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Research Practices in Comparative Communication Research: Visibility, Topical and Geographical Disparities, and their Longitudinal Patterns

FABIENNE LIND
University of Vienna, Austria

HYUNJIN SONG
Yonsei University, Republic of Korea

HAJO G. BOOMGAARDEN
University of Vienna, Austria

AHRABHI KATHIRGAMALINGAM
University of Vienna, Austria
Center for Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS) GmbH, Germany

KIM PAMINA SYED ALI
University of Zurich, Switzerland

RENS VLIEGENTHART[1]
Wageningen University & Research, Netherlands

This article provides a meta-research of comparative communication science articles published in 32 communication journals between 2003 and 2021. Relying on a combination of automated and manual content analysis, we find a gradual increase in the proportion of comparative studies throughout the 19-year span, although their overall presence remains limited. Through a longitudinal lens, we dissect evolving trends in

Fabienne Lind: fabienne.lind@univie.ac.at
Hyunjin Song: hyunjinsong@yonsei.ac.kr
Hajo G. Boomgaarden: hajo.boomgaarden@univie.ac.at
Ahrabhi Kathirgamalingam: ahrabhi.kathirgamalingam@cais-research.de
Kim Pamina Syed Ali: p.syedali@ikmz.uzh.ch
Rens Vliegenthart: rens.vliegenthart@wur.nl
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themes, methodologies, studied cases, and authorship of comparative communication research, with political communication emerging as a prominent topic. We also identify a preference for quantitative methodologies over qualitative or mixed-method approaches. Assessing the geographic patterns of cases and authorship locations, our results echo previous meta-research studies by finding that comparative research is yet another subdiscipline with a strong dominance of Western countries. Discussing these findings, we highlight the critical need for future comparative communication research to foster global representation and inclusivity.

Keywords: meta-research, communication science, comparative research, relative salience, topical and geographical disparities, longitudinal patterns

Dynamics of media production and media effects are highly likely to be conditioned by the contexts into which media producers and users are embedded. Various meso- and macro-level systems relating to cultural, legal, or political aspects provide important boundary conditions for the behavior of actors involved in media production, dissemination, and use. However, communication science has only recently begun to systematically explore these interactions. It is in comparative communication research that communication phenomena are studied in different macro-level contexts (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). The power of this comparative perspective lies in showing how the contextual variations shape or interact with communication processes (Esser & Pfetsch, 2020). Such perspectives further broaden our understanding of media production and its effects, identifying the boundary conditions of theoretical assumptions, and thereby avoiding the "naïve universalism" often present in the discipline's empirical insights (Boomgaarden & Song, 2019). Consequently, comparative research supports also the de-westernization of communication science by fostering modesty about the generalizability of conclusions derived from single national cases and by promoting curiosity about the applicability of concepts across diverse settings (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Beyond testing theories across settings, it deepens our understanding of specific cases, builds more generalizable theories with contextual boundaries, studies transnational processes, and enhances global comprehension (Livingstone, 2003).

Two key developments make the comparative research perspective particularly relevant. First, as phenomena in communication science, media industries, and consumption patterns become increasingly globalized—driven by economic, technological, and cultural forces—the need for comparative communication research is intensifying (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2021). For instance, to understand the usage of popular social media platforms like TikTok or Facebook that span national boundaries, a comparative approach is essential (Dvir-Gvirsman, Sude, & Raisman, 2024; Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021). Second, although academic work cultures in communication science are increasingly globalized, the continued dominance of Western research centers and certain richer countries in Asia, coupled with the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities (e.g., publishing houses, journals, research grants), creates disparities in global collaboration (Demeter, 2017, 2019, 2020). For comparative research, where a global perspective is integral to the research design, examining geographic patterns in researcher collaboration becomes particularly insightful. This raises the critical question of whether this international focus offers an

opportunity to foster more inclusive and diverse scholarship, or if it merely reflects another subfield where imbalances of power and resources persist.

There is no lack of previous meta-research studies of comparative communication studies (Chang, 2001; Hanusch & Vos, 2020; So, 2017; Volk, 2022; Zhao & Liu, 2020). However, in this contribution, we aim to complement and update them by following three avenues: Investigating the largest sample of comparative articles so far and contrasting findings for specialized-comparative journals with the highest-ranked journals in communication science, our meta-research is the first that (1) studies the actual share of comparative research out of the total of articles published by the journals, (2) analyzes publication patterns (topics, methods, cases, and authors) by employing a longitudinal perspective and by contrasting different journal sampling strategies, and (3) and investigates questions related to the geographical biases and possible power concentration present in comparative research.

Our meta-research study concentrates on articles where the comparison is across macro-level contexts that can be described as geographical units, which is, according to So (2017), the most frequently employed perspective in comparative research. We do so by systematically analyzing English-language articles published in 32 communication journals between 2003 and 2021 that use empirical data from at least two geographical units and that make a comparison between these units through statistical analysis or descriptive narrative elaborations.

With our meta-research study, we identify critical patterns in the practice of comparative communication studies in the field and seek to inspire new and more diverse applications in comparative communication research—and therefore contribute to further reflection of the discipline about its theories' contextual boundaries.

Meta-Research of Comparative Communication Research

Meta-research studies investigate how research is conducted, shedding light on publication practices and potential biases in selected research fields (Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2018). The following sections summarize findings from previous meta-research studies in terms of salience, topics, methods, cases, and authorship patterns within comparative communication research, leading to our own research questions. These questions aim to address gaps in the existing meta-research, such as the relative salience of research, and provide a novel longitudinal perspective on each aspect. Additionally, we introduce a research question comparing publication patterns across different journal types and another examining the relationship between geographical biases and the use of secondary data.

Salience

Many prior observations in the field share the general sentiment that comparative research was growing and "has almost become fashionable" at the time of writing (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004, p. 237; see also Livingstone, 2003; Mancini & Hallin, 2012). Such an increase in comparative research observed 20 years ago has been postulated across various subdisciplines of communication science ever since. Reflections for journalism studies (Hanitzsch, 2013) or for political communication (de Vreese, 2017)

unanimously conclude that growing numbers of studies adopt a comparative perspective. This growth is attributed to several factors: Livingstone (2003) and Norris (2009) argue that comparative projects have gained priority with funding agencies, in particular the European funding programs. At the same time, professional networks are arguably becoming more transnational; digitalization has made cross-border collaborations less demanding in terms of resources. Additionally, the wider availability of data through digital archives has enabled comparative research across countries (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004), and academic journals and conferences have increasingly embraced international perspectives. Finally, the accessibility of statistical methods like multilevel models has made comparative analysis easier.

To date, empirical assessments of comparative communication research have typically relied on absolute publication numbers, potentially overlooking fluctuating publication volumes. Zhao and Liu (2020) analyzed 45 studies from 1969 to 2019, finding an increase in comparative Internet and social media research over time. So (2017) reviewed 147 documents from 1980 to 2014, with more than half published between 2010 and 2014. Hanusch and Vos (2020) examined 441 comparative journalism studies, showing distribution as follows: 2000–2005 (22.4%), 2006–2010 (34.2%), and 2011–2015 (43.3%). Volk (2022) found an upward trend in 335 comparative studies, with annual increases: 2015 (11.6%), 2016 (19.1%), 2017 (19.7%), 2018 (23.3%), and 2019 (26.3%).

This study builds on previous assessments by empirically investigating the salience of comparative communication research, using the largest sample analyzed to date. It is the first meta-research study to examine the proportion of comparative studies relative to communication science publications. We aim to determine how prominent comparative approaches are in published research and whether their prominence has increased in recent years, expecting to confirm an overall rise in comparative research salience.

RQ1: How salient is comparative communication research and how does the salience change over time?

H1: The share of comparative communication research is increasing over time.

Topic Areas

Not all areas of communication science apply a comparative perspective in the same way or to the same extent. For example, fields like journalism and health communication tend to focus on individual or institutional communication choices, although media policy research emphasizes structural development and institutional impact across cases (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). Contrasting the popularity of comparative research across areas, observers conclude that a comparative perspective is not equally distributed (Boomgaarden & Song, 2019; Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012). Several authors report that political communication and journalism studies are particularly likely to adopt a comparative approach (So, 2017; Volk, 2022). This popularity is in part triggered by the European Union as a comparative playground (Esser, 2013; Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004) and the popularity of the comparative approach in political science (Mancini & Hallin, 2012). Political communication is also the focus of most theoretical articles on comparative communication research (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975; de Vreese, 2017; Esser & Pfetsch, 2020; Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004; Norris, 2009). Beyond political communication, development communication, interpersonal and intercultural communication (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012), health communication, audience studies, and journalism studies (Downey, 2020)

are noted for their frequent adoption of a comparative perspective. Previous meta-research studies did not explicitly assess topical trends over time. Examining topic areas for our journal sample, we ask:

RQ2: What are the most frequently studied topics and how do they vary over time?

Methodological Approaches and Inquiries

Previous meta-research studies (Hanusch & Vos, 2020; Volk, 2022) highlight a distinct prevalence of quantitative over qualitative methodological approaches. They emphasize that content analysis and surveys are the most commonly used quantitative methods, with experimental designs being infrequently employed. In the realm of qualitative methods, qualitative content analysis and interviews enjoy popularity. For temporal trends, the findings from Hanusch and Vos (2020) suggest a growing popularity of quantitative approaches over time. Interested in the methods used in our journal sample over time, we ask:

RQ3: What is the ratio of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches and how does it vary over time?

RQ4: What methodological inquiries are most commonly used and how do they vary over time?

Geographical Focus and Number of Compared Cases

Moving to the concrete cases under the study, two variables are typically analyzed in meta-research studies (1) the geographical scope of comparison cases, and (2) the number of cases compared. Comparative studies have largely focused on Western Europe and North America, with the United Kingdom, United States, and Germany as the most frequently studied countries, and China as the most common non-Western case (Hanusch & Vos, 2020; So, 2017; Volk, 2022).

Findings on the trend toward greater international diversity in comparative cases are mixed. Esser and Hanitzsch (2012) identified four paradigms over the past eight decades, all biased toward Western countries. Recent assessments, including Ang and colleagues (2019), suggest that global equality in comparative studies has not yet been achieved. Similarly, Hanusch and Vos (2020) found that the proportion of studies comparing only Western countries increased slightly from 51% in 2000–2005 to 55% in 2011–2015.

Studies on the number of compared cases in communication research show a shift from small (two to three cases) to larger case comparisons globally (Mancini & Hallin, 2012). Zhao and Liu (2020) report 36% of single country, 47% small-N (two to nine cases), and 13% large-N (10+ cases) studies. Analyzing 85 articles published from 1979 to 2014, So (2017) finds that the mean number of countries is 7.2 (median = 4, max = 31), with 52% of them having four or fewer participating cases, 22% having five to nine cases involved, and 26% having 10 or more cases. The sample (n = 335, published 2005–2019) analyzed by Volk (2022) observed a similar trend with a mean of 6.62 countries, 32.5% of studies comparing two cases, and 12.5% comparing more than 10 cases. Hanusch and Vos (2020) noted a decline in two-case studies and an increase in studies with four or more cases. Studying publication patterns about cases over time for our journal sample, we ask:

RQ5: What is the geographic scope of compared cases and how does it vary over time?

RQ6: What is the average number of compared cases and how does it vary over time?

Authorship Structure

An increase in the number of co-authors, and a general internationalization of research in recent decades is well documented, especially for the social sciences (Henriksen, 2016). For communication science, the mean number of co-authors rose from 1.5 in 1980 to 2.2 in 2013[2]; the share of international co-authorship in communication science increased from about 2.5% to about 12.5% in the same time period (Henriksen, 2016). Most articles are authored by American and Western European scholars (Demeter, 2017, 2019). Assessments of authorship structures for the subfield of comparative research attest to similar trends. Empirical studies count an average of 2.2 (So, 2017) to 2.91 authors per publication (Volk, 2022). Over time, single-authored articles have decreased, whereas multiauthored ones have increased (Hanusch & Vos, 2020).

Comparative communication research has been characterized as being conducted increasingly by international research teams and transnational collaborations (Norris, 2009). The share of studies with international co-authors has grown, with 26.3% of studies in Hanusch and Vos (2020) and 36.3% in Volk (2022) featuring international teams.

Zooming in on the geographic spread of authors, So (2017) found that European-based authors dominate comparative research, followed by those from the United States. In Volk's (2022) sample, 48.6% of studies were authored solely by Europeans, particularly from Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, and Switzerland. The share of U.S.-affiliated authors has declined over time (Hanusch & Vos, 2020; Volk, 2022). Studying authorship patterns for our sample, we ask:

RQ7: What is the authorship structure and how does it vary over time?

Different Journal Sampling Strategies

The findings of any meta-research study naturally depend on the selection of journals sampled. Previous meta-research studies typically included journals in their sample that are generally relevant in communication science and that represent specialized journals that have an explicit international or comparative focus (e.g., *International Journal of Communication*, *International Communication Gazette*) or that highlight a specific region (e.g., *African Journalism Studies*). They selected these journals to cover the field of comparative research in its thematic breadth (Chang, 2001; So, 2017; Volk, 2022) or to map the field specifically for comparative studies (Hanusch & Vos, 2020; Zhao & Liu, 2020). So far, none of the meta-research studies described the publication patterns of comparative research for a selection of the highest-ranked journals in communication science. Interested in knowing how certain publication patterns are unique to journals specialized for an international and/or comparative perspective versus the highest-

[2] This estimation is also reflected in the mean number of authors of communication papers, where a mean number of authors is 2.1, which we calculated from the frequencies reported by Demeter (2019, p. 49).

ranked journals, we analyze the previously discussed aspects (i.e., salience, topics, methods, cases, authorship structure) separately for two different types of journal sampling logics. Therefore, we ask:

RQ8: Comparing the highest-ranked journals in our field with the specialized journals, how does the salience and nature of comparative communication research in terms of the variables mentioned in RQ1–RQ7 differ on average and over time?

Secondary Data Use and Geographic Patterns

It is likely that our investigations for the geographic spread of investigated cases and authorship will reflect the strong dominance of certain Western countries, as already found in previous meta-research studies (Hanusch & Vos, 2020; So, 2017; Volk, 2022). As resources shape the potential of comparative research (especially large-scale comparative research), we seek to investigate how the geographic scope of cases and authors is related to the use of secondary data. Arguably, the setting for comparative research has never been better, with increasing digital availability of communication content data, the easy and versatile use of large-scale online surveys, and the existence of large-scale comparative survey programs (*European Social Survey*, *Worlds of Journalism Study*, *World Values Survey*, etc.). However, geographically speaking, not all of the academic communities might profit equally from such availability. Western countries might be overrepresented in the data itself, thus reinforcing existing geographical divides. Placing a focus on the use of secondary data in comparative studies (studies excluded in the meta-research study by Volk, 2022), we investigate how the use of secondary data is related to case and authorship patterns:

RQ9: How is the dominance of certain Western countries (in respect to cases and authors) related to the use of secondary data?

Data and Method

We rely on a content analysis of a corpus of English-language research articles published between 2003 and 2021 in 32 communication science journals. This decision reflects that most top-ranked journals in the field publish articles in English. To identify these journals, we followed two paths. First, we selected the 20 highest-ranked communication science journals based on their Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for the years 2003–2019.[3] We will refer to this group of journals as "highest-ranked journals." Second, we selected 14 communication science journals that are either regional journals or have an explicit focus on comparative and international research.[4] We will subsequently refer to them as "comparative-specialized journals" (two journals are part of both groups: see Table 1 for a list of the selected journals). All article-level metadata from these journals were automatically collected from Web of Science by querying all published articles from January 2003 to December 2021 in each of the journals. Automatically collected article-level metadata

[3] For each year within this period, we compiled a list of communication science journals ranked by JIF and assigned points from 20 (for rank 1) to 1 (for rank 20). We then summed the points across all years and considered the 20 journals with the highest total ranking score for this research.

[4] Journals were included in this group if their titles or "about" pages contained terms such as "International," "African," "Asian," or "European," indicating a clear emphasis on comparative or regional studies.

include journal name, year, issue, article title, author information, abstract, page numbers, citation counts, and DOI. The metadata were collected for *N* = 29,992 articles. This set was reduced to *N* = 23,189, excluding book reviews, editorials, or retractions.

Table 1. List of Journals and Breakdowns of Articles.

Rank	Journal	Type [1]	*N* Comparative [2]	*N* Total [3]
1	*Journal of Communication*	HR	40	834
2	*Human Communication Research*	HR	10	430
3	*Public Opinion Quarterly*	HR	23	767
4	*Communication Research*	HR	37	747
5	*Political Communication*	HR	40	500
6	*Public Understanding of Science*	HR	56	914
7	*Communication Theory*	HR	0	398
8	*Media Psychology*	HR	10	465
9	*New Media & Society*	HR	87	1,869
10	*Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*	HR	19	617
11	*Journal of Health Communication*	HR	24	1,718
12	*Research on Language and Social Interaction*	HR	0	347
13	*Health Communication*	HR	28	2,203
14	*Science Communication*	HR	16	465
15	*Communication Monographs*	HR	8	441
16	*International Journal of Press-Politics*	HR & CS	96	490
17	*Journal of Advertising*	HR	22	652
18	*Cyberpsychology Behavior & Social Networking*	HR	23	1,266
19	*International Journal of Advertising*	HR & CS	32	620
20	*Journal of Advertising Research*	HR	10	675
	African Journalism Studies	CS	7	193
	Asian Journal of Communication	CS	48	433
	Chinese Journal of Communication	CS	25	331
	Comunicar	CS	10	687
	European Journal of Communication	CS	43	494
	International Communication Gazette	CS	89	345
	International Journal of Business Communication	CS	12	230
	International Journal of Communication	CS	148	2,279
	International Journal of Conflict Management	CS	16	421
	International Journal of Mobile Communications	CS	17	490
	International Journal of Public Opinion Research	CS	69	590
	Journal of African Media Studies	CS	11	278
Total			1,074	23,189

Note. The first 20 journals are listed according to the number of times they have been ranked in the top 20. From 2003 to 2019, the highest-ranked (HR) journals were predominantly classified as Q1 journals, with some occasionally ranked as Q2 in certain years.
[1] HR = Highest-ranked journal, CS = Comparative-specialized journal
[2] Number of comparative research articles published between January 2003 and December 2021.
[3] Number of research articles published between January 2003 and December 2021.

Article Selection

We used a three-step procedure to select only articles that fit our definition of a comparative communication research article: those that employed empirical data from at least two geographical units and conducted a comparison between these units through statistical analysis or descriptive narrative elaborations. The first step involved the application of a validated search string.[5] To validate the search string, one of the researchers manually coded 400 article titles and abstracts, identifying 22 of the 400 as having a comparative scope. Comparison of the manual coding results against the automatic retrieval of the search string yielded the recall value of 0.96 and 0.47 for precision. The high recall score is of particular importance here, because in this first step we want to exclude as few relevant articles as possible. The search string then was applied to each title and abstract of the entire corpus of the articles. The number of articles retrieved (i.e., determined as comparative) with this search string was *N* = 4,404. As a second step and in response to the low precision value, three researchers manually checked all 4,404 abstracts to identify false positives (Krippendorff's alpha = 1, based on a set of 100 abstracts). As a result, the sample of relevant articles was reduced to *N* = 1,473 articles. Next, we repeated the manual screening but based on the full text, where five coders reduced the sample of relevant articles to *N* = 1,074. The coders screened the articles in respect to two aspects. First, they assessed whether the articles incorporated empirical data and conducted an analysis involving a minimum of two geographical units (Krippendorff's alpha = .64, based on a set of 20 articles). Second, the evaluation considered whether an explicit comparison between at least two geographical units was made using statistical analysis or explicit descriptive narrative elaborations (Krippendorff's alpha = .66, based on a set of 20 articles). Both criteria were required to consider the article as relevant. Below, we present our analysis focusing on the final set of 1,074 comparative research articles; yet where appropriate, we also present our results including other noncomparative articles as well for drawing appropriate comparisons (total *N* of articles = 23,189). A list of journals and breakdowns of articles is presented in Table 1.

Measures

The *N* = 1,074 comparative research articles that returned from the three-step procedure were manually coded by five coders in respect to topics, methods, cases, authorship, and data source type. First,

[5] The search string includes the keywords "countries, comparative, cross.(nation|region|countr), across the globe, around the world," and "[0–9].(country|country|nation)\\s.," the names of countries (e.g., Spain), languages (e.g., Spanish), as well as nominations that refer to the territorial origin of a person (e.g., Spaniards) for about 300 different marco-level contexts. An article is automatically coded as a comparative article if at least two of such territorial names are mentioned. The search string is provided in the OSF Repository: https://osf.io/exgd2/

each article was assigned the most dominant topic area based on the domains identified by Song, Eberl, and Eisele (2020), which include: crisis/public relations, advertising, health communication, interpersonal communication, communication technology/mobile communication, race/gender/intersectionality, political communication, journalism, science communication, children and media, media psychology, cross-cultural/cross-national communication,[6] organizational communication, and other. Second, we recorded each article's methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) and types of inquiry (e.g., content analysis, surveys, experiments, interviews/focus groups, observations), allowing multiple answers. Third, the geographical focus was determined by coding the type of geographic unit studied. Categories included supranational region, country, none of the above, or a combination of these. As most articles compared countries, only the names of the countries were recorded. The number of geographic units compared was also counted. Fourth, to analyze authorship, the affiliation or affiliations (e.g., university or other institution) of each author were recorded by scanning the article's front page or author information section, using the article's metadata or conducting online searches. The country associated with each author's affiliation(s) was noted. Fifth, the type of data source used was categorized as either original data, secondary data, or a mix of both.

The coder training was performed online with multiple test-coding rounds. After each round, intercoder reliability was calculated, discussed, and the codebook was refined. A final intercoder reliability test on eight articles indicated good joint understanding of most variables in terms of Krippendorff's alpha values. Table 2 provides the results from the last round of test coding, and the final intercoder reliability test.

Table 2. Intercoder Reliability (N = 5 Coders).

	Final Test Coding [a]		Final Reliability Test [b]	
Variable	*N* articles	Krippendorff's alpha	*N* articles	Krippendorff's alpha
Topic area	20	.63	8	.59
Methodological approach	20	.87	8	1
Methodological inquiries	20	.62	8	.90
Number of cases	20	.84	8	.87
Geographic scope of cases	20	1	8	1
Names of cases	20	.53	8	.94
Affiliation location(s) of each author	20	.77	8	.84
Data source type	20	.77	8	.86

Note.
[a] Five coders independently coded the same set of 20 articles. Instances of disagreement were discussed, and clarifications to the coding rules were subsequently added to the codebook.
[b] Five coders coded the same set of eight articles independently.

The variable with lower reliability, topic area, was more challenging to code because coders had to determine the most dominant topic per article. The mitigation strategy implemented to address the lower reliability was that coders were advised to record a second topical area if they were not sure which one is

[6] We used the code "cross-cultural / cross-national communication" for research on international and intercultural communication, including transnational media, cultural identity (e.g., European or Asian), global media flows, and the impact of transnational television on identity and country reputations.

the most dominant one. A final review was conducted by one author, who manually checked all articles where two topics were assigned, resolving any discrepancies through discussion with a coauthor.

The OSF Repository[7] includes the codebook with more detailed descriptions of the variables and the meta-information of the N = 1,074 articles identified as relevant.

Results

Salience

RQ1 examines the salience of comparative research and its changes over time, although H1 predicts that the relative share of comparative communication research has increased over time. Overall, we found comparative articles among all research articles published in the selected 32 communication journals to be very rare, ranging from 2.07% (year 2003) to 6.25% (year 2019), with a mean proportion of comparative articles of 4.29% relative to total articles published over the 19-year time span. Despite an overall low salience of comparative communication research, we found relative shares to be slightly increasing over time as depicted in Figure 1 below. A nonparametric test of a linear trend in time series using the Mann-Kendall test found that the combined shares of comparative articles monotonically and significantly increased over time, τ = .614, S = 105.00, Z = 3.638, df = 19, p < .001. Therefore, our H1 was supported.

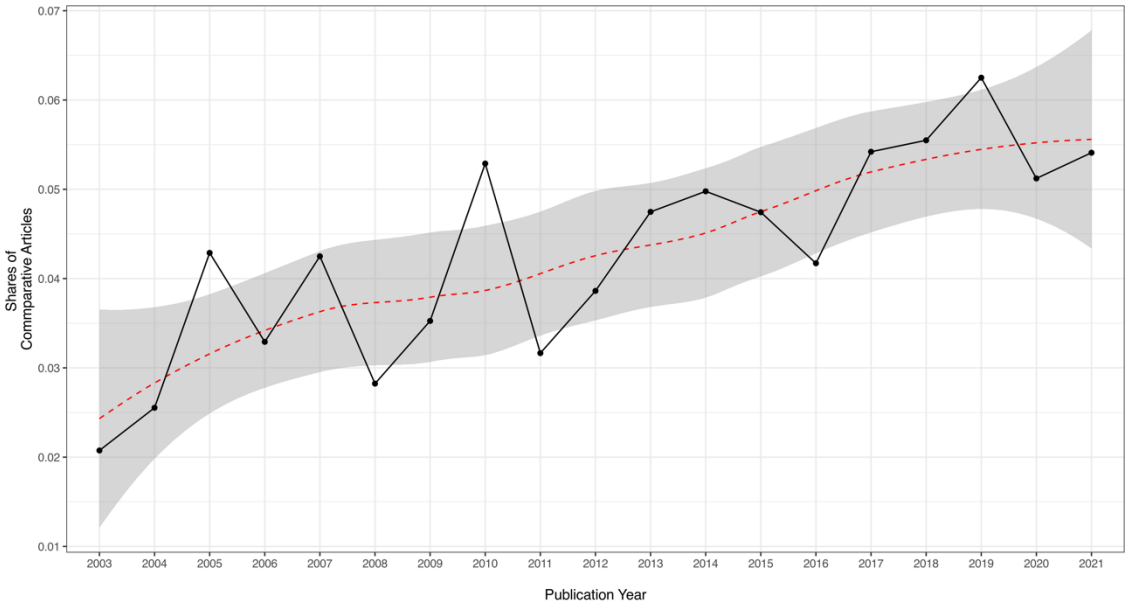

Figure 1. Shares of comparative research over time, all samples.

[7] https://osf.io/exgd2/

Topic Areas

RQ2 examines the most frequently studied topics in comparative communication scholarship and how these have evolved over time. To investigate this, we coded up to two specific topical areas per article. Among the articles analyzed, 213 comparative studies were found to include two topics (N = 1,074). Combining the first and second topical area, the most studied topic was political communication (42.27%, relative to all comparative articles), followed by journalism (15.64%), and media psychology (8.85%). Figure 2 below shows the overall prevalence of comparative research articles by topic in respect to all comparative articles.

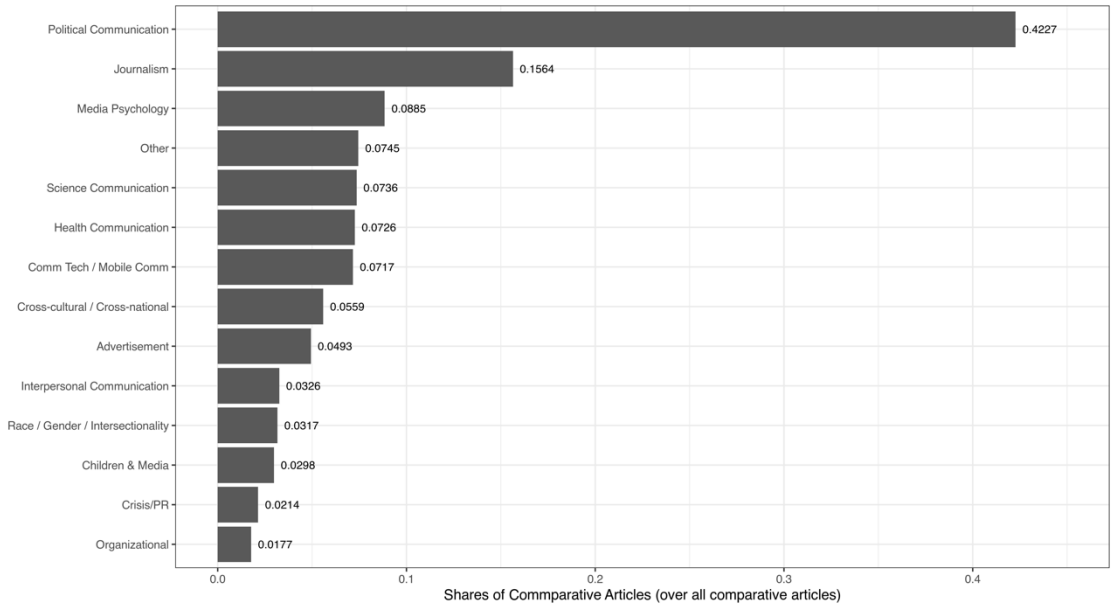

Figure 2. Shares of comparative articles by research topics.

We also formally tested whether time trends in respect to the visibility of comparative research are indeed similar or different across different topical subfields. Using generalized estimating equations (GEE), we confirmed the presence of significant linear and increasing trends in shares of comparative research (b = 0.0003, robust SE = 0.0001, p < .001). Interacting this linear trend with indicator dummies for topical subfields (using "communication technology/mobile communication" as the reference category), we found that political communication (topic 7: b = 0.0016, robust SE = 0.0003, p < .001) increased significantly over time relative to other subfields, although the reference category itself also showed an upward trend (b = 0.0003, robust SE = 0.0001, p < .001). In contrast, interpersonal communication (b = −0.0004, robust SE = 0.0001, p < .001), race/gender/intersectionality (b = −0.0002, robust SE = 0.0001, p < .001), and organizational communication (b = −0.0003, robust SE = 0.0001, p < .001) showed weaker growth or even

decline over time.[8] Table A1 in the OSF Online Repository[9] provides the details about the GEE analysis, Figure A1 the frequency per topic, per year.

Methodological Approaches and Inquiries

RQ3 examines the relative prevalence of quantitative versus qualitative methodological approaches within comparative scholarship and their potential changes over time, although RQ4 explores the most commonly used methods within each category both cross-sectionally and over time. For RQ3, we observed that most comparative articles were quantitatively oriented (N = 815, 75.88%), with approximately a quarter relying on qualitative approaches (N = 181, 16.85%), and a smaller proportion employing mixed-method approaches (N = 78, 7.26%). Breaking down these proportions by year, Figure 3 illustrates the relative share of methodological approaches over time. A chi-square test of independence found no significant relationship between publication year and the relative shares of different methodological approaches, $X^2(54) = 1.084$, $p > .05$. Additionally, Mann-Kendall tests indicated no monotonic trend in any of the methodological orientations over time.

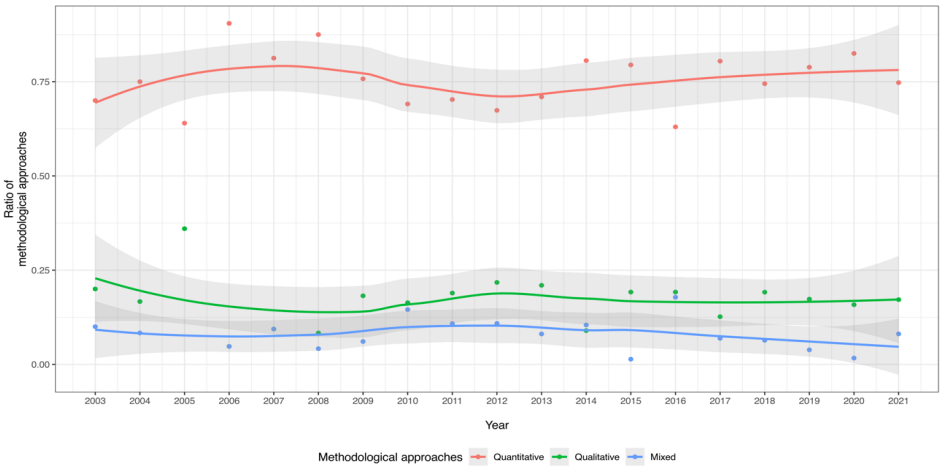

Figure 3. Relative shares of different methodological orientations over time.

[8] Since GEE models with indicator dummies indicate only whether the rates of growth (or decline) over time differ significantly from the chosen reference category (in this case, the communication technology subfield), we additionally performed a Mann-Kendall test, a bootstrap-based nonparametric inferential test, to assess pairwise (dis)similarities in linear time trends across different subfields. We find that *crisis/public relations*, *advertisement*, *interpersonal communication*, *race/gender/intersectionality*, *science communication*, *children & media*, *cross-cultural/national*, and *organizational communication* topics show significantly different and negative time trends than the rest of the topics combined, whereas *political communication* and *journalism* topics were significantly more likely to appear than the rest of the topics combined. See Figure A2 in the OSF Online Repository: https://osf.io/exgd2/

[9] https://osf.io/exgd2/

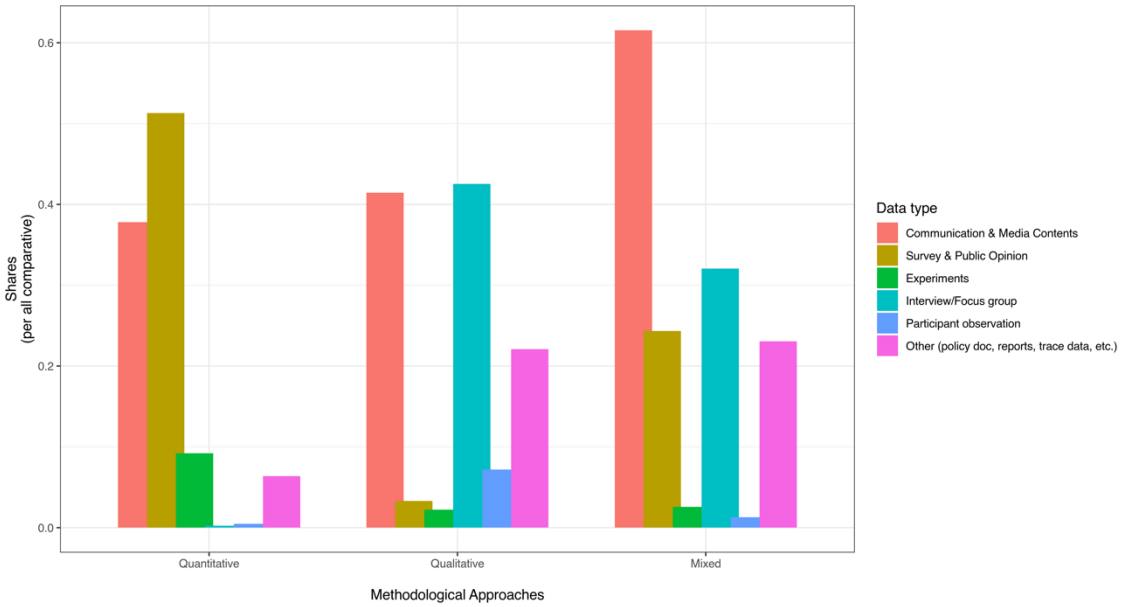

Figure 4. Relative shares of different methods of inquiries.

About the methods of inquiry across different methodological orientations (RQ4, Figure 4), content analysis was the most common method in mixed-method studies (61.53%), followed by interviews/focus groups (32.05%). For qualitative studies, content analysis (41.43%) and interviews/focus groups (42.54%) were most frequent, whereas in quantitative studies, surveys (51.28%) were the most common, with content analysis as the second-most frequent method (37.79%). Figure A3 in the OSF Online Repository[10] shows the frequencies per year. Both the chi-square and Mann-Kendall tests showed no significant changes in the relative use of these methods over time, with their proportions remaining stable.

Geographical Focus and Number of Compared Cases

Countries were the primary geographical units of comparison in nearly all studies, with supranational regions rarely represented. About geographical scope (RQ5), the United States was the most frequently compared country (*N* = 519), followed by the United Kingdom (*N* = 368) and Germany (*N* = 345). As shown in Figure 5, no single Global South country appeared in the top 30 most compared countries over the 19-year period, reflecting the strong dominance of the United States and Western countries in communication research (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIlwain, 2018) and social sciences more broadly (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Over-time trends in the relative shares of countries compared within each geographical region (based on OECD's 7-region specification[11]) showed no significant changes,

[10] https://osf.io/exgd2/

[11] These are: East Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, North America, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

according to Mann-Kendall tests. This suggests that the United States and Western dominance in communication research is historically entrenched and stable.

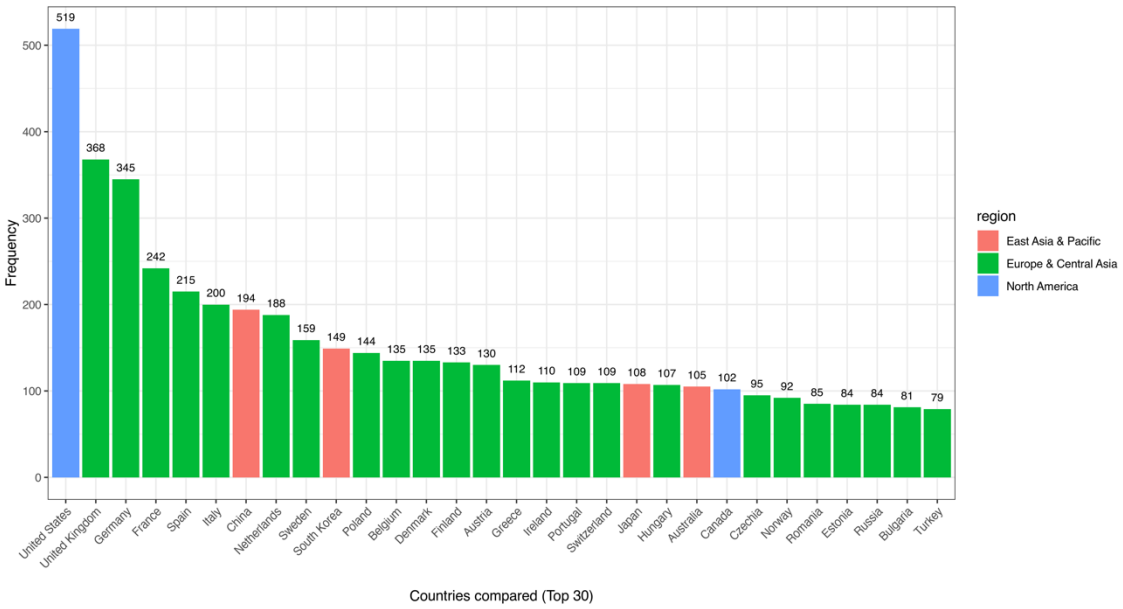

Figure 5. Countries most frequently compared.

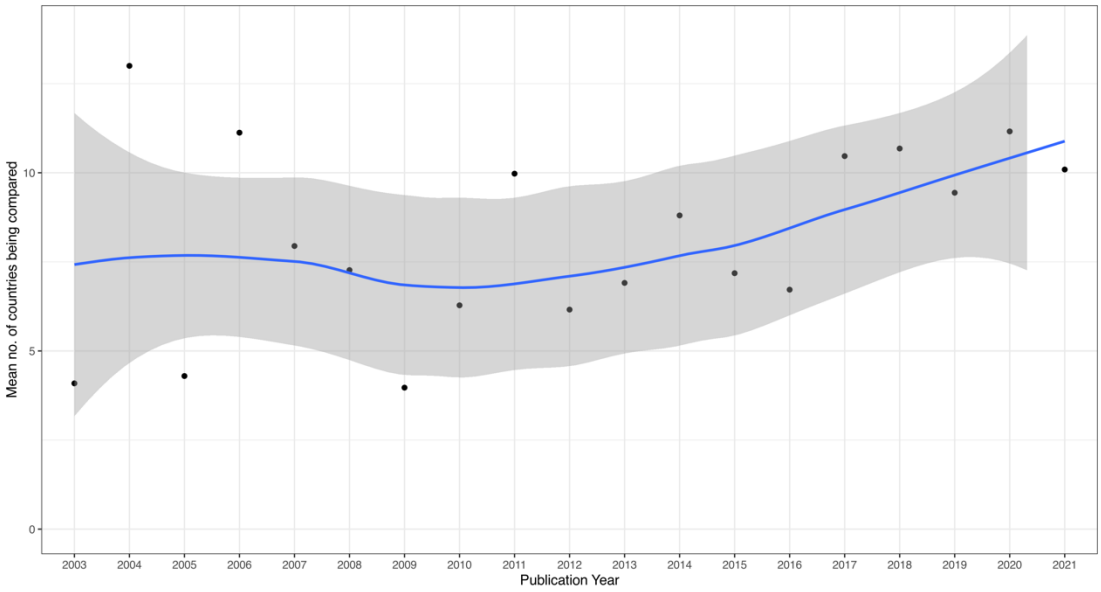

Figure 6. Mean number of countries being compared over time.

With the number of cases (RQ6), comparative research typically involved three countries (median = 3), with the mean number of countries being higher (M = 8.71, SD = 18.13) because of a few studies comparing most countries. Over time, the average number of countries examined slightly increased, as shown in Figure 6. The Mann-Kendall test revealed a marginally significant linear trend (S = 47, Z = 1.64, df = 19, p = 0.05).

Authorship Structure

RQ7 examines the authorship structure of comparative communication research. About 40% of studies had multiple authors (at least two), with the average number of authors being 2.73 (SD = 2.11), and authors typically from 1.64 different geographical locations (SD = 1.26). Most papers were authored by two (N = 357) or three (N = 242) researchers, or a single author (N = 249), with most having one institutional affiliation (N = 629), followed by two (N = 333), or three (N = 66) locations. This trend appeared to be gradually increasing over time, as shown in Figure 7. Mann-Kendall tests provided strong evidence of this trend for the number of authors (S = 110, Z = 3.85, df = 19, p < .001), articles with at least two authors (S = 81, Z = 2.83, df = 19, p < .01), and the number of author affiliations (S = 115, Z = 4.02, df = 19, p < .001).

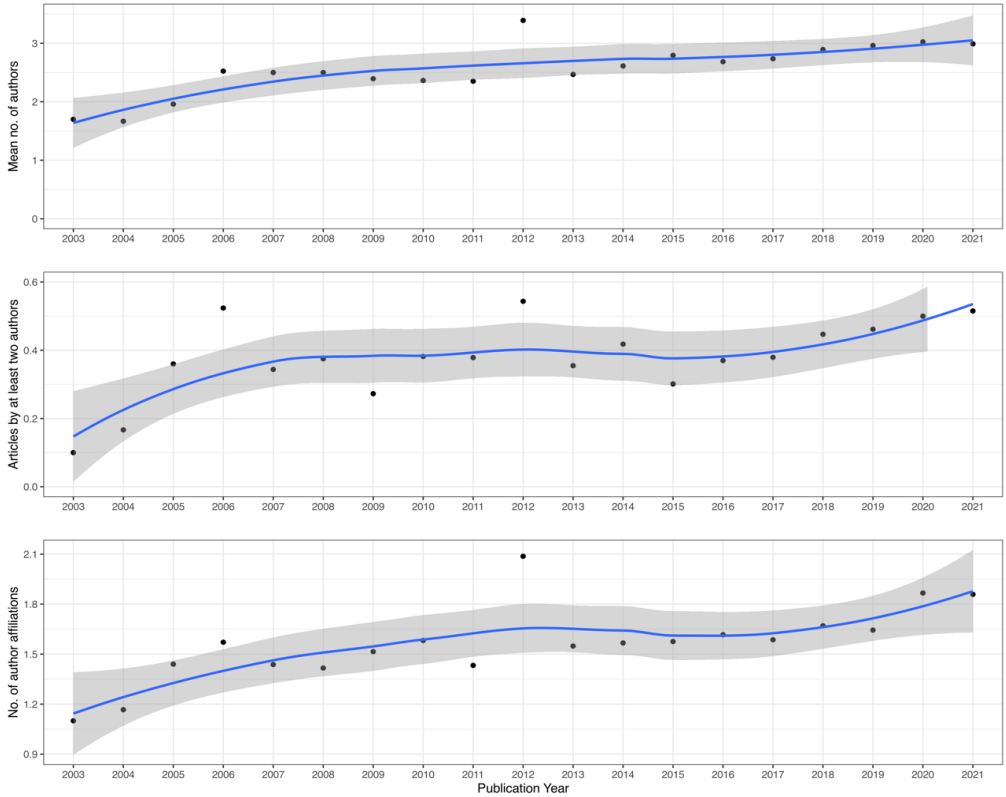

Figure 7. Authorship structure in comparative communication research over time.

When examining the geographical spread of author locations, we observed a strong dominance of Western countries (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands) with notable representation from East Asia and the Pacific (e.g., South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore) among the top 20 author locations. However, only one country from the Middle East (Israel) and no countries from the Global South were represented in author locations (see Figure 8).

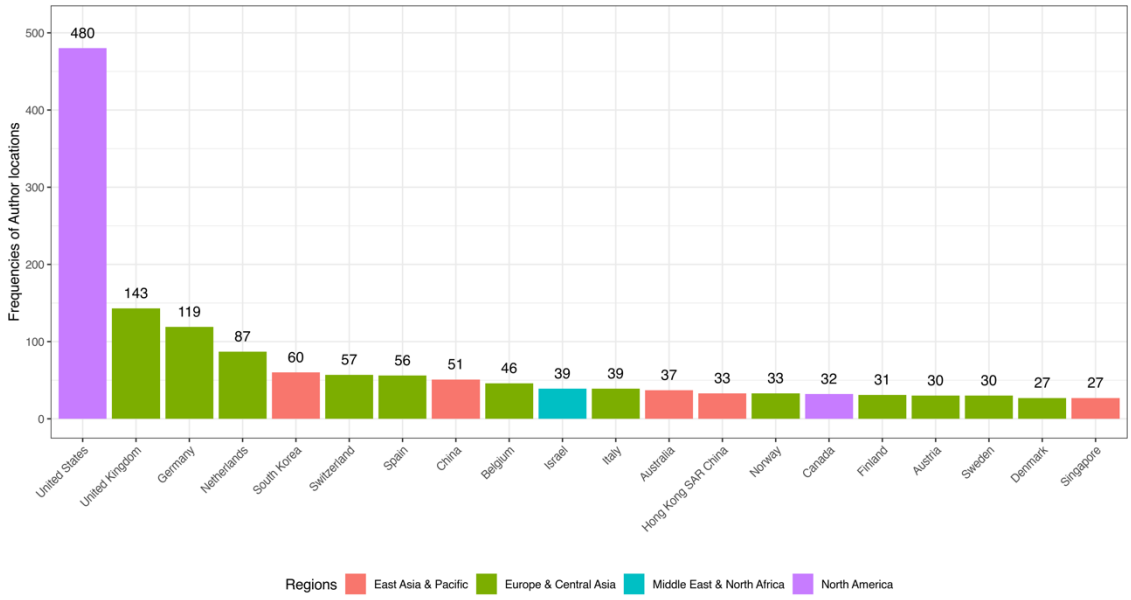

Figure 8. Frequencies of authors' institutional locations.

Analyzing time trends in author locations with the Mann-Kendall test, we found significant upward trends over time for the United States (S = 137, Z = 4.77, df = 19, p < .001), United Kingdom (S = 109, Z = 3.83, df = 19, p < .001), and The Netherlands (S = 53, Z = 1.84, df = 19, p < .05). Figure A4 in the OSF Online Repository[12] shows the frequencies per year.

Highest-Ranked Journals vs. Comparative-Specialized Journal Comparisons

RQ8 investigates whether patterns in salience, topics, method, cases, and authorship structure differ on average and over time between the field's highest-ranked journals and comparative-specialized journals.

As shown in Figure 9, the share of comparative articles in both highest-ranked and comparative-specialized journals showed a slightly increasing trend over time, with the upward trend being somewhat stronger in comparative-specialized journals. However, it's important to note that the overall share of comparative articles in this type of journal remains relatively low, ranging from as low as 0.4% in 2003 to

[12] https://osf.io/exgd2/

as high as 4% in 2021. This is surprising given the nature of our sample, where we would expect a stronger presence of comparative scholarship.

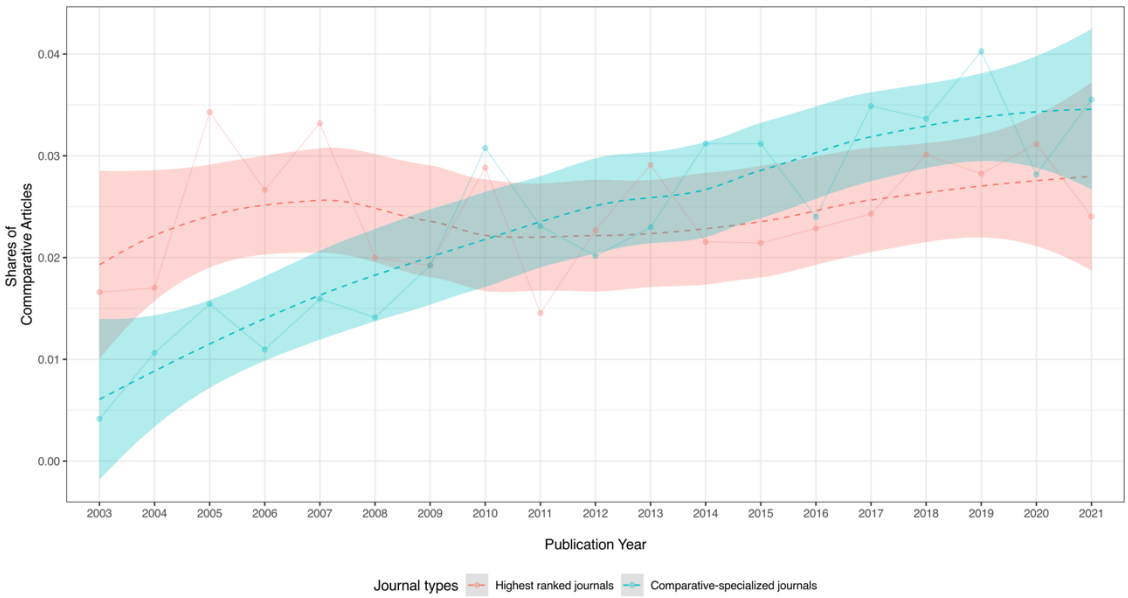

Figure 9. Shares of comparative research over time by journal type.

Our analysis showed no significant difference in the salience of research topics between journal types. Both the Spearman rank correlation (S = 353.16, p = .442) and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test (W = 100, p = .945) indicated that the relative visibility of 14 research topics is consistent across the highest-ranked and comparative-specialized journals throughout the entire period.[13] Additionally, the relative visibility of topics remained stable over time.

Our findings showed no significant differences in the prevalence of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method approaches between the highest-ranked journals and comparative-specialized journals (W = 4, p = .827); neither did these patterns vary over time. Similarly, a paired-sample Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test revealed no significant differences in the distribution of methodological inquiries (e.g., content analysis, survey, experiment, interview, participant observation) between the two journal types (W = 126, p = .077), with this trend remaining consistent over time (all p > .13).

When comparing the top 30 most frequently analyzed countries, we found no evidence that the proportion of each country's representation (as a share of the total number of comparisons) differs between

[13] Although the parametric chi-squared test of independence based on raw counts finds the opposite evidence, $X^2(df = 13) = 196.88$, $p < .001$, it is likely that "relative" visibility of each research topics should be understood in relation to the total number of comparative articles in each journal type, which makes the comparison of mere raw counts render largely inappropriate.

the highest-ranked journals and comparative-specialized journals (V = 255, p = .322).[14] This lack of difference holds across most publication years, except for 2008, where we observed marginally significant differences. On average, studies in the highest-ranked journals included 9.48 countries (SD = 19.44), while those in comparative-specialized journals involved 7.8 countries (SD = 15.58). Overall, the average number of countries compared was significantly higher in the highest-ranked journals (V = 141, p = .032).

On average, articles in the highest-ranked journals were authored by 3.03 researchers (SD = 2.34) from 1.75 different geographical locations (SD = 1.47), whereas articles in the comparative-specialized journals were typically authored by 2.52 researchers (SD = 2.12) from 1.60 different geographical locations (SD = 1.31). However, we found no evidence that the average number of authors or the proportion of international coauthored studies varied across years between the highest-ranked journals and comparative-specialized journals.

Finally, when comparing the geographical distribution of author locations across years by journal type, we observed notable similarities in the regional representation of the top 20 countries. Both highest-ranked and comparative-specialized journals were predominantly authored by researchers from North America and Europe. In contrast, authors from the Global South, the Middle East, and Africa were significantly underrepresented, as shown in Figure 10 below.

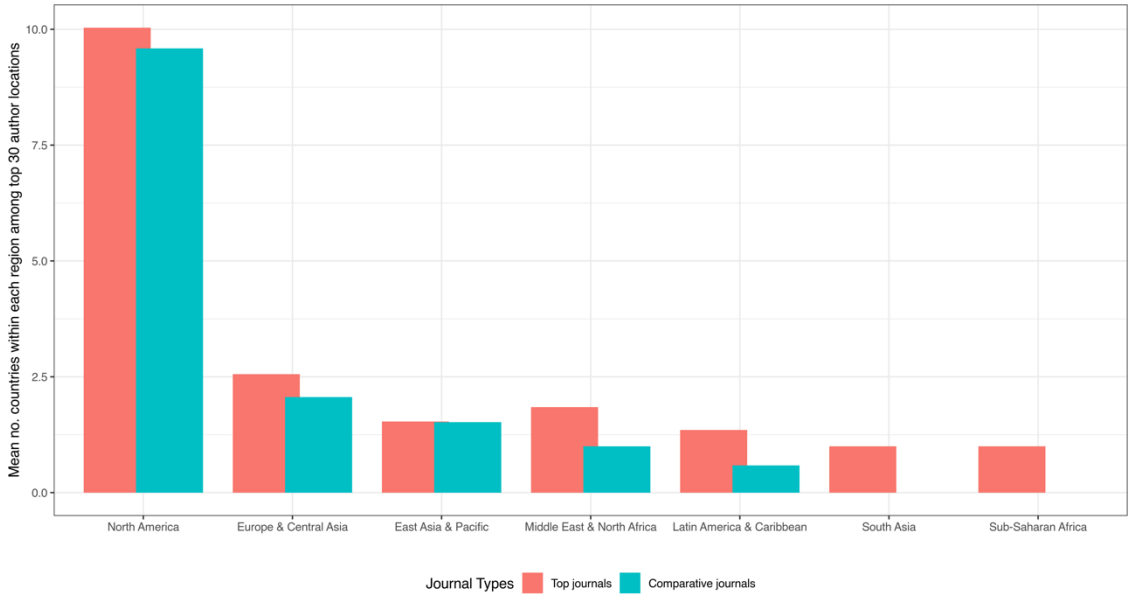

Figure 10. Mean frequency of author locations within each region, among top 30 locations.

[14] Given the difference in the total number of comparisons in the highest-ranked versus comparative-specialized journals, we used proportional measures, normalizing ratios relative to the total comparisons within each journal type, rather than raw counts.

Secondary Data Use and Geographic Patterns

In RQ9, we examine how the dominance of certain Western countries (in terms of cases and author locations) relates to the use of secondary data. To study this relationship, we classified all comparative research articles based on their data source type: original data (N = 874, 81.37%), secondary data (N = 173, 16.10%), or a mix of both (N = 27, 2.51%). Given that the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany were the most frequently analyzed cases and author locations, we define these as "dominant" countries and compare the relative frequencies of dominant versus nondominant countries by data source type, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Breakdown of the Author Locations and Comparison Countries per Primary Data Source.

Country types (row-wise % in parentheses)	Author locations			Comparison cases		
	Original	Secondary	Mixed	Original	Secondary	Mixed
Dominant countries (United States, United Kingdom, Germany)	615 (82.77%)	113 (15.21%)	15 (2.01%)	940 (76.86%)	252 (20.61%)	31 (2.53%)
Other countries	858 (83.71%)	133 (12.97%)	34 (3.31%)	3,467 (53.55%)	2,725 (42.09%)	282 (4.35%)
Sum	1,473	246	49	4,407	2,977	313

A series of chi-square tests of independence showed that the distribution of author locations does not significantly differ across primary data source type, X^2 (df = 2) = 4.208, p = .12. This suggests that authors from dominant countries are equally likely to use secondary data as those from nondominant countries. However, the distribution of dominant versus nondominant countries in comparison cases did significantly differ across data source type, X^2 (df = 2) = 228.77, p < .001. Nondominant countries were more likely to be analyzed using secondary data, possibly because of resource constraints for original data collection and the opportunities secondary data provide to engage with less frequently studied cases.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our meta-research study set out to map the comparative approach in communication and their dynamics from 2003 to 2021. Although many prominent scholars in our field have pointed to the importance of comparative research, we found that its presence is limited. Our findings show that this type of research is still relatively rare, with an average share of 4.29% of articles taking a comparative angle over a 19-year time span. The temporal analysis indicates that comparative communication research is gradually gaining popularity, but given the low absolute numbers, it may take some time to become truly prominent. Next to the rather low visibility of the comparative approach in communication science, our findings further indicate that comparative communication research is focused on certain topical areas and geographical regions.

Topically, and as expected, political communication stands out with a high and increasing share of comparative studies, likely because of its intersection with political science and the availability of country-level data, especially within the European Union (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2012). Additionally, journalism studies showed a visible share of comparative studies, likely because of research on differing journalistic cultures and practices. However, other areas, such as cross-cultural communication, expected to be popular (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012), remain underrepresented, with only 6% of comparative studies focused on this topic. Overall, the popularity of comparative research is concentrated in just a few subfields of communication science.

Geographically, we observe a clear link between the analyzed cases and authorship locations, with the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany dominating both. This indicates a narrow spatial focus in comparative research, both in terms of countries selected and author institutions. However, there are differences in the geographical composition of the frequently compared countries (Figure 5) and author institutions (Figure 8). Countries such as Poland, Greece, Hungary, Czechia, Romania, Estonia, Russia, and Turkey are included in the comparisons, yet none are represented prominently in the author locations. Most of these countries are from central and Eastern Europe, the semiperiphery of Western Europe. This suggests that although these countries are often chosen as subjects for comparison, scholars from these regions are seldom given a voice, remaining objects of Western analysis rather than active contributors. Comparative research generally involves more authors on average (about three) compared with general communication research (about two: Demeter, 2019; Henriksen, 2016). This trend reflects the evolving nature of communication science, where both the average number of authors and the number of cases compared have been increasing in recent years (Henriksen, 2016).

Overall, although the slowly growing attention to comparative approaches in communication gives reason for some optimism, it is clear that its visibility is relatively low. Our results also highlight a lack of topical and geographical diversity in comparative communication science. When comparative research is conducted, it reflects the traditional power imbalances, with a focus on certain regions and topics. This limited approach fails to fully leverage the contextual variance that could be achieved through a more inclusive and global perspective. This is particularly concerning, as it prevents the discipline from testing the generalizability and boundaries of its theories and engaging in a truly transnational dialogue around shared theoretical and empirical questions (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Thus, although the prerequisites for comparative research have likely never been more favorable, and are in line with general trends in the field where also the contextually contingent nature of media effects is increasingly emphasized (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), we believe there is still significant room for growth. To truly understand how communication content and effects unfold across different contexts, and to deepen our understanding of both similarities and differences, more comparative research is essential.

Our study has limitations that future meta-research should address. First, we excluded comparative research published in book formats and non-English journal articles, which may lead to an overrepresentation of issues relevant to English-speaking countries and an underrepresentation of perspectives from regions where English is not the primary language, such as Latin America (Collyer, 2018). Additionally, although there are strong global incentives to publish in English-language journals,

structural barriers—such as limited resources and unequal access to publishing opportunities—create disparities, particularly affecting research from the Global South, where publishing in English is often less accessible (Demeter, 2020). These factors may influence the geographic diversity and cases studied in our sample. Additionally, our definition of comparative research was limited to comparisons across geographical units of analysis, excluding other conceptualizations, such as comparisons of language communities, which are important for studying online platforms (Matassi, & Boczkowski, 2021). Although funding sources were not a focus, they likely influence the geographic scope of authors and cases studied (Livingstone, 2003; Norris, 2009). Future research could examine how funding impacts research trends and geographical representation in comparative scholarship.

In conclusion, our analysis reveals limited visibility, as well as limited topical and geographic diversity, within comparative research. Given the globally interconnected nature of many media-related phenomena, this low visibility is concerning, suggesting that crucial contextual factors are often overlooked in communication research. Comparative research should therefore become a standard approach across fields beyond its current focus on political communication and journalism. For instance, the global scale of pandemics and the cross-border influence of international corporations underscore the essential role of comparative perspectives in fields like health communication and advertising. Comparative communication research currently stands as another subdiscipline dominated by Western Europe and the United States, reflecting the broader trends in communication science (Goyanes & Demeter, 2020). This dominance is especially concerning given the potential of comparative research to challenge what Demeter (2019) calls the "enormous predomination" (p. 47) of North American and Western European perspectives. Although simply increasing the volume of comparative research may not be a comprehensive solution to these structural issues, it is clear that concerted efforts are needed to shift this landscape. To foster a more inclusive future for comparative research, we propose actionable measures. First, more workshops and training programs on comparative research methodologies should highlight both challenges and opportunities. Examples are knowledge about how it enriches our understanding but also what challenges in terms of data collection, tool accessibility, and comparability exist (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017). Data collection challenges can be addressed by promoting open-access databases where global researchers can share data and tools, fostering transparency and inclusivity. Communication science must also support the development of tools for a wider range of languages, countering the dominance of English and other selected languages in NLP (Baden, Pipal, Schoonvelde, & van der Velden, 2022). Adapting computational text analysis methods for multilingual data sets offers a path toward more globally inclusive comparative research (Lind & Volk, forthcoming). Other measures include issuing special calls for papers on underrepresented regions, countries, and topics, and ensuring editorial boards of major journals are geographically diverse, with members from a broad range of countries and regions. Specifically for comparative research, a concrete action point is prioritizing collaborations with researchers from the studied countries. Journals and funders could incentivize diverse teams, aligning authorship with study regions to improve validity and diversity. Long-term, establishing funding programs for collaborations across regions could further support this goal (Fuchs & Qiu, 2018). We hope our meta-research study provides further justification and evidence for these steps in advancing the field.

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