distinction, noting that reliability checks differ for manifest *versus* latent content. For their part, Lombard et al. (2002) do the same by recognising the suitability of consensus procedures in interpretive research, while Schreier (2012) emphasises that, in qualitative content analysis, reliability lies in the consistent application of categories and the systematic resolution of ambiguity, precisely the objective of the procedure adopted here.

This approach suits the dataset's hybrid nature, combining directly observable variables (e.g., authorship, institutional affiliation, number of RQs or hypotheses, methodological approach) with variables requiring interpretive engagement (e.g., thematic classification, results, theoretical frameworks). While the former ensure structural reliability through direct extraction, the latter are addressed through the adjudication process described above.

4. RESULTS

4.1. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ARTICLES PUBLISHED IN *PUBLIC RELATIONS REVIEW* (2000–2024)

Between 2000 and 2024, *PRR* published 1,991 articles, of which 52 (2.6%) addressed PD. Publication activity was uneven across the period, with peaks in 2012 (six articles), 2014, 2019, and 2020 (five each). Moderate levels were observed in 2007 and 2016 (four each), while several years registered one to three papers and others none. Overall, the distribution reflects a gradual but irregular growth of scholarly attention to PD within *PRR*.

This uneven distribution is not incidental: publication peaks in 2012, 2014, and 2019–2020 coincide with moments of heightened global geopolitical tension and diplomatic reconfiguration, suggesting that PD scholarship in *PRR* responds, at least partially, to external political cycles rather than developing solely through internal academic logic.

4.2. MOST FREQUENT KEYWORDS

The keyword analysis indicates that the most frequent terms were “public diplomacy”, “soft power”, “nation branding”, “strategic communication”, and “international relations”. Over time, the vocabulary broadened to include “digital diplomacy”, “engagement”, and “social media”, reflecting the field's theoretical shift from institutional and State-centred approaches to more relational and networked perspectives.

4.3. NUMBER OF AUTHORS PER ARTICLE AND MOST PROLIFIC AUTHORS

Authorship patterns show a predominance of single- (32.7%) and dual-authored papers (40.4%), followed by a smaller proportion of three-author collaborations (17.3%) and a limited number of works with four or more contributors (9.6%). This distribution indicates that PD research in *PRR* remains largely individual or small-scale, with gradual growth in collaborative authorship in recent years.

Across the 52 PD articles, 86 distinct scholars contributed. Aimei Yang was the most prolific author (four papers), followed by Juyan Zhang and Spiro K. Kioussis (three each). A broad second tier of recurrent contributors, Glen T. Cameron, Jian Wang, Tsan-Kuo Chang, Suman Lee, Augustine Pang, Jordi Xifra, Greg Simons, Nur Uysal, Di Wu, Jarim Kim, Lisa Tam, Jeong-Nam Kim, Diana Ingenhoff, Sarah Marschlich, Sofiya Tarasevich, and Phillip Arceneaux, each authored two papers. Meanwhile, Ray Eldon Hiebert, Margalit Toledano, Seong-Hun Yun, Sungwook Hwang, Brecken Chinn Swartz, Kurt Wise, Cai Peijuan, and Lee Pei Ting, among others, each published one article. Collectively, these scholars form the core of PD research in *PRR*, reflecting both the field's strong institutional base in the United States and the increasing participation of Asian and European authors.

The growing presence of Asian-affiliated authors — particularly from South Korea, China, and Singapore — deserves closer attention. This trend aligns with broader patterns in communication and public relations journals, where scholars of Asian origin have substantially increased their output over the past two decades. Notably, some of this production comes from researchers of Chinese origin working at institutions in the United States, a pattern that complicates straightforward geographical attribution: affiliation data may overstate North American dominance while obscuring the extent of Asian intellectual participation in the field.

The prevalence of single and dual authorship, while consistent with humanistic research traditions, also signals a field still consolidating its collaborative infrastructure. The gradual increase in multi-author work in recent years may indicate a maturation toward more networked scholarly practices, though whether this reflects genuine intellectual exchange or merely institutional co-affiliation remains an open question.

4.4. MOST REPRESENTED COUNTRIES

Authorship across the 52 PD articles spanned 17 countries, revealing a strong geographical asymmetry. The United States dominated with 33 publications (63.5%), of which 24 were single-country papers (46.2%) and nine involved authors affiliated with institutions in other countries. These collaborations often linked the United States with partners such as South Korea, Australia, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Poland, China, and the United Arab Emirates, illustrating a partial internationalisation of an otherwise United States-centred field.

The Republic of Korea ranked second (five papers; 9.6%), followed by the United Kingdom and Australia (four each; 7.7%), and New Zealand, Sweden, and China (three each; 5.8%). Singapore, Spain, and Switzerland contributed two articles each (3.8%), while Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Finland, Norway, and Poland each appeared once (1.9%).

Overall, these data confirm the disproportionate concentration of PD scholarship in the United States, alongside a growing though limited diversification toward East Asia and other regions. The 14 articles with affiliations in more than one country (12 multi-authored international collaborations and two single-authored papers with dual international affiliations) highlight emerging transnational research networks, though they remain anchored in Anglophone academia.

This geographical concentration is not merely a bibliometric artefact: it reflects deeper structural inequalities in the production of knowledge about international communication. When over 63% of PD scholarship originates from a single country, the theoretical frameworks that dominate the field inevitably bear the imprint of that country's diplomatic culture, foreign policy priorities, and academic conventions — raising the question of whose diplomacy is being theorised and whose is being studied as an object.

4.5. MOST REPRESENTED UNIVERSITIES

The 52 PD articles were produced by scholars affiliated with 65 universities across 17 countries, reflecting a geographically diverse yet uneven institutional landscape. The most prolific institutions (Purdue University, University of Maryland, American University, University of Southern California, University of Oklahoma, and University of Florida) each contributed three publications, reinforcing the dominance of United States universities in the field. A second tier, including University of Missouri, University of Waikato, Iowa State University, Nanyang Technological University, Syracuse University, Kookmin University, Queensland University of Technology, University of Fribourg, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, University of Texas at Austin, and Miami University, produced two publications each. The remaining 48 institutions each contributed a single article.

This distribution underscores the centrality of the United States academic system in PD research, alongside emerging contributions from Asia-Pacific and Europe, signalling a gradual diversification of research centres and perspectives.

4.6. RESEARCH NETWORKS

Collaboration patterns show that 35 of the 52 PD articles (67.3%) were produced within research groups. These groups can be classified as endogenous internal networks (authors from the same country and institution: 11 cases; 21.2%) and inter-university collaborations (24 cases; 46.2%). The latter were evenly divided between domestic networks

(same country, different universities; 12 cases; 23.1%) and international networks (different countries and universities; 12 cases; 23.1%). This distribution indicates that while collaborative research is the norm in PD scholarship, cooperation is balanced between national and cross-border partnerships, reflecting both institutional consolidation and growing international connectivity in the field. The 12 international networks refer exclusively to multi-authored papers; the 14 internationally affiliated articles mentioned in Subsection 4.4 also include two single-authored papers with dual international affiliations.

4.7. DOMINANT TOPICS

Beyond PD itself, the *corpus* reveals a wide thematic range reflecting the hybrid and interdisciplinary nature of PD research. The five most frequent complementary topics were government relations (14 articles), political communication (11), reputation management (10), social media (nine), and international communication (seven). Other recurrent areas include campaign and issues management, publicity/media relations (four each), strategic communication, strategic planning, public affairs (three each), and a set of applied subfields such as public relations, digital technologies, corporate social responsibility (CSR), measurement and evaluation, corporate communication, and community relations (two each).

Notably, the thematic categories used in this analysis were derived from the taxonomies of the International Communication Association and Public Relations Society of America, which operationalise public relations as a field composed of discrete functional areas. Within this framework, “public relations” as a category captures articles that reflect on the discipline itself — its definition, identity, and theoretical boundaries — rather than on specific practice domains. Government relations and community relations, while broadly understood as subfields of public relations in the theoretical literature, are treated here as distinct thematic categories using the same institutional taxonomies, to preserve comparability with established classification systems in the field.

A long tail of specialised topics (ranging from crisis communication and global communication to corporate diplomacy and brand management) appeared sporadically. The chronological distribution indicates that government relations, political communication, and reputation management have been consistently present throughout the 25 years, while social media and digital technologies have gained prominence only after 2015, evidencing the field’s gradual shift toward digital and relational paradigms.

4.8. DECLARED OBJECTIVES AND THEIR COMPLEXITY OVER THE YEARS

The 52 analysed articles included 107 declared objectives, most of which were concise and clearly formulated. Nearly three-quarters of the papers (73.1%; 38 of 52) presented one or two objectives, suggesting a focus on specific, well-defined problems.

According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2010), objectives were classified as descriptive (36.4%), correlational (18.7%), and causal (44.9%). The prevalence of causal aims indicates a shift from descriptive mapping toward explanatory reasoning, reflecting growing theoretical and methodological maturity in PD scholarship.

From a cognitive perspective (Bloom, 1956), nearly half of the objectives were located at the analysis level (48.6%), followed by application (15.9%), knowledge (11.2%), and comprehension (10.3%), with fewer instances of synthesis (9.3%) and evaluation (4.7%). Cross-tabulation of both classifications shows that causal objectives align strongly with the analysis level (30 of the 48 causal objectives), signalling an intermediate-to-advanced degree of cognitive complexity. However, the limited presence of synthesis and evaluation objectives suggests that few studies advance toward theoretical integration or critical model-building.

Qualitatively, the declared objectives reveal a strategic and governmental orientation, privileging analysis of public policies, institutional practices, and State-led communication over theoretical innovation or experimental research. The frequent use of verbs like “examine”, “explore”, and “understand” reflects an interpretive focus on how and why communication occurs.

Three thematic axes recur, although none dominates quantitatively: (a) crisis communication and emergency contexts (present in only three articles, consistent with Subsection 4.7), where PD is tested as a tool of legitimacy and resilience; (b) target publics and audience engagement, highlighting the relational and dialogical turn in contemporary diplomacy; and (c) narratives and discourses mobilised by diplomatic actors, revealing the symbolic and performative dimensions of international communication.

The relative scarcity of objectives related to impact measurement, soft power assessment, or nation branding underscores a methodological gap in outcome evaluation. In contrast, the predominance of strategic and interpretive objectives situates PD research within a managerial and communicational paradigm, rather than a cultural or relational one. Overall, the field displays a mature interpretive orientation but still limited evaluative and synthetic capacity, marking its current stage of theoretical consolidation.

4.9. STATED RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEIR COMPLEXITY BY YEAR

Among the 52 PD articles analysed, 23 (44.2%) explicitly stated RQs, while 29 (55.8%) did not. Across those 23 papers, researchers identified 53 RQs in total, typically one to three per article, suggesting moderate conceptual focus and a preference for open-ended inquiry over hypothesis-driven design.

Qualitative analysis of the 53 questions reveals a diverse, interpretative landscape that mirrors the field’s theoretical pluralism. Several key orientations emerge:

- State communication and narrative construction: many questions focus on how governments communicate, project their image, and construct diplomatic narratives. These inquiries explore PD as both an instrument of influence and a discursive practice of legitimization, highlighting symbolic and communicational mechanisms rather than material outcomes.

- Audiences and publics: a second cluster examines how different publics (national, foreign, diasporic, or digital) perceive and respond to State messages. These studies show growing attention to reception and relational dynamics, even though few operationalise systematic tools to measure perception or impact.
- Strategic and political dimensions: several questions analyse how public policies, foreign policy goals, and communication strategies intersect, positioning PD as an extension of State governance. This perspective strengthens the field's applied and institutional orientation, yet it remains largely case-based, limiting broader theoretical generalisation.
- Evaluation and effectiveness: only a small subset of studies explicitly address impact, performance, or effectiveness, confirming the persistent lack of empirical and evaluative frameworks noted in the objectives analysis (Subsection 4.8).
- Digital and networked diplomacy: more recent contributions raise questions about digital technologies and social media, signalling a thematic shift toward online diplomacy and networked communication in the 2010s and 2020s.

Overall, the RQs reveal a conceptually expansive but methodologically fragmented field, characterised by interpretive richness yet limited standardisation. The emphasis on understanding over measurement suggests that PD scholarship remains rooted in qualitative, meaning-oriented paradigms, while the next stage of development will require greater empirical precision and comparative rigour to consolidate its theoretical and methodological coherence.

4.10. TYPES OF HYPOTHESES AND THEIR COMPLEXITY BY YEAR

Of the 52 PD articles reviewed, 45 (86.5%) did not include hypotheses, while only six papers (11.5%) explicitly presented them; one additional article (1.9%) merely mentioned their existence without specifying them. Altogether, these six studies contained 33 hypotheses (five papers with four each, and one with 13), illustrating the still-limited use of hypothesis testing in the field. Only main hypotheses were counted; sub-hypotheses (e.g., H3a–H3b) were not counted separately.

Following Méndez's (1998) typology, no first-degree hypotheses were identified; 18 were second-degree, and 15 were third-degree, evidencing a preference for theoretically grounded propositions over purely empirical regularities. According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2010), none were descriptive; eight were differential-group, 18 correlational, and seven causal. Cross-analysis shows that second-degree hypotheses were mainly correlational ($n = 10$) and differential-group ($n = 6$), with two causal ones ($n = 2$), while third-degree ones combined correlational ($n = 8$) and causal ($n = 5$) approaches, plus two differential-group hypotheses ($n = 2$).

These findings suggest that PD research has reached an intermediate-to-high level of theoretical sophistication, oriented toward understanding complex interrelations among variables rather than merely describing observable phenomena. The absence of first-degree hypotheses indicates that the field has moved beyond trivial empirical uniformities and now favours conceptual articulation and theoretical modelling. However, the limited number of causal hypotheses also reveals the lack of fully developed empirical testing designs.

At a qualitative and interpretive level, the hypotheses examined reflect the field's ongoing transition from exploratory empiricism toward relational and systemic theorisation. Most propositions address the interdependence among the communicational, political, and social dimensions of PD, and how communication strategies, image management, and narrative construction shape international perceptions, reputation, and legitimacy. This reflects a growing focus on symbolic power and meaning-making as core elements of global influence.

Several hypotheses portray PD as both a mechanism of mediation and a site of discursive negotiation, exploring the impact of digital and cultural diplomacy and the ways institutional communication shapes audience attitudes. Such perspectives signal a shift toward networked and participatory diplomacy, where publics are no longer passive recipients but co-actors in meaning creation.

Theoretical sophistication has also increased: newer hypotheses integrate multiple interdependent variables (message types, media ecosystems, cultural contexts) within relational and systemic models. Yet, methodological limitations persist, especially in impact assessment and variable operationalisation. The scarcity of causal testing reflects a field still in empirical maturation, consolidating its conceptual foundations while refining its verification instruments.

A smaller subset of hypotheses also revisits the cultural and cooperative dimensions of PD, focusing on trust-building, educational exchanges, and soft-power practices. These efforts contribute to a broader, more humanistic understanding of PD as symbolic interdependence and co-creation of meaning, complementing the dominant strategic and political views.

In sum, the analysed hypotheses portray a field in theoretical consolidation and methodological transition. PD is increasingly understood not as a unilateral instrument of State projection but as a relational, adaptive, and communicative process embedded in complex global networks. This evolution reflects the discipline's diversification and maturation, moving from description to explanation and from influence to interaction.

4.11. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES BY YEAR

Among the 52 articles analysed, methodological choices reveal a balanced yet evolving mix of approaches (Table 1). Most studies adopted either theoretical-bibliographic designs (30.8%; $n = 16$) or quantitative methods (25%; $n = 13$), followed closely by qualitative approaches (23.1%; $n = 12$). A smaller but significant portion (21.2%; $n = 11$) employed mixed methods, including combinations of quantitative and qualitative (13.5%; $n = 7$), experimental and quantitative (5.8%; $n = 3$), and theoretical-bibliographic with qualitative (1.9%; $n = 1$) frameworks. This distribution indicates that PD research in *PRR* has progressively diversified methodologically, reflecting a shift from predominantly conceptual analyses toward more empirical and hybrid designs. The growing use of mixed methods (particularly since the mid-2010s) reflects an effort to integrate interpretive depth with empirical validation, suggesting an ongoing transition from descriptive and normative studies to more systematic, evidence-based investigations.

	QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE	THEORETICAL- BIBLIOGRAPHIC	EXPERIMENTAL- QUANTITATIVE	QUALITATIVE- QUANTITATIVE	THEORETICAL- BIBLIOGRAPHIC- QUALITATIVE	TOTAL
2000							0
2001							0
2002							0
2003					1		1
2004			1				1
2005			2				2
2006							0
2007	2		2				4
2008				1			1
2009		2	1				3
2010							0
2011		1					1
2012	2	3	1				6
2013							0
2014	1	1	2		1		5
2015			3				3
2016		1			2	1	4
2017	1	1	1				3
2018	1						1
2019	2	1	2				5
2020	3		1		1		5
2021				1			1
2022				1			1
2023		1			2		3
2024	1	1					2
Total	13	12	16	3	7	1	52

Table 1. Methodologies used in public diplomacy research published in Public Relations Review (2000-2024), by year

Yet this transition remains incomplete. The persistence of theoretical-bibliographic designs as the most common single approach — even as mixed methods grow — points to a structural tension between the field's interpretive tradition and its aspirations toward empirical rigour. The fact that qualitative and theoretical studies still outnumber quantitative ones suggests that PD research in *PRR* has prioritised conceptual elaboration over measurement, reflecting both the complexity of its object and the methodological constraints of studying diplomatic communication in real-world contexts.

4.12. RESEARCH TECHNIQUES USED

Across the 52 analysed articles, combined research techniques are relatively common, reflecting a gradual move toward methodological pluralism in PD studies (Table 2). The most frequently employed methods were theoretical–bibliographic analysis (34.6%; $n = 18$) and content analysis (32.7%; $n = 17$), followed by surveys (7.7%; $n = 4$), discourse

analysis (5.8%; $n = 3$), and interviews (1.9%; $n = 1$). Among the nine studies (17.3%) employing mixed techniques, the most frequent combinations included experimental and survey methods (5.8%; $n = 3$) and content and network analysis (3.8%; $n = 2$), while others combined case studies, interviews, and content analysis in varied configurations (1.9%; each $n = 1$). This methodological landscape suggests that PD research remains anchored in textual and interpretive traditions (particularly bibliographic and content analysis) while progressively incorporating empirical and computational techniques such as network analysis and experimental design. The use of hybrid methods shows growing methodological diversification and sophistication, yet the limited use of interviews and longitudinal surveys underscores persistent challenges in accessing field data and measuring communicative impact.

	CONTENT ANALYSIS	CONTENT ANALYSIS, NETWORK ANALYSIS	CONTENT ANALYSIS, CASE STUDY	CONTENT ANALYSIS, SURVEYS	ANALYSIS OF SPEECH	BIBLIOGRAPHIC THEORETICAL ANALYSIS	INTERVIEWS	INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS	CASE STUDY, INTERVIEWS	EXPERIMENTAL, SURVEYS	SURVEYS	TOTAL
2000												0
2001												0
2002												0
2003	1											1
2004						1						1
2005						2						2
2006												0
2007	1					2					1	4
2008										1		1
2009					1	1			1			3
2010												0
2011						1						1
2012	2		1	1	1	1						6
2013												0
2014	3					2						5
2015						3						3
2016	1					1	1	1				4
2017	2					1						3
2018											1	1
2019	2	1				2						5
2020	1	1				1					2	5
2021										1		1
2022										1		1
2023	3											3
2024	1				1							2
Total	17	2	1	1	3	18	1	1	1	3	4	52

Table 2. Techniques used in public diplomacy research published in Public Relations Review (2000–2024), by year

4.13. KIND OF RESEARCH

Using Ferguson's (2018) typology (later refined by Sallot et al., 2003, and Sisco et al., 2011), the 52 PD articles were classified into three principal categories: introspective, practice-oriented, and theoretical research, as well as their possible combinations. Results show a clear predominance of practice-oriented research (26.9%) and introspective + practice studies (25%), followed by practice + theoretical combinations (15.4%). Purely theoretical and introspective + theoretical works each represent 11.5%, while purely introspective studies account for 7.7%. Only one article (1.9%) combined all three dimensions.

This distribution confirms that PD scholarship in *PRR* remains primarily applied and problem-oriented, emphasising professional practices, institutional management, and communication strategies rather than abstract theorisation. However, the presence of hybrid types (especially practice + theoretical and introspective + theoretical research) suggests a gradual movement toward conceptual integration, reflecting the field's ongoing theoretical consolidation.

The scarcity of fully introspective studies indicates that the educational and professional self-reflection dimension of PD within public relations remains underdeveloped. Conversely, the relatively high proportion of practice-related work underscores the field's managerial and strategic bias, consistent with its origins in applied communication and international policy.

4.14. ANALYSIS OF THE “RESULTS” IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PAPERS

A qualitative synthesis of the 52 PD articles published in *PRR* (2000–2024) reveals the field's progressive conceptual, empirical, and professional maturation within public relations. The *corpus* traces a transition from theoretical and definitional beginnings to a more empirical and applied phase, marked by diverse actors, platforms, and mediation logics.

4.14.1. CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL CONSOLIDATION

Early research focused on the genealogy and conceptual clarification of PD, particularly its development in the United States and Western contexts. These studies reconstructed its institutional history and overlap with public relations, emphasising communication as a tool of foreign policy and national image management. They also exposed persistent ambiguities (especially blurred boundaries among PD, governmental communication, and propaganda), highlighting the need for greater theoretical precision.

4.14.2. FROM STATE-CENTRED TO NETWORKED DIPLOMACY

Recent studies reveal a shift toward relational and networked paradigms, where States are no longer the sole actors. Universities, NGOs, corporations, and individuals increasingly contribute to international narratives. This pluralisation expands PD's reach but complicates coherence, as nation branding, corporate diplomacy, and CSR often intersect. The literature identifies both the potential of plural diplomacy and the risk of discursive fragmentation.

4.14.3. NARRATIVES, LEGITIMACY, AND SOFT POWER

A significant strand of research examines State narratives and national image strategies, particularly in China and other emerging powers. These studies highlight sophisticated soft-power practices in which communication builds legitimacy and symbolic consensus rather than merely transmitting information. Comparative analyses show PD as a discursive arena mediating influence through storytelling and cultural symbolism.

4.14.4. MEDIA MEDIATION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Other studies explore PD's media representation, analysing coverage, framing, and visibility. Results show that journalistic mediation varies with political context and crises, positioning the media as both amplifier and challenger of official narratives, a contested space of foreign-policy interpretation.

4.14.5. EVALUATION AND IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Although still limited, some studies measure PD's effects through surveys and quantitative analyses linking credibility, trust, and identification with State communication. These efforts reflect emerging methodological sophistication, but remain constrained by small samples and cross-sectional designs.

4.14.6. PROFESSIONALISATION AND PRACTICE

Research on practitioners highlights growing institutionalisation and the adoption of public relations principles in audience management, message design, and evaluation. Findings stress the need for specialised training and intercultural skills while acknowledging a persistent theory-practice gap, now addressed through applied collaborations.

4.14.7. CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND IMAGE REPAIR

A smaller group of studies investigates PD during crises and conflicts, emphasising transparency, leadership credibility, and narrative coherence as key to restoring trust and confirming PD's dual role as reactive and strategic communication.

4.14.8. STRUCTURAL EVOLUTION OF THE FIELD

Across these strands, PD research shows a clear evolution, from State-controlled, message-driven models to networked, relational systems shaped by digitalisation and global interdependence. PD now integrates image, trust, and credibility but lacks a unified framework. Results trace its evolution from conceptual to empirical inquiry, revealing a dynamic, interdisciplinary field attuned to global transformations.

4.15. ANALYSIS OF THE “CONCLUSIONS” IN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY PAPERS

The conclusions of the 52 analysed articles depict a field reaching conceptual and methodological maturity, marked by theoretical integration, diversified approaches, and adaptation to global communication changes. Across studies, a shared interpretation emerges: PD is increasingly conceived as a strategic, relational, and ethically grounded communicative practice central to international relations.

4.15.1. FROM INFORMATION TO RELATIONSHIPS

Conclusions underscore a shift from an informational, State-centred model to a relational, trust-based practice. PD effectiveness is measured less by message reach than by the quality of long-term relationships founded on credibility, transparency, and reciprocity. This transformation reflects digitalisation and the erosion of institutional authority: authenticity and audience trust now determine influence, with States sharing narrative agency with NGOs, corporations, and citizens.

4.15.2. THE NARRATIVE TURN

Nearly all studies converge on the centrality of narrative. PD is no longer framed as persuasion but as strategic storytelling: the ability to craft coherent narratives that link national interests to shared cultural values. This perspective reframes PD as a symbolic practice in which managing meaning is as critical as managing resources.

4.15.3. POWER AND ETHICS

Conclusions acknowledge PD’s dual nature: it aspires to intercultural dialogue yet serves as a power instrument legitimising national interests. Scholars advocate a hybrid understanding that integrates persuasion and cooperation. Ethics emerges as both normative and strategic: transparency, consistency, and honesty are essential for sustainable credibility amid misinformation and polarisation.

4.15.4. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL DEVELOPMENT

Authors report advances in theoretical articulation but note overlaps with nation branding and governmental communication. A growing consensus defines PD as a continuous process grounded in trust and long-term relationships, requiring synthesis among public relations, communication, and international relations. Empirically, studies call for systematic methodologies and evaluation frameworks to assess effectiveness, and analytical models that address audience reception, perception dynamics, and longitudinal impact. Evaluation thus becomes both a scientific and ethical imperative.

4.15.5. PROFESSIONALISATION AND TRAINING

Many conclusions emphasise professional competence: intercultural literacy, symbolic negotiation, and digital skills are essential for effective PD. Closer collaboration between academia and practice is recommended to align theoretical progress with diplomatic needs.

4.15.6. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AS A MIRROR OF GLOBAL CHANGE

Finally, authors highlight that the way nations communicate mirrors their political culture and democratic quality. PD is presented as a valuable lens for interpreting power, legitimacy, and identity in the international system. Over two decades, the field has evolved from conceptual definition to empirical sophistication, consolidating itself as a strategic observatory of global communication and symbolic interaction.

4.16. THEORIES APPLIED

The 52 articles reveal substantial theoretical diversity. The constructs identified (111 distinct constructs; 216 mentions in total) were grouped into four domains: (a) general public relations theories (30 constructs; 63 mentions); (b) PD theories (seven constructs; 45 mentions); (c) models from management and other disciplines (six constructs; 11 mentions); and (d) other related themes and concepts (68 constructs; 97 mentions), reflecting the field's interdisciplinary expansion. Hereafter, “constructs” refers to distinct categories and “mentions” to the number of times they appear across the 52 articles; the figures reported in Subsections 4.16.1 to 4.16.3 are mentions.

4.16.1. GENERAL PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORIES

Following Sadi and Ferrari (2022), the most frequent constructs include: general references to public relations theory (11 mentions); excellence theory (Grunig; nine mentions), foundational for conceptualising PD as strategic management; critical and dialogic approaches (L'Etang; Edwards; Kent & Taylor; seven mentions) — framing PD

as negotiation and dialogic engagement; relational, institutional, and strategic management theories (combined; seven mentions) — emphasising relationships, legitimacy, and organisational strategy. Other applied frameworks include image repair, political public relations, nation building, stakeholder, and contingency theories, showing efforts to connect public relations models to PD's diplomatic contexts.

4.16.2. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY-SPECIFIC THEORIES

Seven PD constructs were identified (45 mentions): general references to PD as a conceptual framework (33 mentions), communication theory (Gilboa; five), mediated PD (three), soft power theory (Nye; one), soft power model (Kim & Ni; one), twiplomacy (one) and PD communication (one). These frameworks demonstrate how PD research increasingly integrates digital communication, symbolic influence, and media mediation as central dimensions.

4.16.3. CROSS-DISCIPLINARY AND EMERGING CONSTRUCTS

Models drawn from management and other disciplines (six constructs; 11 mentions) include crisis communication (four mentions), communication management (two), CSR and ethics (two), cross-sector collaboration (two), measurement (one) and organisation–public relationship assessment (one), illustrating PD's expansion toward applied, hybrid methodologies. The remaining 68 related themes and concepts (97 mentions) are mostly concepts rather than theories in the strict sense (e.g., international public relations, social media, strategic communication, agenda setting, framing, trust, network analysis, reputation management, storytelling) and also include contextual labels (e.g., China, the Middle East), showing the field's plural and adaptive nature.

4.16.4. INTERPRETATIVE SYNTHESIS

Overall, theory application in PD research indicates a dual movement: (a) integration of public relations models to conceptualise PD as a communicative, relational, and strategic function; (b) differentiation through the articulation of PD-specific theories that address symbolic, cultural, and technological transformations. This hybridisation confirms PD's position at the intersection of communication and international relations, with increasing attention to soft power, digital diplomacy, and relational ethics.

This theoretical hybridisation, however, carries a risk: accumulating frameworks from adjacent disciplines — political science, management, media studies — without sufficient integration may produce conceptual eclecticism rather than theoretical coherence. The field's richness is simultaneously its vulnerability. Moving forward, PD scholarship will need to distinguish between productive interdisciplinarity and mere theoretical borrowing, consolidating a core conceptual identity that can sustain comparative and cumulative research across contexts.

Taken together, the patterns identified across Subsections 4.1 to 4.16 are not isolated findings but interconnected symptoms of a field navigating a critical transition. The geographical concentration of scholarship in the United States shapes the theoretical frameworks that dominate the field; the prevalence of qualitative and bibliographic methods reflects a discipline still negotiating its epistemic identity; and the thematic diversity — rich but dispersed — signals an expanding scope yet to be theoretically integrated. Read collectively, these findings suggest that PD research in *PRR* has achieved interpretive sophistication but has yet to consolidate the empirical and comparative infrastructure that a mature subfield requires. This tension between conceptual ambition and methodological constraint is precisely what the following discussion seeks to address.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review depict a field in consolidation yet marked by geographical, thematic, and methodological asymmetries. PD, as examined in *PRR* (2000–2024), reflects a shift from unidirectional, informational models to relational, collaborative, and dialogic frameworks.

Scholarship remains concentrated in the United States, confirming Anglophone centrality, but it coexists with new regional poles, particularly in East Asia, where China and South Korea emerge as both research objects and knowledge producers. The “Chinese case” illustrates this duality, serving as both the most studied empirical context and a growing source of theoretical contributions. This polycentric configuration shows the Anglo-American axis still defining theory while Asian countries act as empirical laboratories and strategic actors in a globalised diplomatic landscape.

This asymmetry has epistemological consequences: when a field’s theoretical core is produced predominantly from one geopolitical position, the concepts, assumptions, and normative ideals embedded in that scholarship risk being mistaken for universal standards rather than recognised as culturally situated perspectives. Diversifying PD research geographically is therefore not merely an equity concern but a condition for the field’s theoretical validity.

Theoretical and methodological trends show evolution from descriptive to analytical studies, though empirical maturity remains limited, with few longitudinal designs and weak impact measures. PD still develops more as a relational than an empirical domain.

The predominance of causal and analytical objectives signals a move from instrumental paradigms focused on persuasion toward relational and interpretive ones, where communicative power rests on co-creating meaning, credibility, and trust. This shift aligns with Grunig’s excellence theory and relational approaches (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Zaharna et al., 2013), emphasising collaboration over control.

Topic diversification shows conceptual expansion, though State-centred perspectives still prevail. This imbalance reveals an ongoing negotiation between hierarchical diplomacy and participatory, networked communication.

Overall, PD appears theoretically consolidated but methodologically transitional. The field must strengthen empirical rigour, comparative validation, and geographic diversity while integrating technological perspectives. These findings reveal a paradigm shift: from State-centric persuasion to shared symbolic production and relational governance, framing the implications discussed below.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the evolution of PD research published in *PRR* (2000–2024), addressing four RQs and testing three hypotheses. The results provide an integrated view of the field's theoretical and methodological consolidation, as well as its persistent gaps and future challenges.

Regarding RQ1, the literature reveals an evolution from an instrumental vision focused on persuasion and message diffusion to a relational and strategic conception centred on credibility, dialogue, and mutual trust. PD is increasingly viewed as an international communication process building symbolic legitimacy. This shift confirms Hypothesis 1, which posited that PD has moved away from unidirectional, propagandistic models toward a relational, collaborative approach.

Concerning RQ2, the findings show the predominance of frameworks derived from public relations and strategic communication (particularly the excellence model and two-way symmetrical communication), thus validating Hypothesis 3. Methodologically, qualitative and theoretical-bibliographic studies prevail, though empirical and mixed-methods research has grown in recent years. Persistent gaps remain in operationalisation and impact assessment, indicating the need for stronger analytical tools and comparative designs.

Regarding RQ3, the field shows thematic and geographical diversification. PD now integrates digital, cultural, and societal dimensions and involves both State and non-State actors. The emergence of Asian research hubs, especially China and South Korea, marks a shift toward a multipolar ecology of scientific production, though Anglophone theoretical dominance endures. Thus, the hypothesis of conceptual and practical maturation is largely confirmed.

Finally, regarding RQ4, the analysis demonstrates a growing intersection between the two fields. PD is often conceptualised as a form of IPR practised by States and institutions, adopting organisational communication models and principles. This evidence supports Hypothesis 2, which predicted increased theoretical and methodological overlap.

6.1. THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL, AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that PD has consolidated as a subfield within IPR, marked by conceptual hybridisation and methodological plurality. The integration of ideas such as soft power, relationship management, and strategic engagement redefines PD as an instrument of symbolic mediation and a mechanism of global governance, expanding the traditional boundaries of international communication. Yet this theoretical consolidation coexists with an empirical fragility revealed by the predominance of qualitative and interpretive approaches, which underscores both the field's analytical strength and its methodological limitations. Advancing this dimension requires systematic methodologies and evaluation frameworks that can assess perceptions and relational outcomes, with mixed methods and digital tools offering promising avenues for greater analytical rigour. Future research should also expand geographically, incorporate Global South perspectives and integrate digital diplomacy and artificial intelligence as key drivers of contemporary international communication. In this direction, developing shared indicators and metrics remains essential to evaluate PD's effectiveness and to bridge empirical evidence with cultural and relational dimensions. Methodological innovation and global diversification are thus central to consolidating PD as a mature field — one whose next stage will depend on its capacity to combine interpretive depth with empirical precision, ensuring theoretical coherence, comparability, and adaptability to 21st-century diplomacy.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

While preparing this manuscript, the authors used artificial intelligence (AI) tools (Claude) solely to assist with language translation and final editing. The authors conducted all research design, methodology, literature review, data analysis, results, and conclusions. The AI tool was not used to generate scientific content, interpret data, or draw conclusions. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Álvaro Elgueta-Ruiz has a PhD in Public Communication (University of Navarra, Spain), a master’s in Education (University of Concepción, Chile) and a bachelor’s in History and Geography (University of Concepción, Chile) and Journalism (Catholic University of the Most Holy Concepción, Chile). He is an active member of the International Communication Association, the World Association for Public Opinion Research, the Chilean Communication Research Association, and the Metropolitan Branch of the Journalists Association of Chile. He is currently a professor and researcher at the University of Cape Verde within the School of Business and Governance.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6099-7143>

Email: alvaro.ruiz@docente.unicv.edu.cv

Address: Campus do Palmarejo Grande, 379-C 7943-010 Praia, Santiago, Cabo Verde

Carmen Lucía Domínguez Águila has a PhD in Communication (University of Navarra, Spain). She is a full professor and researcher in the Faculty of Education, University of Concepción, Concepción, Chile. Her work focuses on teacher training and educational research, with a special emphasis on the impact of technology and media on childhood. Her academic research has addressed key topics for early childhood and primary education, such as: (a) technology use in preschoolers, investigating the relationship between preschool children and video games, analysing parental mediation and educators’ perspectives

on classroom integration; (b) teacher training, publishing studies on the implications of using hypertext in the training of future teachers; and (c) content analysis, exploring how cartoons influence the cognition of preschool-aged children.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3475-0268>

Email: ldomingu@udec.cl

Address: Victoria 248, Concepción, Biobío Region, Chile

Daniela Bento Almeida has a bachelor's degree in Public Relations and Executive Secretariat from the School of Business and Governance at the University of Cape Verde. She currently works at Ecobank, the Pan-African Bank.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7353-8789>

Email: daniela.almeida@student.unicv.edu.cv

Address: Campus do Palmarejo Grande, 379-C 7943-010 Praia, Santiago, Cabo Verde

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