



A content analysis of public relations literatures from 1999 to 2008 in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the content analysis method to review the research papers on public relations published in the past 10 years, concludes the current situation and trend of public relations research, and reveals the variations and laws of public relations research in China. In addition, this paper also compares the public relations literatures published in Mainland China with those in Taiwan, which benefits the understanding of the research situation and trend on public relations across the Strait.

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This study adopted the content analysis method to conduct an analysis of academic papers on public relations which are published in core journals retrieved in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database from 1999 to 2008. Through a comprehensive and systematic analysis, this paper finds some changes of research on public relations as well as some laws guiding the evolution. The content analysis method is a means to use statistics to show the results of text research. It has the characteristics of being objective, systematic, quantitative, and clearly descriptive. It requires researchers to code the sample, describe or analyze accurately and finally form quantitative numeral information. Features of the content analysis method and the processes it requires are consistent with this study's objective. With quantitative descriptions, content analysis of research papers published in the past 10 years can reveal how research on public relations evolves during this period.

Therefore, based on public relations literatures retrieved in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database (from 1999 to September 2008) and the Image System of Index to Chinese Periodical Literature (from R.O.C. 88 to R.O.C. 97), this study conducted cross-regional and cross-cultural comparisons to explore differences of public relations research between Mainland China and Taiwan. The sample chosen is representative and the quantitative analysis as well as qualitative analysis of these literatures can describe the theoretical evolution track of public relations research in the set period.

1. Total research situation analysis

Basically, the number of papers published each year during the period from 1999 to 2008 is on the increase. 2005 saw the largest growth rate (compared to 2004, an increase of 57 papers), and in recent years the speed of growth is gaining momentum. Because we have only the statistics of papers published in the first 7 months, shown in Fig. 1, there are quite fewer papers published yet in 2008 (Fig. 2).

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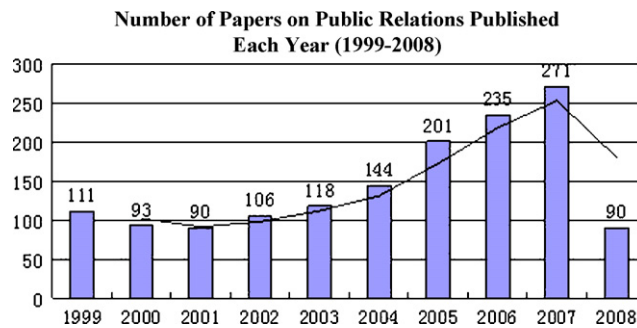


Fig. 1. Number of papers on public relations published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

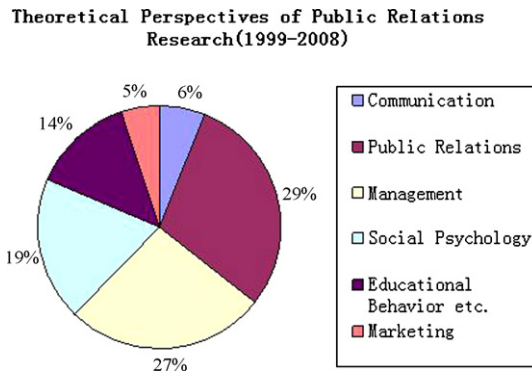


Fig. 2. Theoretical perspectives of public relations research in Mainland China during the 10 years from 1999 to 2008.

As for research angles of public relations, the most frequently employed are educational behaviors, management and social psychology, representing 29%, 27% and 19% of all the literatures, respectively. Data reveals, since 1994, papers on public relations with a management perspective had always been the biggest part. However, this kind of paper declined in numbers since 1999, and it accounts for only 27%, the second biggest part now. On the contrary, the number of papers with a public relations perspective has shown an upward trend and has surpassed that of papers with a management perspective, accounting for 29% of the whole. In addition, the proportion of papers with a social psychology perspective is also increasing year by year.

From Fig. 3, we can see obviously that in the past nearly 10 years, education and social science, economics and management and electronic information science are the three major hot fields of public relations, accounting for 41%, 34% and 19% of the whole, respectively. Education and social science field is the hottest research field, which is inseparable from the

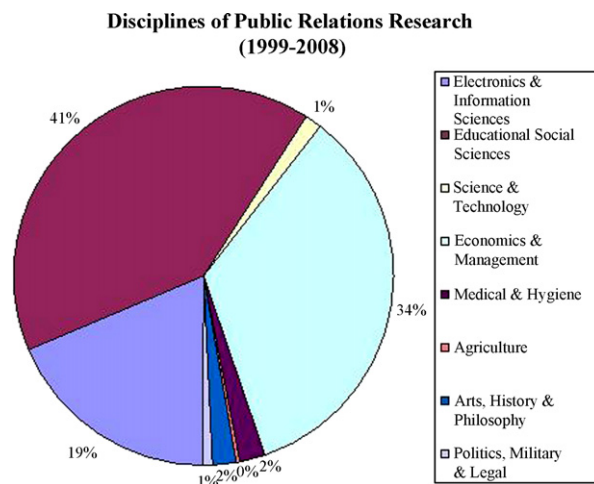


Fig. 3. Disciplines of public relations research in Mainland China during the 10 years from 1999 to 2008.

Research Themes of Public Relations (1999-2008)

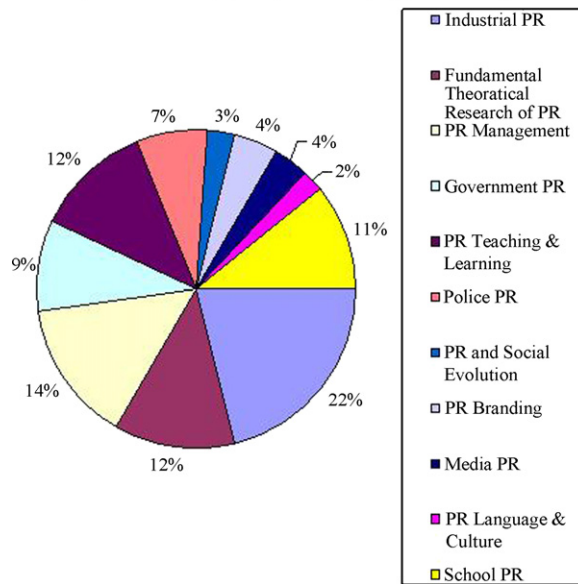


Fig. 4. Research themes of public relations literature in Mainland China during the period from 1999 to 2008.

national attention to the development of education, the strategic implementation of thriving the country through science and education, and the establishment of innovation-based society in recent years.

2. Research themes

Classified according to themes we found that, in recent years there is a clear trend: research themes has evolved from the past “one superpower and top three” into “one superpower and many powers” (Fig. 4).

Industrial PR (public relations) is still dominative. But with the growing number of research papers, research fields have also expanded, showing a trend of development together in many areas. For example, research on the police public relations and educational public relations has experienced an exceptionally rapid growth. This trend is closely associated with the increasing emphasis of building a harmonious society in China in recent years, as reflected in the high degree of attention for and discussion about the human-oriented thought in public relations.

Data shows that the number of research papers on the Police Public Relations gradually increased in recent years. And the growth rate keeps rising, particularly significant in the 2007 when papers of this category account for 7 percent of the total annual amount. This fully embodies the great concern of a harmonious society in recent years as the public security organs shoulder a special and important mission in the process of building a harmonious society and a harmonious community–police relations itself is an important part of a harmonious society. Therefore, the role of the police–community public relations in building a harmonious society, problems which the police–community public relations faces and the corresponding countermeasures become very important research topics. So we expect this trend will continue in the future for a long time and to be a new hot spot in public relations research (Fig. 5).

The number of research papers on Public Relations Teaching and Learning had basically not changed in the period from 99 to 03, but it started to increase rapidly from the beginning of 2004 and exceeded that on Government Public Relations in 2004

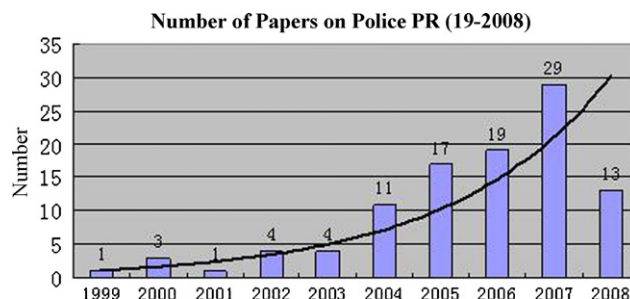


Fig. 5. Number of Papers on Police PR (1999–2008).

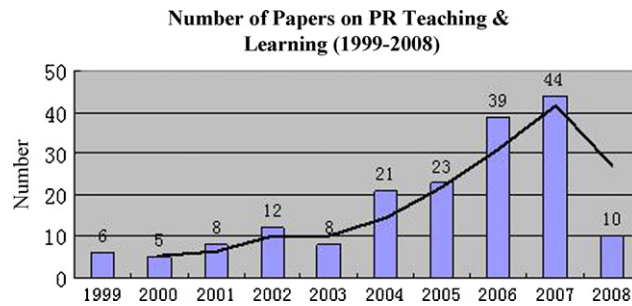


Fig. 6. Number of papers on PR teaching and learning published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

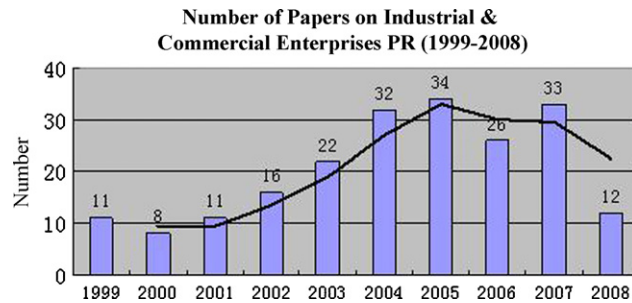


Fig. 7. Number of papers on industrial and commercial enterprises PR published in Mainland China each year from the period from 1999 to 2008.

to be the fourth largest research topic. This reflects the country's increasing emphasis on the establishment of innovative social. Cultivating new talent is the capital to create new social and creating "talent-oriented" universities, training professionals and serving the society from all aspects are the key to realize this objective. As an emerging field of talent training, Public Relations Teaching and Learning is gradually being incorporated into priority disciplines in various universities, which reflects that the entire education system is attaching great importance to create an innovative society and train creative talents (Fig. 6).

The number of research papers in the field of industrial and commercial enterprises had been on the rise before 2005, but it experienced a sharp decline in 2006, and according to Fig. 7, there seems to be a downward trend after 2005. Since industrial and commercial enterprises are traditional research fields of public relations, this phenomenon is worthy of further study and discussion.

As for governmental public relations field, literature in the past nearly 10 years showed a "atypical" serration, but it started to increase after 2004. Especially in 2007 it had a substantial increase. Since a series of major events occurred in 2008 are closely linked with the public relations, we cautiously forecast that the number of papers on governmental public relations should show a much greater upward trend (Fig. 8).

It is clear from Fig. 9 that in the past nearly a decade, papers on crisis management continued to increase. Content analysis shows that research papers on public relations crisis management mainly focused on three areas: corporate crisis management, government crisis management and school crisis management. The reason, we believe, is that in recent years, many changes emerged in such aspects as China's rapid economic development, joining the WTO, the accelerated globalization, national and parents' increasing emphasis on school education, and more and more various industrial and commercial enterprises, government and schools which lack the capacity to handle crises effectively made more crises occur.

Library and archive field of public relations has been a public relations research hot spot, accounting for a large proportion of the whole, but Fig. 10 surprisingly shows that the number of papers on library and archive each year is actually following

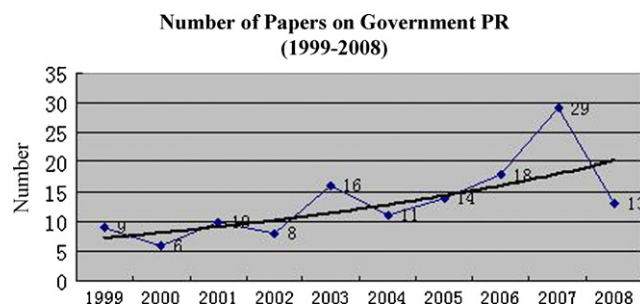


Fig. 8. Number of papers on government PR published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.



Fig. 9. Number of papers on crisis management published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

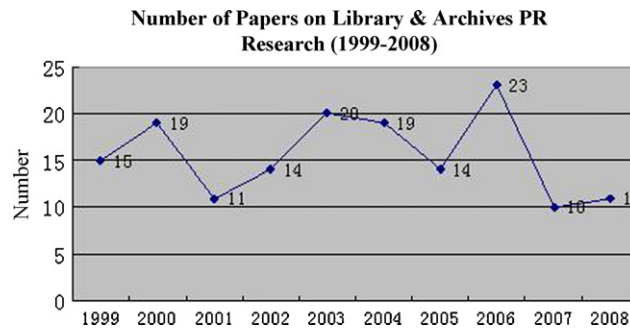


Fig. 10. Number of papers on library and archives PR published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

a “typical zigzag type”. During the past 10 years, the number of literature on library and archive public relations each year changed like a “Three-summit”, namely first rose, then declined, and then rose again, but the first and third peaks are relatively steeper, which we call taper peaks, and the second peak is flat and wide so we may call it flat peak. The instable state of research on “typical zigzag” library and archive public relations reveals the existing weaknesses and problems of public relations research. Only have analyzed the causes calmly and profoundly can we change the research dilemma similar to “stock market weakness” and find the internal and external environments suitable for profound development of public relations research.

As for school public relations research, the number of papers keeps rising every year, but the growth rate is quite slow. This also shows that China’s school development and school management systems are more and more mature in recent years (Fig. 11).

In addition to the major areas above, other areas also show new trends. For example, the number of papers on public relations linguistics and culture is gradually increasing resulting from the accelerated process of globalization and foreign cultures’ penetrations; what’s more, the concern about the livelihood of the public caused the number of papers on social environment and spiritual civilization rose continuously, with a focus on the establishment of a socialist harmonious society.

3. Research attributes

In this study, fundamental research, applied research and branch-based research are Level-1 classification criteria and secondary classification criteria are derived from the three Level-1 categories. Secondary classification is based on keywords and abstracts of papers, and there are 34 specific Level-2 categories. Secondary classification may exist some slight overlap, but truthfully reflect the research perspectives and immature status of papers on public relations in the past 10 years (Table 1).

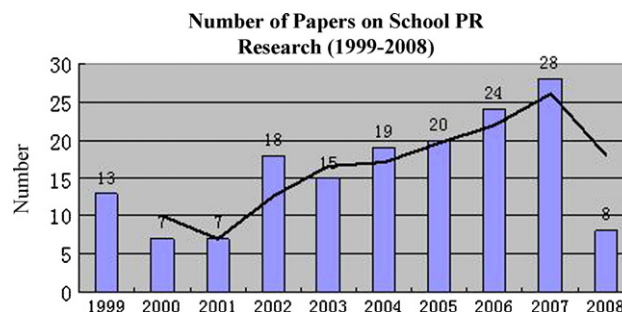


Fig. 11. Number of papers on school PR published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

Table 1
Research attributes level-2 coding.

1, Financial public relations	13, Library and publishing sector	25, Practice and methods
2, File sector	14, Media communications and sector	26, Organizations
3, Transportation management	15, Administration and the ideological and political work	27, Planning of public relations
4, Corporations	16, School construction and management	28, Public relations communication
5, Public relations teaching and learning	17, Health care public relations	29, Public relations history
6, Police public relations	18, Banks	30, Public relations ethics
7, Tourism and hotels	19, Government public relations	31, Public relations aesthetics
8, Agriculture	20, Employees	32, Cultural public relations
9, Other non-profit organizations	21, Basic research topics on public relations	33, Public relations linguistics
10, Social environment and spiritual civilization	22, Functions and roles	34, Other categories
11, Tax	23, History	
12, Sports	24, Inside and outside the public	

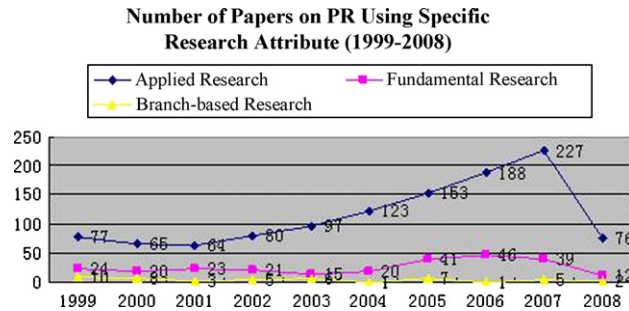


Fig. 12. Number of papers on PR using specific research attribute published in Mainland China each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

The above figures show that of all the public relations study attributes, papers of applied research are the majority, accounting for almost 79% of the total sample, and involve various fields, in which the top three are industrial and commercial enterprises (18%), library and publishing sector (15 percent), school development and management (15%). Papers of fundamental research represented 18% of the total sample, and the top two within this category are papers about methods and practice and basic theories accounting for 34% and 26%, respectively. Compared with applied research and fundamental research, branch-based research has the least number of papers, representing only 3% of the total articles. Within branch-based research public relations planning is of the highest proportion, accounting for 29%, followed by public relations ethics and cultural public relations, accounting for 25% each. This shows that public relations research in China tended to be practical, applied, closely linked with the market, and involving many areas with various views of point (Figs. 12–15).

4. Methodology

The majority of research papers on public relations use qualitative methods, of which historical analysis and literature review methods are most popular. Interview method also began to appear in public relations research. From Fig. 16, it is not difficult to find that most of the research methods used during the last 10 years was qualitative. However, we can obviously notice that the numbers of research papers from 2005 to 2008 using quantitative methods were 5, 1, 5 and 3, a significant increase compared to that in the past. This shows that researchers are gradually paying more attention on quantitative research.

The following are the research results of some representative quantitative research papers on public relations.

In the paper “A Quantitative Analysis of Public Relations Research in Library, Information Science and Archive Disciplines in the Past Ten Years”, Xia, Fang, and Li used the bibliometric method to analyze the literature from 1987 to 1998 on public

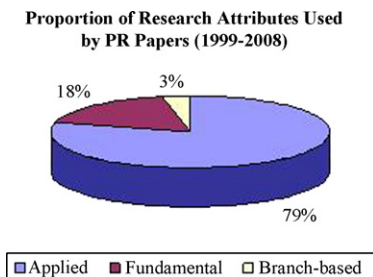


Fig. 13. Proportions of each research attribute used by PR papers published in Mainland China during the 10 years from 1999 to 2008.

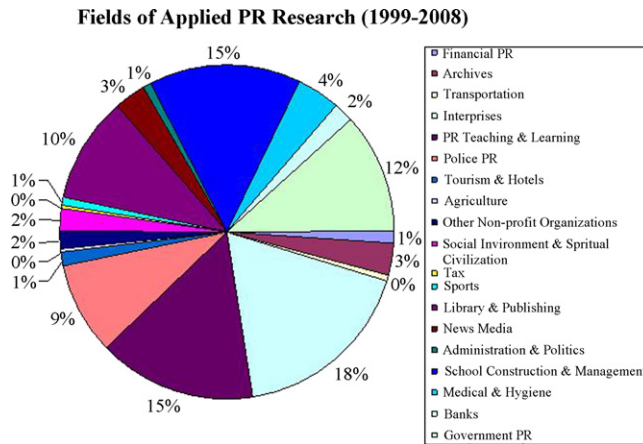


Fig. 14. Fields of applied PR research papers published in Mainland China during the period from 1999 to 2008.

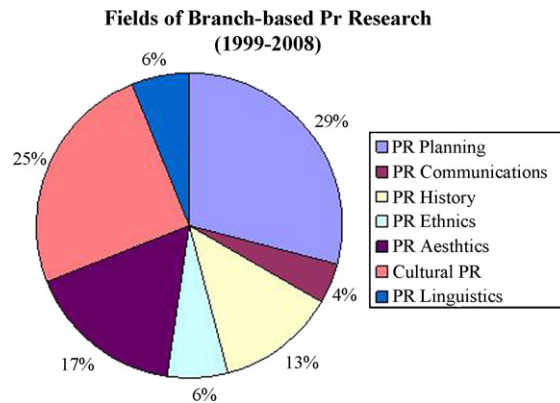


Fig. 15. Fields of Branch-based PR Research.

relations in library, information science and archives from such aspects as annual number of papers published, authors cooperation, core authors, journal distributions and research contents. They discussed the situation of public relations research in library, information science and archives as well as the existing problems facing these fields, and also proposed inspirations of their research to the public relations of the library, information sciences and archive professions. The article is innovative in its classification of quantitative research and has a value of benefiting further research on public relations in library, information science and archives as a good example and reference.

As for Chinese empirical research on public relations theory, Professor **Chen Xianhong's** article—"A Quantitative Comparative Report on Public Relations Research in China in Recent Ten Years" is the first representative and systematic study of public relations theory development. It was also based on the public relation s papers retrieved in China National Knowledge Infrastructure and China Big Six journalism and communication academic journals from 1994 to 2003. The author used the content analysis method to conduct a quantitative and cross-cultural research from four aspects (research attribute, research topic, theoretical paradigm and research method). The paper well enlightened the future research on this subject.

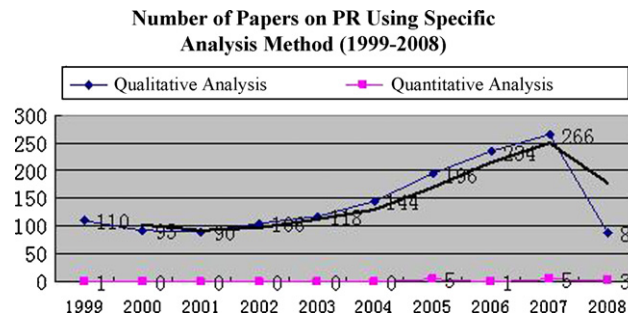


Fig. 16. Number of papers on PR using specific analysis methods (qualitative and quantitative) published in Mainland China during the 10 years.



Fig. 17. Number of papers on PR published in Taiwan each year during the period from 1999 to 2008.

In addition, such papers as “2004 Individual Rankings Report of China’s Public Relations Industry”, “2005 Annual Report of China’s Public Relations Industry”, “2006 Annual Report of China’s Public Relations Industry”, “2007 Annual Report of China’s Public Relations Industry”, “2007 Human Resource and Salary Report of China’s Public Relations Industry”, “Small and Medium-sized Urban Public Relations Industry Conditions – Wenzhou’s Public Relations Industry as an Example”, “Public Relations Investigation and Analysis in Guangzhou Hospitals”, “Survey on Medical Probationers’ Demand for Public Relations Skills”, “A Quantitative Analysis of Public relations and Media Agenda Setting” also used quantitative methods and submitted in forms of reports in which the contents are mainly analysis and forecasts of public relations in various industries.

5. Comparisons with public relations research in Taiwan

5.1. Annual quantity comparisons

By comparing with Fig. 1, we can clearly see that the number of published papers on public relations between Mainland China and Taiwan varies greatly in the last decade. As for trends, the number of papers in Mainland China was upward rising while in Taiwan the trend was zigzag. On one hand, this shows that Taiwan’s research in this area has entered a mature stage and what can be further researched in the area is declining, on the other hand, in Mainland China, public relations research has a great potential and there is still room for the rise unceasingly (Fig. 17).

5.2. Research theme comparisons

Compared to Fig. 4, as concerns to the themes, there are not many differences in public relations research between Mainland China and Taiwan. Industrial public relations, school public relations, fundamental theoretical research of public relations and public relations management are the focuses in both the Mainland and Taiwan. The relatively obvious difference is that in the Mainland, the field of industrial public relations is dominative, accounting for 22% of the total papers, as the first class. Fundamental theoretical research of public relations, public relations management, public relations teaching and learning and school public relations followed, respecting 12% and 14%, 12% and 11% of the total number, respectively. These four fields have more or less the same proportion, with no one particularly greater than the others, so we can put them under the second class, and the rest as the third class; however, the leading field of Taiwan’s public relations research is school public relations, accounting for 34 percent of the total research, as the first class. The following are fundamental theoretical public relations research, industrial public relations research and public relations management, accounting for 18%, 15% and 8% of the total research papers, respectively. It is clear that school public relations research is far ahead, accounting for more than one-third of the total papers. We can put fundamental theoretical research of public relations and industrial public relations research under the second class and the rest under the third class. In summary, the Mainland and Taiwan have the same major research fields of public relations but differ in these fields’ proportions of the total literature (Fig. 18).

5.3. Research attribute comparisons

Compared to Fig. 13, we can obviously see that after classified by research attributes of the public relations literatures, the proportions which applied research, fundamental research and branch-type research accounted for are very similar between the Mainland and Taiwan. In Mainland, the proportions are 79%, 18% and 3%, respectively while in Taiwan 82%, 15% and 3%. This indicates that in both Mainland China and Taiwan public relations research tends to be practical, applied and market-oriented. However, we also find the difference that among Taiwan’s applied research, sports public relations research constitutes a proportion of 8.64% of the total literature while in Mainland China the corresponding proportion is only 0.70%. In addition, military public relations research is included in Taiwan while in Mainland China this is still empty (Fig. 19).

Research Themes of PR in Taiwan (1999-2008)

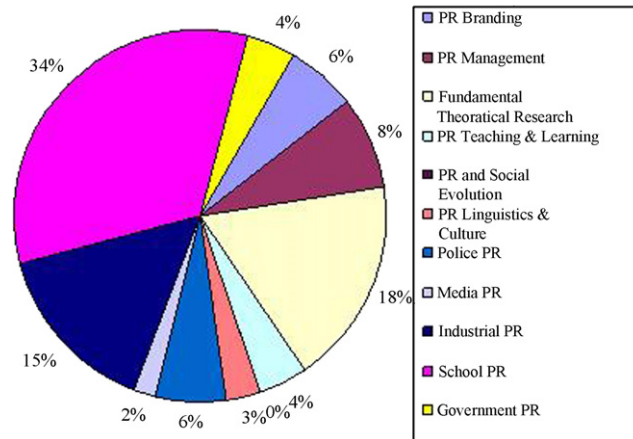


Fig. 18. Research themes of PR literature published in Taiwan during the 10 years from 1999 to 2008.

5.4. Research trend comparisons during the past 10 years

Research trends in Taiwan:

In Taiwan, school public relations research was always dominative during the past 10 years and it is so strong that other fields cannot take its place.

Research trends in Mainland China:

- (1) There have been some changes in research priorities in the past decade. Traditional hot topics of public relations, such as school public relations, businesses public relations and library and archive public relations, remain strong while police public relations and public relations teaching and learning like two rising stars, develop very rapidly.
- (2) Research fields of public relations show a diversification trend.
- (3) Public relations research is more and more concerned about livelihood issues.

Commonness of cross-strait public relations research:

Public relations research in Mainland China and Taiwan also reflects some common grounds. Public relations research in the two places covers a wide range of studies; research purposes tend to be market-oriented and application-oriented; fundamental theoretical research is relatively weak; as for research methods, qualitative remains majority while quantitative is just auxiliary.

Taiwan and Mainland China are both Chinese communities, with the same root, and Taiwan's development is inextricably linked to Mainland China, so it is quite reasonable that public relations research in these two places is so similar.

5.5. Why major research fields differ between Taiwan and the Mainland

- (1) Public relations teaching and learning was a focus in 2006 in Mainland China. The increasing social awareness of public relations' importance and public relations ever-strengthening role in business made the community and schools start to pay more attention to public relations teaching and learning. Meanwhile in the background of promoting caliber-education, college teachers actively explored new teaching methods, which also contributed to public relations teaching and learning's hot situation.
- (2) School public relations research is always the majority in Taiwan. Based on the background that Taiwan developed rapidly in the last few decades, school building and training innovative talents gain more and more concerns, the social

Proportion of Research Attributes Used by PR Papers in Taiwan (1999-2008)

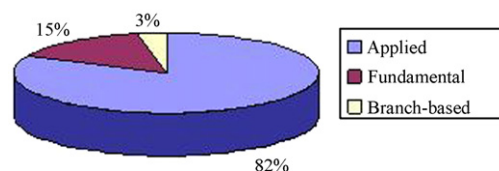


Fig. 19. Proportions of each research attribute used by PR papers published in Taiwan during the period from 1999 to 2008.

and parental awareness of school's importance is increasing. This makes the society pays more and more concern for schools. At the same time as a special social groups college students are always the concern of the whole society, so a series of school management problems that occurred in Taiwan in recent years make school public relations research a hot topic in Taiwan. Since the situations are very similar, this is possibly the trend of school public relations in Mainland China too.

- (3) Government public relations becomes an important field in the Mainland in 2008. In recent years, along with the gradual opening of government's work and idealistic democratization, thought changes of government staff, the continuous transformation of government functions, the put-forward of "Three Represents" theory, the strengthening concept of people-oriented and many other reasons, government public relations has gradually become one of the hottest research topics in Mainland China. And in 2008 this will be more prominent. In addition to the upward trend, 2008 is a special year because in the past few months, a series of natural and factitious factors triggered many crises across the whole country, and dealing with these crises could never be separated from the government's public relations. Therefore, it is reasonable that government public relations research rose to the first topic.
- (4) Reasons for research on industrial and commercial enterprises public relations as a focus. Public relations research itself is mainly applied and industrial and commercial enterprises are the most important components of a market economy, so research on business public relations should naturally be the focus of public relations research. At the same time because of the accelerated process of globalization and accession to the WTO, competition between industrial and commercial enterprises has been strengthened, so applying public relations strategies in industrial and commercial enterprises can be more effective and efficient.
- (5) Reasons for library and archive public relations as a hot research field. In Mainland China, public relations concept was introduced in libraries and archives quite early. After the introduction of public relations, based on rich information resources, featured services and advanced modern equipments, with the aim to be community-oriented and serve the nation's modernization, libraries and archives continued to innovate and gained very good social and economic benefits. Many public relations scholars noticed the success of public relations in libraries and archives, then they started to research in this field so that they can apply the successful experience to other fields and gain more social benefits, therefore pushed the research on library and archive public relations to a climax.

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