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# Sharing the same bed with different dreams: Topic modeling the research-practice gap in public relations 2011-2020

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## ABSTRACT

Prior empirical efforts in uncovering the research-practice gap in public relations have often been restricted to perceptions and evaluations of people participating in the investigation. Moving beyond the linear perspective on knowledge transfer that dominates relevant discussions for decades, this study adopted topic modeling as an inductive analytical approach to examine a comprehensive set of texts representing the perspective of scholars and practitioners over a 10-year period from 2011 to 2020. A comparison of 35 topics discerned from academic journals (1,209 titles/abstracts) and professional texts (2,378 articles) revealed that a total of 18 topics were peculiar to each corpus, providing sound evidence of the substantial divide between scholars and practitioners. However, two communities shared common or comparable concerns over 17 topics, suggesting a significant convergence on crucial issues. Moreover, scholars and practitioners assigned varying weights to these topics in their publications, which indicated noteworthy differences in the primary areas of interest for both communities. In addition to deepening our understanding of the width and nuances of the research-practice gap in the field of public relations in a quantitative way, findings obtained from this study also signal the direction toward which scholars and practitioners should make progress to bridge the gap.

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Knowledge community; practitioner; public relations; research-practice gap; scholar; topic model

## Introduction

Public relations, as defined by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA 2017), is ‘a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics’. Of paramount importance for exploring this communication process and balancing the organization-public relationship are scholars and practitioners who together constitute the PR community. Nonetheless, the existing literature suggests a well-grounded dissonance between academic research and industry practice despite the lack of consensus on the scale of disconnectedness. With contrasting world-views, scholars and practitioners utilize different sense-making strategies and strive for different goals (Gregory and Watson 2008; Wang and Huang 2020). This leads to what is termed as the ‘two worlds’ of concern (Broom et al. 1989; J. Grunig 1979) or the ‘research-

practice gap' (Jain, De Moya, and Molleda 2014; Kim, Avery, and Lariscy 2009; Macnamara 2016).

To decipher this research-practice gap, one stream of literature has revealed that scholars in general usually give a cold shoulder to practitioner reports and industry initiatives, which crystallize cutting-edge concerns and attitude changes of frontline communication professionals, while practitioners hesitate or even resist to incorporate the academically led frameworks or methods into their daily operations (Gregory and Watson 2008). This implies a significant degree of pragmatic incongruence between practitioners' information needs and theory-oriented research outputs contributed by academic institutions. This disparity can be attributed to the widely different concerns of scholars and practitioners. J. Grunig (1979), for instance, suggested that scholars tend to pursue theoretical frameworks and ideas that exhibit strong relevance, if not generalizability, to various organizations and contexts; this contrasts with practitioners' primary concern over concrete issues and situations of a given organization on a daily basis.

Another line of research, however, has demonstrated that academic texts and reference books in the field of PR generally align with practitioners' expectations through a distinct focus on industry structure as well as an extensive discussion of day-to-day communication skills and tactics (Byrne 2008; Macnamara 2010). On the other hand, top executives and senior communication officers have increasingly recognized the importance of the 'best practice' advice and directives rewarded by scholars. Industry initiatives such as the *Global Body of Knowledge Project* (GBOK) and the *Global Capability Framework for Public Relations and Communication Management* have also been released and continuously updated to close the research-practice gap and induce PR measurement and evaluation methodologies that exhibit both theoretical robustness and practical guidance (Global Alliance (for Public Relations and Communication Management) 2018; Macnamara et al. 2018; Manley and Valin 2017). Such scholar-practitioner interactions suggest that the boundary between two knowledge communities is rather fluid than solid so that the research-practice gap in PR should be regarded as a continuum instead of a split.

The present study extends the discussion about the research-practice gap and builds on the existing research gaps in several ways. First, it moves beyond the linear perspective on knowledge transfer that dominates the understanding of theory-practice distinctions for decades, contending that the boundary between knowledge communities (i.e., scholars vs. practitioners) is constantly renegotiated by their respective members. Second, most empirical efforts so far in examining the research-practice gap have employed self-reported data from surveys or in-depth interviews. The findings obtained from these studies are not generalizable because they only reflect perceptions and evaluations of those who participated in the study. To address this potential selection bias, we used topic modeling, an unsupervised machine learning technique that has been used to identify latent semantic structures exhibited in the selected documents, to examine a comprehensive array of texts representing the perspective of scholars and practitioners over a 10-year period from 2011 to 2020. Moreover, given the recent call for more comparative PR research that knits theory and practice close together (Jain, De Moya, and Molleda 2014), this study examines not only distinct topics that set academics apart from practitioners on the continuum, but also shared or similar topics that are indicative of the common ground between two knowledge

communities. By discerning and comparing the primary topics of interest for scholars and practitioners, respectively, we could better describe and illustrate the relative position of two communities along the continuum, and more importantly, contribute to a more pertinent and stratified discussion about how to close the research-practice gap.

### **Negotiating the boundary between two knowledge communities**

It has been widely recognized that academics and practitioners constitute separate communities grounded on their distinct objectives, ways of thinking, and tactical preferences. With this underlying assumption, critics argue that scholars should broaden their scope of influence on practitioner communities by crafting more digestible statements, balancing their publishing efforts, and conducting research that addresses real problems faced by practitioners; while practitioners are expected to seek out more research opportunities, to diversify the structure of industry initiatives (e.g., The Barcelona Principles and Global Capabilities Framework), and to provide scholars with access to potential research sites and participants (Devnew 2017; Waddington 2016). In both scenarios, the knowledge underpinning theory–practice interactions represents ‘an objective entity that can and should be transferred from one side of the (supposedly) clearly defined boundary to the other to address practitioner problems’ (Kuhn 2002, 106). Based on an extensive content analysis of more than 18 years of crisis communication literature, for instance, Kim, Avery, and Lariscy (2009) concluded that PR scholars specialized in crisis communication are invariably counted on to provide ‘best practice’ advice together with more tangible and cogent instructions for practitioners.

Communication roles and activities within each knowledge community, however, are far more complicated than have been frequently depicted from the other side of the boundary. Scholars dedicated to developing the body of knowledge (BOK) in PR and communication management can find a vast group of like-minded professionals that attempt to apply theoretical models and research methodologies to the corporate arena (McElreath and Blamphin 1994; Verčič et al. 2001). Through a systematic analysis of academic articles, education frameworks, and credential schemes across six continents, scholars within the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management have developed a fundamental guideline of knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors (KSABs) to incorporate the critical demand from both academic institutions and professional associations to benchmark professional qualifications and courses (Manley and Valin 2017). Also, the development of industry policies, especially those for pursuing internationally agreed and acceptable PR programme evaluation metrics (Gregory and Watson 2008), consistently reveals a broad spectrum of perspectives on how to encourage the implementation of academically led methods that exhibit theoretical robustness. In addition, multifarious pragmatic strategies have been utilized to bridge the gap between PR theory and practice, among which improving the accessibility of research, leveraging alumni networks, and maintaining university-to-practice reciprocal guest speakers at an informal level are important ones. Therefore, it seems more likely that rather than an explicit division between academics and practitioners, there exist manifold and mixed subcommunities/groups on both sides of the boundary that is largely shaped by professional affiliation. Despite several significant differences mentioned above, it is

necessary to reconsider the origin and manifestation of the theory-practice discrepancies in PR.

The cross-boundary interactions indicate that a close working relationship between two knowledge communities is a cornerstone of professional disciplines like PR and communication management in order to nourish real-world practice. In this regard, the scholar-practitioner boundary appears rather fluid than solid because each community's professional discourses are constantly (re-)negotiated by its members. In this internal process of meaning negotiation, a knowledge community organizes joint activities, cultivates a sense of belonging, and produces a shared configuration of communication resources (e.g., theories, practical tools, lexicons, linguistic styles, and ethics). Knowledge communities are thus fields of practice wherein community members express identity and acquire relevant knowledge by means of a certain level of participation in collective events. In contrast to the aforementioned one-way linear approach to pondering knowledge transfer, knowledge from this perspective is intricately tied to discourse, context, and praxis.

Although communities emerge around common communication resources and demonstrate similarities in identity and knowledge, both academics and practitioners exhibit varying levels of interest in PR theory along with specific forms of practice. Moreover, a variety of practical venues have been designed to allow members from both communities to be physically co-present to share knowledge and advance the profession. Some industry award committees, for example, tend to invite a combination of scholars and practitioners to serve as judges or committee members, developing mutually beneficial opportunities to honor excellence in both research and practice. International conferences such as BledCom also promote a greater diversity of academics and practitioners in PR and related disciplines to discuss contemporary communication and management problems. All these efforts coupled with the continually renegotiated boundary between the two knowledge communities suggest that a more complex understanding of the research-practice gap in PR is needed.

## Method

### *Data collection*

Articles published within a 10-year period (from 2011 to 2020) were collected from sources representing the perspective of scholars and practitioners, respectively. This time frame was selected to navigate the changing PR landscape for both knowledge communities over the past decade (e.g., the explosion of social media applications, digital/integrated marketing services, data-driven decisions, and emerging evaluation measurements), and equally important, to offer a comparative vision through the lens of relevant empirical studies conducted earlier than this time frame. For the research corpus, we chose two leading peer-reviewed academic journals in the scholarly field of PR: *Public Relations Review (PRR)* and *Journal of Public Relations Research (JPRR)*. Established in 1975, *PRR* is the oldest academic journal focusing on research, theory, and practice in PR. It is published quarterly and devoted to empirical research conducted by both scholars and professionals. *JPRR* is, on the other hand, a quarterly academic journal established in 1989 and produced for the PR Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass

Communication (AEJMC). With its focus on PR theory, *JPRR* primarily publishes articles that create, examine, or extend current theoretical frameworks in the field. It should be noted that although there are other important journals publishing scholarly articles in PR, these two journals concentrate on the academic concerns and represent pertinent themes selected by the internationally recognized editorial review panels. Prior studies also identified these two journals as ‘most representative’ of global PR scholarship (Kim et al. 2014, 116) as well as the major sites of state-of-the-art theory and research (Jelen 2008). Moreover, both publications are the primary references used by educators and students of PR. The search within the time frame resulted in a total of 1,209 published articles for *PRR* ( $N = 1,017$ ) and *JPRR* ( $N = 192$ ). Titles and abstracts for these articles were scrapped for further analysis.

With respect to the practice corpus, we selected *Strategies & Tactics (S&T)*, an online monthly newspaper published by the PRSA, to represent emerging trends as well as frontline communication professionals’ concerns in PR. Focusing on both strategic and tactical aspects of the evolving profession, *S&T* features up-to-date industry news, specialist commentaries on the strategic significance of PR, and best practices instructed for communication managers and employees. It merits attention that *S&T* is a merged version of two separate publications since the beginning of 2018: the *PR Strategist (PRS)* and the *PR Tactics (PRT)*.<sup>1</sup> As thus, we collected articles published by *PRS* ( $N = 341$ ) and *PRT* ( $N = 1,368$ ) prior to 2018 and articles by *S&T* ( $N = 669$ ) thereafter.<sup>2</sup> Granted, authors represented in either the research corpus or the practice corpus are to a certain degree mixed because some communication professionals or expert researchers publish their works on *PRR/JPRR*, while *S&T* also sought insights from scholars or research-oriented practitioners. Nevertheless, these two corpora are known for their totally different publication priorities: *PRR/JPRR* deliver more theory-driven empirical efforts, whereas *S&T* publishes more practice-oriented works.

### **Topic modeling**

Topic modeling is an unsupervised machine learning technique that has been used to identify and extract latent semantic structures exhibited in large volumes of textual documents (Blei 2012; DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013). As a generative model for texts, a topic model estimates the probability of words affiliated to a particular topic based on the following assumptions: (1) a topic is a statistical distribution over words; (2) words of a certain topic are more likely to co-occur in the same document; and (3) a document comprises words belonging to different topics (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). Each document includes multiple topics and researchers can inspect topics through the topical prevalence expressed as a probability distribution and the most discriminating words in a topic.

We employed the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), which is probably the most frequently used topic modeling algorithm that has been applied to a variety of fields of study (e.g., Jacobi, van Atteveldt, and Welbers 2016; Peng et al. 2013; Walker et al. 2020). Compared with traditional bibliographic review or manual content analysis addressing the research-practice gap in PR, a probabilistic topic model like LDA shows several prominent advantages for our research purpose. First, the unsupervised text mining process provides a more objective yet cost-efficient technique to deal with large datasets, particularly a collection of documents containing broad topic patterns over time and across

different content forms (Jacobi, van Atteveldt, and Welbers 2016). Second, by using an inductive analytical approach (i.e., building models from data), LDA moves beyond the predetermined categorization necessitated in prior studies to manually classify topics or themes. Since an article/abstract is likely to cover two or more topics, LDA does not assume a binary decision as to whether a document only belongs to a given topic or not (Huang 2019). Hence, a fitted topic model can better capture topical features of our corpora as well as the topical distribution in each document. Third, the overt and transparent model setup can reduce the coding ambiguity, thus making the research agenda more replicable and readily accessible for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

### **Data preprocessing and model setup**

Data analysis was conducted as follows: First, we created (1) a research corpus of 1,209 textual documents by merging the title and abstract of each *PRR/JPRR* article into a single text file and (2) a practice corpus of 2,378 documents by treating each *S&T* article as a single text file. The second step was to preprocess the collected documents to get each corpus ready for topic modeling. Specifically, we conducted the word normalization to convert all letters to lowercase and the removal of stop words (i.e., typical English articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and transitive verbs that contribute little to the text), punctuations, numbers, as well as an additional set of meaningless words that can be observed in most abstracts or articles.

The next step was to fit the model. We used the R programming package *tm* (Feinerer, Hornik, and Meyer 2008) to convert each corpus into a document-term matrix on which to run the model. As topic modeling is an unsupervised modeling technique, a crucial parameter that needs to be specified is the number of topics  $K$ . Although several commonly used quantitative indicators (e.g., perplexity) can be used to select the number of topics, these measures usually fail to obtain the interpretability of results, which proves to be more important for fulfilling social science purposes (Chang et al. 2009; Jacobi, van Atteveldt, and Welbers 2016). Hence, we used the perplexity measure only for an initial selection ensuring an acceptable level of information loss, and then determined the value of  $K$  to achieve a satisfactory explanatory power of modeling outcomes rather than for optimizing the goodness of model fit. Specifically, we evaluated different numbers of topics  $K$  ranging from 25 to 50 and calculated the harmonic mean of the Log-Likelihood for topic models using different  $K$  values (see Appendix A for the modeling performance for each corpus). We selected the 35-topic model as it produced a reasonable tradeoff between semantic coherence and exclusivity and yielded the strongest interpretive power for both corpora. In addition, we followed suggestions from Gerow et al. (2018) by using the Dirichlet hyperparameter  $\alpha$  to control the concentration/sparsity of topic distribution over documents (i.e., document-topic distribution).<sup>3</sup> For the current study, we employed the R package *topicmodels* to fit our LDA model with  $\alpha = 50/K = 1.43$ .<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we manually inferred the topic labels based on the top words of each topic. Before labeling the topics, we intensively referred to prior studies in mapping the research-practice gap in the field of PR (e.g., Broom et al. 1989; Gregory and Watson 2008; Macnamara 2010, 2016; Macnamara et al. 2018; McElreath and Blamphin 1994) and collected potential trending topics that have drawn considerable attention from either PR scholars or communication professionals in the recent decade. Given that each abstract/



article is a mixture of multiple latent topics, five most representative abstracts/articles of each topic were also scrutinized to assess the semantic context of the most discriminating words. By doing so, we can ensure a grounded understanding of each topic as well as the external validity of the suggested labels.

## Results

Results were obtained to compare topics identified from the research corpus and the practice corpus, respectively (see [Appendix B](#) and [Appendix C](#) for topics identified for both corpora presented in a ranked order of topic proportion). As the lowest topic proportion for both corpora is less than 2.5% (research: 2.34%; practice: 1.76%), the results can be concluded to have grasped the major latent semantic structure of each corpus. Each topic was ranked by its topic proportion, and the five most discriminating words were listed to represent the primary content contained in each suggested topic label. For instance, the topic 'social media' was inferred from the prominent words including 'media', 'social', 'Twitter', 'Facebook', 'people'. Further analysis of discerned topics was categorized into three broad themes: 'common topics', 'comparable topics', and 'disparate topics'. The first theme comprises topics indicating the common ground – that is, the nearly identical set of top words shared by scholars and practitioners. The second theme represents topics with generally similar areas of interest but different priorities in terms of their prominent words. The last theme scrutinizes the largely unique topics contained in each corpus, which are most likely to reflect the width and nuances of the research-practice gap in the recent decade.

### *Common topics*

As shown in [Table 1](#), topics identified from the research corpus were listed on the left panel, while those from the practice corpus on the right panel. Seven 'common topics' shared by academics and practitioners included readily detected topics in PR: social media, crisis communication, strategic communication, employee communication, ethics, education, and leadership. Several topics had similar prevalence across both knowledge communities. For instance, social media, identified as a major revolution influencing professional practices of PR (Macnamara 2010; Kent 2013; Ki, Pasadeos, and Ertem-Eray 2019), turned out to be the most extensively researched topic for scholars (3.63%) while also attracting considerable attention from practitioners (3.67%; ranked fourth). Likewise, strategic communication, which emerges to be one of the major theoretical approaches aiming to balance the interests of an organization and its public stakeholders (Cornelissen 2020; Hallahan et al. 2007), proved to be a prominent concern for both scholars (3.13%; ranked seventh) and communication professionals (5.60%; ranked first). This reflects the fact that in addition to being used as a term in PR scholarship (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier 2002), strategic communication has been continually deployed as an alternative conceptualization of communication management practices on a global scale (Van Ruler and Verčič 2005). However, some of these topics appeared less prominent with a relatively low ranking in both corpora. Employee communication, for example, was ranked 11th (2.96%) by scholars and 18th (2.85%) by practitioners. Similarly, education was given limited attention by scholars (2.86%; ranked 16th) and practitioners (2.66%; ranked 20th).



A closer inspection of the modeling results reveals how these ‘common topics’ potentially diverge between scholars and practitioners when some of them ranked high for one community but had a relatively low ranking for the other. For instance, crisis communication was conceived by scholars as a strikingly prominent topic (3.49%; ranked second) but revealed less salience in practitioners’ agenda (3.05%; ranked 11th). This echoes S. Kim et al.’s (2009) earlier observation that after decades of crisis communication research, ‘the bridge between theory and practice may not be as solid as it should be . . . scholars may be preaching what we should practice to a greater extent than practitioners are practicing what we preach’ (p. 448). Ethics ranked 12th (2.93%) in the analysis of academic journals, but only 24th (2.52%) in *S&T* articles. Despite extensive scholarly discussion of ethical principles along with regulatory and legal issues in a systematic manner (e.g., the TARES Test and the Potter Box), the PR industry seems to insist on moral thinking and codes of professional conduct that are largely spontaneous and unenforceable (Macnamara 2010). In contrast, frontline communication professionals attached great importance to leadership (3.41%; ranked seventh), but not PR scholars (2.64%; ranked 27th). This demonstrates practitioners’ concern over institutional arrangements and leadership groups, emphasizing how powerful leaders can influence firm trajectories.

The evolving feature of these seven ‘common topics’ was further investigated by plotting their topic weights over the 10-year period of observation. As shown in Figure 1, the vertical coordinate represents the topic weight of each topic, while the horizontal coordinate represents the time. The dotted lines depict the evolving pattern of topic weights for the research corpus and the solid lines those for the practice corpus. The

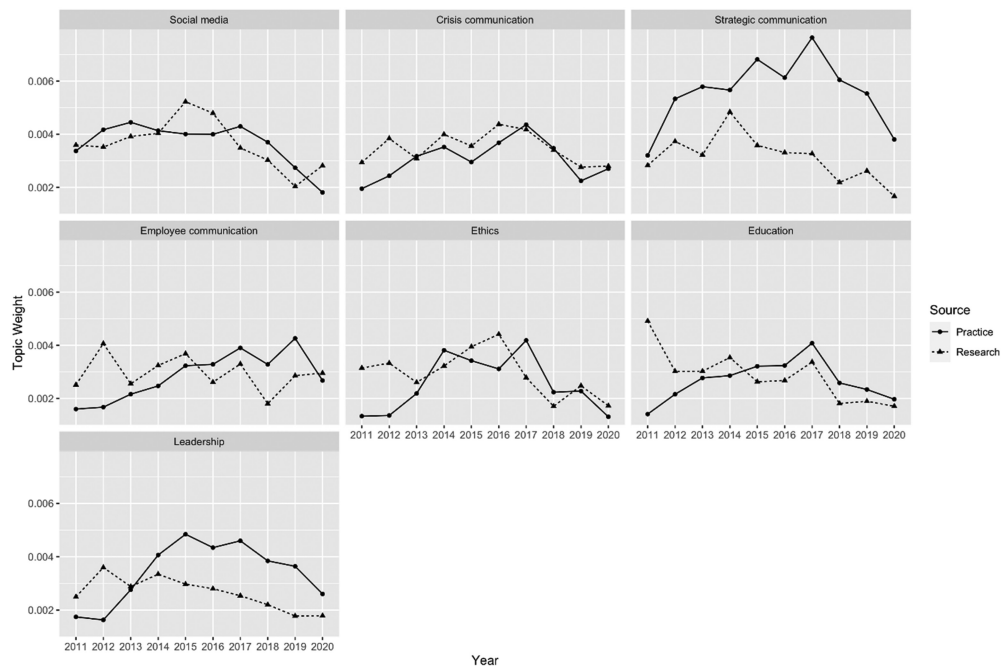


Figure 1. Trend of topic weights for seven common topics shared by research corpus and practice corpus, 2011–2020.

seven panels exhibited in Figure 1 show that with the exception of strategic communication, the topic weights of all these topics were initially higher for the research corpus and then exceeded by those of the practice corpus. It is noted that the scope of analysis can be broadened in future efforts to minimize the potential bias of topical visualization engendered by the prescribed time frame. Nonetheless, the results suggest that PR scholars originally paid closer attention to these issues, which were then followed and surpassed by their counterparts from the industry. Moreover, two communities exhibited distinct patterns of agenda priority over time. The topicality of strategic communication, for instance, peaked at different times partly due to its recent development seeing the shift from the earlier organizational-centric theorization of the concept (Hallahan et al. 2007) to an emerging set of applicable approaches designed to balance the interests of an organization and its public stakeholders, such as the networked strategy (Murphy 2015) and the participatory strategy (Falkheimer and Heide 2014). By comparison, the topical prevalence of social media and employee communication showed a high level of congruence between scholars and practitioners, demonstrating a concurrent trend of focus on these two topics.

### **Comparable topics**

Table 2 presents the 10 ‘comparable topics’ wherein both corpora shared some similarities in terms of broadly defined areas of interest. While these topics to some extent represent the ‘boundary objects’ (Kuhn 2002) that have the potential to bridge the perspectives of various communities, different priorities can be captured with scholars paying closer attention to theoretical concepts and theory-driven frameworks, whereas practitioners having more practice-oriented concerns over how to provide practical tools for guiding daily operations and industry behavior. This can be evidenced from two highly ranked topics: professionalization (3.17%; ranked fifth)/job skills (3.65%; ranked fifth), and online engagement (3.04%; ranked ninth)/online content strategy (3.45%; ranked sixth). When addressing PR as an occupation, scholars emphasized the professional role of communication practitioners in an effort to contribute to the continuing debate over the field’s professionalization (Bowen 2007), while practitioners concentrated on providing pragmatic contents including job skills, early career advice, and other learning opportunities to achieve professional status. In a similar vein, scholars focused obviously more on online ‘listening’ through engagement to various stakeholders, whereas practitioners stressed online ‘speaking’ in forms of creating content and distributing messages through social media platforms and mobile applications.

Unlike ‘common topics’, most topics in this regard also had comparable overall prevalence between two corpora. The only topic that reveals a ranking difference of more than 10 places is corporate social responsibility (CSR)/corporate communication. Specifically, scholars ranked CSR (3.16%; ranked sixth) higher than practitioners ranked corporate communication (2.55%; ranked 22nd). Although it has long been recognized that corporate communication shares an overlapping, if not common, field of practice with PR, it was only in the recent theorization did scholars describe corporate communication in very similar terms to PR (Cornelissen 2020). In addition, the difference in priority also points to another underlying factor contributing to the research-practice

**Table 2.** Comparable topics with top five words, topic proportion, and topic rank from research corpus and practice corpus.

Research corpus		Practice corpus					
Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank	Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank
Professionalization	practitioners, journalists, professional, professionals, roles	3.17%	5	Job skills	job, new, career, professional, skills	3.65%	5
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	corporate, csr, companies, responsibility, business	3.16%	6	Corporate communication	communications, president, corporate, new, vice	2.55%	22
Online engagement	engagement, online, facebook, use, stakeholders	3.04%	8	Online content strategy	content, video, online, mobile, use	3.45%	6
Media publicity	news, media, content, coverage, press	2.93%	13	Media relations	news, media, press, story, journalists	2.79%	19
Evaluation framework	framework, dimensions, evaluation, development, process	2.85%	18	Measurement	data, measurement, research, results, measure	2.95%	12
Political campaigning on Twitter	political, twitter, issues, use, tweets	2.65%	25	Political campaign	public, government, political, campaign, president	1.90%	30
Transatlantic comparison	united, states, marketing, transparency, european	2.61%	29	Globalization	global, world, united, states, use	1.91%	29
Cultural identity	culture, identity, cultural, values, activism	2.51%	32	Diversity and inclusion (D&I)	diversity, diverse, inclusion, women, cultural	2.33%	25
Health risk management	information, health, involvement, risk, data	2.49%	33	Health care	health, care, hospital, medical, pandemic	1.86%	33
Community relations	community, relations, conflict, members, association	2.48%	34	Public communication	public, media, city, community, department	2.21%	27
Total topic proportion		27.89%		Total topic proportion		25.60%	

**Table 3.** Disparate topics with top five words, topic proportion, and topic rank from research corpus and practice corpus.

Research corpus				Practice corpus			
Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank	Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank
Organizational reputation	reputation, organizational, effects, negative, effect	3.37%	3	Miscellaneous 2	people, time, years, work, lot	4.82%	2
Miscellaneous 1	field, future, need, practice, issues	3.29%	4	Q&A	questions, people, ask, good, want	4.45%	3
Nonprofit management	organizations, publics, organization, nonprofit, using	3.04%	9	Writing	writing, read, write, words, readers	3.37%	8
Public diplomacy	public, diplomacy, global, international, countries	3.03%	10	Miscellaneous 3	time, work, day, office, team	3.35%	9
Dialogic communication	communication, dialogic, dialogue, principles, potential	2.91%	14	Creativity	people, change, creative, new, ideas	3.26%	10
Relationship management	relationships, relationship, organization-public, management, relational	2.90%	15	Client-agency relations	clients, client, agency, business, work	2.95%	13
Social capital	network, social, power, capital, society	2.86%	17	Survey study	percent, study, survey, report, research	2.94%	14
Histography	history, early, historical, century, race	2.80%	19	Storytelling	story, stories, audience, people, storytelling	2.94%	15
Image repair strategy	strategies, image, repair, used, strategy	2.74%	20	PRSA structure	members, year, chapter, national, program	2.91%	16
PR perception	influence, perceptions, perceived, impact, korean	2.71%	21	Brand marketing	brand, brands, company, customers, consumers	2.89%	17
Case study	case, used, practices, efforts, american	2.71%	22	Digital technology	technology, future, new, world, digital	2.59%	21
Government relations	public, government, trust, local, citizens	2.70%	23	Conference	conference, tactics, issue, new, month	2.53%	23
Academic concepts	concept, scholars, work, scholarship, concepts	2.69%	24	Senior management	company, ceo, ceos, corporate, business	2.32%	26
Organizational performance	performance, organizational, order, used, quality	2.65%	26	City tourism	travel, food, san, city, tourism	2.00%	28
Emerging economy/ industry	economic, agencies, interviews, industry, emerging	2.64%	28	Emergency management	power, new, water, weather, safety	1.89%	31

*(Continued)*

Table 3. (Continued).

Research corpus				Practice corpus			
Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank	Topic label	Top five words	Topic proportion	Rank
Chinese practice	china, chinese, perspective, cultural, practices	2.54%	30	Emotions	people, emotional, messages, use, emotions	1.89%	32
Messaging strategy	content, messages, using, message, attention	2.52%	31	Awards season	show, event, music, film, awards	1.80%	34
Rhetorical theory	discourse, case, narrative, rhetoric, rhetorical	2.34%	35	Sports	space, sports, game, games, players	1.76%	35
Total topic proportion		50.44%		Total topic proportion		50.66%	

Note. PRSA = Public Relations Society of America.

gap that the pressure to publish tends to push scholars toward more concretely defined topics such as CSR.

### **Disparate topics**

As presented in Table 3, a total of 18 topics were found peculiar to the research corpus (50.44%) and the practice corpus (50.66%). Positioned further apart on the research-practice continuum, these topics suggest a significant gap by underlining substantial disparities of focus. Specifically, a further inspection of ‘disparate topics’ concurs with that of ‘comparable topics’ with scholars adopting more theoretical concepts (e.g., organizational reputation, nonprofit management, public diplomacy, PR perception, and organizational performance), theory-oriented frameworks (e.g., dialogic communication, relationship management, image repair strategy, and rhetorical theory), and the lens or approaches through which to probe into relevant communication practices (e.g., historiography, case study, and Chinese practice). In contrast, practitioners focused on specific issues incorporating an extended application of PR in multiple areas of communication management (e.g., senior management, brand marketing, emergency management), an extensive description of various communication roles and activities (e.g., client–agency relations, survey study, conference, city tourism), and a detailed discussion of capabilities, techniques, or skills needed for day-to-day operations in the field of practice (e.g., writing, creativity, storytelling, digital technology, emotions).

One explanation for this between-corpora difference may be that even though most scholars paid special attention to practical implications of their research, they may primarily focus on normative and often idealistic theoretical models within and beyond the field of PR, thus discussing the practice in accordance with their own perceptions of practitioners’ roles and activities. As a result, the prevalent topics discussed in scholarly research may not have adequately captured practitioners’ primary concerns. For example, topics related to those highly valued competencies and capabilities for frontline communication professionals such as writing (3.37%; ranked eighth) and creativity (3.26%; ranked 10th) were of

tremendous interest to practitioners, but they rarely appeared in scholars' academic works. On the other hand, practitioners' statements often revealed a widely adopted advocacy tone in discussing the field of practice, marginalizing those who have negative perceptions of PR, and circumventing the critical analysis of practices that warrant careful inspection in terms of political economy, culture, and power relations among other theoretical perspectives. Therefore, topics highlighting conceptual frameworks or approaches such as dialogic communication (2.91%; ranked 14th), relationship management (2.90%; ranked 15th), and social capital (2.86%; ranked 17th) were frequently studied by scholars but attracted little attention from practitioners. This finding also speaks to one theory-practice contradiction frequently seen when using a dialogic or relational framework to create and sustain external relationships with stakeholders (Rybalko and Seltzer 2010; Wang and Huang 2020). Although scholars promote a participatory and often stakeholder-centric approach to communication management (Heath and Johansen 2018), the premise that frontline practitioners will spontaneously incorporate this sense-making process into their day-to-day communication practices is likely to be utopian and problematic.

## Discussion

To examine the research-practice gap in PR, this study has adopted an inductive or 'bottom-up' analytical approach to compare multiple topics identified from the text corpora over a 10-year period. Findings obtained from this study deepen our understanding of the width and nitty-gritty details of the gap in a quantitative way, and more importantly, signal the direction toward which scholars and practitioners should make progress to bridge the gap.

First, the results corroborated a substantial divide in the topics of heightened concern between scholars and practitioners, thus providing compelling evidence of the research-practice gap. Additionally, there were some minor variations in the weights assigned to these topics. These topics reflect concerns expressed in prior studies that academics focus on theory-driven models and approaches while practitioners attach more importance to specific issues addressing functional communication roles and needs (Jain, De Moya, and Molleda 2014; Kim, Avery, and Lariscy 2009). This disparity may also be attributed to the distinct publication procedures of academic and professional texts. Articles published in academic journals must go through a lengthy and stringent peer-review procedure, which necessitates a general process of theorization and conceptualization. Professional outlets, by contrast, usually respond to pressing concerns of communication professionals and trending issues in the field of practice.

Second, there is plenty of common ground between two knowledge communities, as evidenced by the fact that scholars and practitioners shared common or comparable concerns over 17 topics, with slightly lower topic weights than disparate topics (49.56% for scholars and 49.34% for practitioners). Nonetheless, the varying weights assigned to these topics revealed noticeable differences in the primary areas of interest for both communities. Together, these findings suggest that scholars and practitioners converged on crucial issues and the research-practice gap in PR seems more like a continuum on which all relevant topics can be uniformly distributed.



## ***Theoretical and practical implications***

### ***Organizational listening vs. speaking to be revisited***

This study empirically confirms the organizational listening versus organizational speaking as a major gap in PR theory and practice (Lloyd, Boer, and Voelpel 2017; Macnamara 2016; Place 2019). Specifically, ‘disparate topics’ demonstrated clearly that scholars engaged in more organizational listening with stakeholders and publics through creating and developing dialogue/relationship-oriented models and frameworks. In addition, this focus on recording and analyzing public opinions, feedback, and criticisms can also be observed from scholars’ inclination to adopt cultural studies and rhetorical approach that echoes the field’s ‘sociocultural shift’ from serving the interests of strategic management elites to shaping more context-sensitive understandings about social interaction and cultural dynamics (Edwards and Hodges 2011). In contrast, practitioners focused on organizational speaking with an explicit propensity to produce and disseminate messages for the purpose of notification, persuasion, and instruction. This can be evidenced by practitioners’ frequent mentions of writing, creativity, and storytelling. Such content-based functions and activities convey an essential sense of one-way transmission, especially given the lack of consideration for both planning and assessment of communication functions.

Prior studies demonstrate that listening activities entailing authentic engagement and dialogue (e.g., public consultation, open-ended research, and social media monitoring) can improve organizational productivity, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and employee commitment, while reducing labor disputes and crisis conditions unfavorable to organizations (Macnamara 2014; Neill and Bowen 2021; Reed, Goolsby, and Johnston 2016; Qin and Men 2021). For instance, Yang, Kang, and Cha (2015) found that the organization-public dialogic communication significantly predicts the level of public trust and distrust. However, a study of both public and private organizations concluded that the PR function ‘is principally involved in creating an *architecture of speaking* for organizations comprised of structures, systems, resources, tools, and technologies such as websites, databases, mailing lists, events, presentations, videos, media campaigns, speeches, reports, newsletters, brochures, and so on’ (Macnamara 2016, 162). The present study has quantitatively clarified this imbalance between listening and speaking in the field of practice. The results also reveal that advocacy-oriented PR functions such as client–agency relations, media relations, and brand marketing are likely to restrain organizations from formulating and implementing effective listening strategies because they tend to lay particular stress on sales and promotion of products. Hence, organizational listening is not only a promising subject calling for more future scholarship, but also an efficient pathway through which innovative academic ideas can find their way to workplace norms and expectations.

### ***Bridging roles of boundary-spanners to be valued***

The common ground between scholars and practitioners implies the possibility of developing subjects and programs that accommodate the concerns of both communities. For instance, among ‘common topics’ and ‘comparable topics’, two communities had a similar number of topics ranked in the top 10 most prevalent topics: six for the research corpus and five for the practice corpus. Indeed, two knowledge communities have different

norms and beliefs with practitioners striving to transfer industry knowledge in simple and lucid language, while scholars putting extra weight on developing academic knowledge through more rigorous methodologies and robust results. To bridge this gap, continuous efforts should be made from both sides of the boundary. Despite several collective events (e.g., industry awards, conferences, and round table events) and mutually beneficial opportunities (e.g., reciprocal guest speakers and alumni networks) described earlier, the bridging role of potential boundary-spanners connecting two communities cannot be neglected (Zerfass and Volk 2017).

For scholars aimed at conducting research that address practitioners' pressing needs, it is critical to investigate how to foster sustained cross-boundary interactions in order to adapt their research outputs to industry concerns and to encourage practitioners to access academic knowledge. To this end, one way to get started is to increase the boundary-spanning collaboration and cooperation in publishing scholarly articles. Jain, De Moya, and Molleda (2014) found that although most scholars thought highly of their publications' practical implications, only less than 10% of their works included practitioner authors. This indicates an urgent need for academic works to incorporate varying perspectives strongly oriented to practice. In this regard, PR textbooks and reference books are an appropriate domain to facilitate such forms of collaboration because they have 'a major focus on case studies, extensive description of the various roles and fields of practice, and detailed discussion of day-to-day methods and activities' (Macnamara 2010, 13). In addition, academics' publishing efforts should continue to be balanced. For each published peer-reviewed journal article, scholars can write one or more professional texts to timely deliver reader-friendly knowledge for the intended audience. These texts can be sent to industry outlets with a publication style similar to the Harvard Business Review, or alternatively, be packed up in a single-page summary to be shared in open-source publications. Other approaches or opportunities to connect scholars with individuals in the practice world who might benefit from academic findings are expected to be explored further.

For communication professionals, in particular those so-called 'expert researchers' struggling to stay at the forefront of innovation, a thorough understanding of the theoretical and historical perspectives provided by academics is always needed to avoid trading in rudimentary tactics and skills. To enhance their bridging role, industry leaders straddling the boundary may step up their efforts to reach out to theory and keep an eye on research opportunities so long as they help make sense of the evolution of new practices. They are supposed to be keenly aware of issues deserving further investigation and share their ideas and observations in places where scholars flock together, such as various research centers located in colleges and universities. A practitioner in residence would be a suitable route to maintain theory–practice relationship while allowing professional communicators to share their knowledge and influence research subjects. Emerging opportunities to develop a crowdsourced community (e.g., #FuturePProof) can be sought to include more scholarly contributions and energize cross-boundary conversations about the future of PR (Wilson, Robson, and Botha 2017). A greater effort to assist in the research by granting access to research settings and participants can also help bridge the research-practice gap and pave a path for the development of practice-relevant theories.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Several limitations of this study and suggestions for future research should be addressed. First, it should be recognized that the content analyzed in the present study does not comprise the entire domain of two knowledge communities' publication. Although two major academic journals selected for the research corpus can represent PR literature on a global scale (Kim et al. 2014), other prominent international journals publishing PR scholarships are expected to be added to expand the scope of coverage (Ki, Pasadeos, and Ertem-Eray 2019). In particular, the practice corpus covering only articles published by PRSA, a US-based leading professional organization, is subject to the well-established criticism of the dominant US paradigm (Jain, De Moya, and Molleda 2014; Macnamara 2010; Pieczka 2006). Future research incorporating more non-US industry outlets may diversify professional discussion and generate more comprehensive and context-free findings. Second, the so-called 'file drawer effect' is also likely to bias the results because only published work was examined. Although this study analyzes a wide range of academic and professional texts, it does not cover those from authors who try – but fail – to publish their work on their aimed outlets. Another overlooked source is studies presented at conferences or symposiums, of which only a limited percentage appears in our sampled publications. It would be interesting for future research to compare topics identified in the present study with those extracted from conference proceedings, wherein both academics and practitioners may play an essential role. Third, it is important to note that the discerned topics are in fact semantically overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. This form of inter-topic overlap can be corroborated by the most prominent words in each common or comparable topic. This evidence, however, is far from sufficient. Further investigating this type of inter-topic interaction is crucial for understanding how various topics co-evolve with each other and whether this co-evolution broadens or narrows the research-practice gap.

### **Notes**

1. Specifically, *PRS* is a quarterly magazine aiming at executive-level PR professionals with insightful feature-length commentary on the strategic importance of PR at the management level and views on changing PR concepts to engage and inform professionals and their organizations; while *PRT* is a monthly tabloid newspaper conveying essential tips shared by frontline PR practitioners on a wide range of topics and aims to empower communicators to advance their careers and showcase the positive influence of the profession.
2. Titles and abstracts included in the research corpus were retrieved from the official website of *PRR* (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/public-relations-review>) and *JPRR* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hpr20>), respectively; articles for the *S&T* were collected from the publication's online archive (<https://www.prsa.org/publications-and-news/strategies-tactics>). Both academic journals require authors to provide a concise and informative title serving as the abbreviated version of the major idea of their articles. Moreover, the abstract should be able to stand alone to briefly demonstrate the research purpose, primary findings, and principal conclusions. The retrieval of title and abstract information can ensure capturing the major idea of journal articles. On the other hand, the magazine-style pieces of *S&T* necessitate reading through the full text of each article to comprehend its main idea. Hence, the research corpus and the practice corpus scrapped for topic modeling are considered comparable to each other.

3. Prior studies suggest that Dirichlet hyperparameters  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  should be used to control the concentration/sparsity of topic distribution over documents (i.e., document-topic distribution) and word distribution over topics (i.e., topic-word distribution), respectively (Gerow et al. 2018). Lower values of hyper-parameters often result in a higher concentration of document-topic or topic-word distribution. These efforts are primarily made upon a single corpus to reach a balanced word distribution over topics. For the comparative purpose contained in the present study, however, controlling for  $\beta$  to manually set restrictions to the topic distribution is likely to produce a coerced result. Therefore, we fitted the LDA model with  $\alpha$  only.
4. In practice, 1 is often used as the upper threshold for the fine tuning of  $\alpha$ , particularly when there is prior knowledge that the distribution of topics over documents would be sparse and only a very few topics would be contained in a document (Naushan 2020). In the present study, however, it is likely that each document, from either research corpus or practice corpus, contains multiple topics. In addition, the data used for this study covers a 10-year period of observation comprising a variety of themes and viewpoints. It is thus more reasonable to use the common default of  $\alpha$  (i.e.,  $50/K = 1.43$ ) to obtain a set of more explicitly differentiated topics over documents.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Xiao Wang, upon reasonable request.

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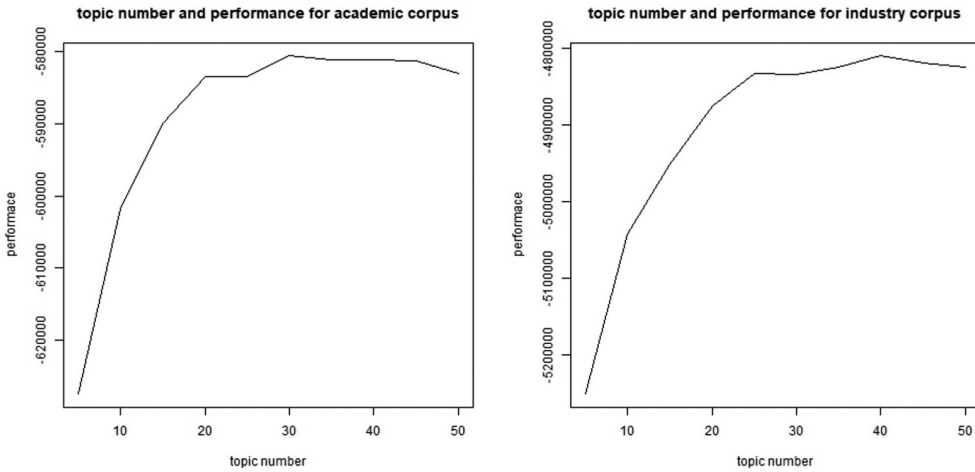
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## Appendix A

Topic Number and Modeling Performance (Left: Research Corpus; Right: Practice Corpus)



## Appendix B. 35 Topics with Top Ten Terms, Topic Weight from Research Corpus

Topic Rank	Suggested Label	Proportion	Top Ten Terms in Each Topic
1	Social media	3.63%	media, social, new, use, traditional, using, digital, platforms, control, corporations
2	Crisis communication	3.49%	crisis, communication, response, crises, emotions, reputation, responses, strategies, responsibility, organization
3	Organizational reputation	3.37%	reputation, organizational, effects, negative, effect, positive, attitudes, perceived, behaviors, intentions
4	Miscellaneous 1	3.29%	field, future, need, practice, issues, review, focus, scholarship, perspectives, academic
5	Professionalization	3.17%	practitioners, journalists, professional, professionals, roles, survey, role, profession, women, important
6	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	3.16%	corporate, csr, companies, responsibility, business, corporations, activities, company, associations, strategy
7	Strategic communication	3.13%	communication, management, strategic, stakeholders, stakeholder, legitimacy, expectations, disaster, managers, managing
8	Online engagement	3.04%	engagement, online, facebook, use, stakeholders, posts, voice, websites, interactivity, users
9	Nonprofit management	3.04%	organizations, publics, organization, nonprofit, using, organizational, issue, communicative, active, support
10	Public diplomacy	3.03%	public, diplomacy, global, international, countries, national, country, foreign, world, ngos

(Continued)



(Continued).

Topic Rank	Suggested Label	Proportion	Top Ten Terms in Each Topic
11	Employee communication	2.96%	communication, internal, employee, employees, external, survey, symmetrical, mediated, organizational, satisfaction
12	Ethics	2.93%	ethical, ethics, role, practice, challenges, society, professional, problems, argues, intelligence
13	Media publicity	2.93%	news, media, content, coverage, press, framing, frames, releases, frame, financial
14	Dialogic communication	2.91%	communication, dialogic, dialogue, principles, potential, new, digital, publics, websites, content
15	Relationship management	2.90%	relationships, relationship, organization-public, management, relational, outcomes, opr, building, publics, strategies
16	Education	2.86%	knowledge, students, education, professionals, experience, skills, work, university, professional, college
17	Social capital	2.86%	network, social, power, capital, society, networks, activist, civil, collective, activists
18	Evaluation framework	2.85%	framework, dimensions, evaluation, development, process, conceptual, qualitative, practice, measurement, data
19	Histography	2.80%	history, early, historical, century, race, world, war, propaganda, view, changing
20	Image repair strategy	2.74%	strategies, image, repair, used, strategy, action, denial, better, apology, oil
21	PR perception	2.71%	influence, perceptions, perceived, impact, korean, perception, factors, south, personal, individuals
22	Case study	2.71%	case, used, practices, efforts, american, campaign, campaigns, effective, environmental, uses
23	Government trust	2.70%	public, government, trust, local, citizens, level, high, participation, distrust, take
24	Academic concepts	2.69%	concept, scholars, work, scholarship, concepts, purpose, current, journal, organizational, researchers
25	Political campaigning on Twitter	2.65%	political, twitter, issues, use, tweets, using, levels, democratic, analyses, party
26	Organizational performance	2.65%	performance, organizational, order, used, quality, service, south, african, structural, data
27	Leadership	2.64%	leadership, change, communications, depth, important, leaders, interviews, executives, ability, senior
28	Emerging economy/ industry	2.64%	economic, agencies, interviews, industry, emerging, agency, clients, limited, activities, views
29	Transatlantic comparison	2.61%	united, states, marketing, transparency, european, recent, advertising, functions, department, departments
30	Chinese practice	2.54%	china, chinese, perspective, cultural, practices, institutional, identified, unique, thunder, cases
31	Messaging strategy	2.52%	content, messages, using, message, attention, brand, visual, role, sharing, messaging
32	Cultural identity	2.51%	culture, identity, cultural, values, activism, practice, main, middle, influence, reveal
33	Health risk management	2.49%	information, health, involvement, risk, data, people, third, emergency, involved, behavior
34	Community relations	2.48%	community, relations, conflict, members, association, organizational, communities, work-life, investor, sample
35	Rhetorical theory	2.34%	discourse, case, narrative, rhetoric, rhetorical, processes, voices, modern, narratives, analyzes

## Appendix C. 35 Topics with Top Ten Terms, Topic Weight from Practice Corpus

Topic Rank	Topic Name	Weight	Top Ten Terms in Each Topic
1	Strategic communication	5.60%	communication, organizations, organization, strategic, business, help, important, communications, need, strategy
2	Miscellaneous 2	4.82%	people, time, years, work, lot, way, best, things, think, great
3	Q&A	4.45%	questions, people, ask, good, want, person, need, time, way, think
4	Social media	3.67%	media, social, twitter, facebook, people, use, platforms, using, channels, digital
5	Job skills	3.65%	job, new, career, professional, skills, work, professionals, help, learn, opportunities
6	Online content strategy	3.45%	content, video, online, mobile, use, digital, users, videos, search, people
7	Leadership	3.41%	leadership, leaders, leader, team, people, lead, great, must, good, leading
8	Writing	3.37%	writing, read, write, words, readers, reading, use, copy, piece, word
9	Miscellaneous 3	3.35%	time, work, day, office, team, working, email, help, hours, meetings
10	Creativity	3.26%	people, change, creative, new, ideas, idea, need, think, look, way
11	Crisis communication	3.05%	crisis, reputation, plan, information, organization, company, management, response, risk, organizations
12	Measurement	2.95%	data, measurement, research, results, measure, business, analytics, goals, value, insights
13	Client-agency relations	2.95%	clients, client, agency, business, work, agencies, independent, firm, time, new
14	Survey study	2.94%	percent, study, survey, report, research, millennials, year, respondents, years, workers
15	Storytelling	2.94%	story, stories, audience, people, storytelling, audiences, message, help, remember, attention
16	PRSA structure	2.91%	members, year, chapter, national, program, member, years, new, anvil, campaign
17	Brand marketing	2.89%	brand, brands, company, customers, consumers, marketing, companies, customer, products, product
18	Employee communication	2.85%	employees, employee, culture, communication, work, company, internal, engagement, companies, leaders
19	Media relations	2.79%	news, media, press, story, journalists, reporters, release, reporter, stories, information
20	Education	2.66%	students, university, college, education, school, program, student, class, profession, prssa
21	Digital technology	2.59%	technology, future, new, world, digital, reality, business, companies, age, need
22	Corporate communication	2.55%	communications, president, corporate, new, vice, business, director, years, marketing, ceo
23	Conference	2.53%	conference, tactics, issue, new, month, years, oct, year, event, session
24	Ethics	2.52%	apr, ethics, ethical, fellow, profession, board, professional, accreditation, professionals, practitioners
25	Diversity and inclusion (D&I)	2.33%	diversity, diverse, inclusion, women, cultural, profession, black, people, gender, multicultural
26	Senior management	2.32%	company, ceo, ceos, corporate, business, executives, wall, journal, executive, public
27	Public communication	2.21%	public, media, city, community, department, state, police, air, force, day
28	City tourism	2.00%	travel, food, san, city, tourism, industry, visitors, diego, team, park
29	Globalization	1.91%	global, world, united, states, use, rules, countries, language, term, common
30	Political campaign	1.90%	public, government, political, campaign, president, election, truth, opinion, presidential, politics

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(Continued).

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Topic Rank	Topic Name	Weight	Top Ten Terms in Each Topic
31	Emergency management	1.89%	power, new, water, weather, safety, storm, hurricane, line, communications, flight
32	Emotions	1.89%	people, emotional, messages, use, emotions, mind, relevance, example, brain, message
33	Health care	1.86%	health, care, hospital, medical, pandemic, coronavirus, new, patient, patients, public
34	Awards season	1.80%	show, event, music, film, awards, arts, movie, academy, events, team
35	Sports	1.76%	space, sports, game, games, players, team, fans, world, season, baseball

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