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Honors Thesis

AN ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH FROM 2000-2019

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

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Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH FROM 2000-2020

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Bachelor of Arts

In the last twenty years, advancements in information and communications technologies have fundamentally altered the face of intercultural communication (Shuter, 2011). While there is significant research regarding the impact of new media on intercultural communication, there is no published research that discusses the ways in which intercultural scholarship in the academic context has adapted to the evolving social media landscape. I will be conducting a content analysis on all intercultural articles published on the EBSCO database “Communication and Mass Media Complete” between January 2000 and January 2019. This research will illuminate trends in intercultural communications studies over the past twenty years. The purpose of this research is two-fold—to illustrate shifts in intercultural communication research and to provide areas for future intercultural research efforts.

Dr. Callahan has researched in this area and will be directing my efforts.

Keywords: intercultural trends, intercultural research, intercultural communication, social media, new media

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Introduction

The importance of recognizing and addressing shifts in intercultural communications research has been noted by numerous communications scholars over the past three decades (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Averbek-Lietz, 2013, Lebedko, 2014). Careful study has made it clear that trends within intercultural communications are some of the biggest influencing factors on the research foci of intercultural communications scholars. Often, these shifts in intercultural communication can be traced to changes in the global landscape (Shuter, 2011). One of these changes include the introduction of social media. As social media becomes increasingly popular in an international scope, we see significant intercultural scholarship that investigates social media and identity (Chen & Dai, 2012; Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2011; Oh, 2012; Croucher, 2011), social media's impact on intercultural adaption (Chen, 2010; Croucher, 2011; Chun, 2011), and the ways in which social media magnifies cultural influence (Author, 2013). Such research draws a correlation between global trends and the focus of intercultural communication research.

Another influential trend in the global community has been the significant increases in migration and intercultural contact. According to the International Organization for Migration (2011), international migration has increased from 150 million migrants in 2000 to 214 million in 2010--and this is a number that is increasing exponentially each year. As the number of individuals migrating increases drastically, so too does the number of "misplaced" individuals who are torn between two cultures, part of both, but totally in neither (Callahan, 2018). Migration is not simply a cultural issue—it's an international crisis that has forced each of us to contemplate, think about and

redefine our interpretation and understanding of belonging, citizenship, geography, and borders.

There are several types of research that may influence and oftentimes dictate the direction that intercultural communications scholarship follows. This research aims to determine if, and or how, intercultural scholarship is affected by a variety of factors, from social media, to increased migration, to natural disasters. As several scholars have noted, global trends dictate the focus of intercultural research. As such, it would stand to reason that there will be an increase in scholarship addressing social cultural changes in response to migration. For example, the internet, communication technology, transportation technology, and national policies allowing dual citizenship combine to alter the social “trends” of our global society, changing the adaptive process that nearly all migrants experience. These changes demonstrate a need to recognize new social impacts--as technology and social structures change, the process by which we study culture may also change (Callahan, 2018).

The combination of changes in global communication practices, increased intercultural scholarship, and the significance of shifts in types and duration of cultural contact necessitates the need to understand these shifts in terms of intercultural research to date (Callahan, 2018). Consequently, this study investigates research patterns and trends through a content analysis of intercultural research between 2000 and 2020. Specifically, this research examines 1) the types of cultures studied, 2) the numbers of cultures studied, and 3) the trends within intercultural communication in the last twenty years.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communications

Research focusing primarily on intercultural communications began to crop up in the early 1960s as globalization was beginning to take root (McLuhan, 1962). Riding on the coattails of World War II and the establishment of the Peace Corps, research in intercultural communications served the primary purpose of generating an understanding of inherent differences across cultures in an attempt to find ways to “enhance the quality and efficacy of intercultural communication” (Kim, 2010). The core purpose of intercultural communications studies has remained the same since its classification by Rich in 1974. Rich determined that the constituents of intercultural communications could be sorted into five forms: intercultural communication, international communication, interracial communication, interethnic or minority communication, and contracultural communication (Hu & Fan, 2011). Complementary to Rich’s definition of intercultural communications, Gudykunst interjects that intercultural communication research must fall into one of four categories: comparative mass communication, international communication, cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 1987; Hu & Fan, 2011). Soon, we begin to see more sophisticated definitions of intercultural communications and thus intercultural scholarship emerge. With a multitude of scholars arguing that intercultural communications should be defined more specifically, Porter presented a working definition with eight defining elements (Hu & Fan, 2011; Porter, 1990). These eight elements were as follows: “attitudes, social organization, patterns of thought, roles and role expectations, language, space, time, and nonverbal expression” (Porter, 1990). Fairly

soon afterwards, Samovar et al. condensed these elements into four interdependent groups: perception, verbal processes, non-verbal processes, and contextual elements (Samovar et al, 2000). In 2013, Kramer, Callahan and Zuckerman introduced a simplified approach to intercultural communications, arguing that “at its basic level, intercultural research attempts to understand the expressive process shared by a group of individuals” (Kramer, Callahan & Zuckerman, 2013).

Trend Studies in Intercultural Communications

In the past twenty years, trend studies analyzing specific aspects of intercultural communications have become increasingly more popular, seeking to understand the ways in which intercultural communications has evolved to respond to new media technology and globalization. These trend studies allow intercultural scholars to understand past trends as well as predict trends that may occur in the future (Callahan, 2018).

Trend studies research a myriad of different aspects of intercultural communications. Regional trends focus on specific aspects of intercultural communication as it pertains to a specific culture. For example, Min-Sun (2010) identified trends in intercultural communication and used her results to project a hypothesis about future research prospects in China (Callahan, 2018; Min-Sun, 2010). Hu & Fan (2011) analyzed both domestic and foreign journals in an effort to identify differences between intercultural research in China and abroad (Hu & Fan, 2011). Other studies have sought to find trends in intercultural research in the United States (Orbe, 2018). Research has been conducted to determine the ways in which cultural sojourners use new media to adapt to new cultures (Callahan, 2011).

Shifts within the Intercultural Context

Though cultures around the world are distinctly different, social media has become a unifying force in aiding individuals to overcome cultural and geographical boundaries and differences. Researchers Chen and Zhang (2010) point out that though cultures around the world are distinctly different, social media has become a unifying force in aiding individuals to overcome cultural and geographical boundaries and differences. New media and globalization have condensed the world into a much smaller “interactive” field in which we interact with one another. Social media has allowed individuals across the planet from each other to communicate in seconds, and in some cases, in real-time. This research conducted by Sawyer and Chen demonstrates that social media can actually aid in the intercultural adaption process.

Rosen, Stefanone and Lackaff (2010) point out that culture influences the way in which individuals interact with social media. In the same vein, by observing the ways in which individuals interact with social media, we can recognize their cultures by their communication styles. Rosen, Stefanone, and Lackaff also point out that individuals who are from an individualistic culture focus on meeting new individuals and being seen by a lot of people (think influencers) while those from collectivistic cultures, like Japan, focus on utilizing social networking sites to maintain relationships with individuals who they are already close with. Social Media like Facebook *promotes* the exchange of messages between individuals across the world, so it only makes sense that as the use of platforms such as Facebook become exponentially more prominent, so too does the research about it.

Concurrent with increased global media use is an increase in international migration. According to the International Organization for Migration (2015), migration

has increased from 150 million migrants in 2000 to 230 million in 2013. The United States alone had an estimated 46 million migrants in 2015 (IOM, 2015), making it the top receiving country with 45 million immigrants--accounting for 20% of the world's migrant population. This increase in global movement, combined with increased global media use, creates a new type of context for intercultural communication researchers. It's likely that other international events may have shaped and determined the intercultural communications landscape, and this research seeks to determine if this may be the case.

RQ1: Are there significant differences between cultures that are studied in intercultural scholarship?

RQ2: Are there significant differences in the number of cultures represented in intercultural research?

RQ3: What, if any, trends emerge from intercultural research published between 2000 and 2019?

Method

Article Selection

In an attempt to understand how intercultural scholars are researching intercultural communication, I conducted a content analysis of intercultural research articles published from January 1, 2000 to January 1, 2020. The artifacts I categorized were selected from *the Communications and Mass Media Complete* (EBSCO) database. I chose this database because it provides full-text, peer-reviewed literature on all communications and mass media related topics from more than 200 full-text journals. Articles that I collected had to meet six criteria in order to be a part of the content analysis. First, a keyword search for the term “intercultural” was used to identify intercultural scholarship within the article. Second, newsletters and books were excluded from the search as they are an entirely different family from scholarly literature. Third, only articles that specified a specific culture or cultures were included in the final analysis, as a large majority of articles were actually theoretical and therefore do not contribute to an overall understanding of the trends of intercultural research as it pertains to countries studied. Consequently, any theoretical articles were not included. Fourth, only articles published in English were included in the final analysis, as it was essential I could disseminate what was being discussed in each article. Fifth, only articles published between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2019 were considered for this content analysis. Using this criteria, I first determined how many articles that met the prior criteria were published each year, in order to observe a trend in the number of articles studied by year. Then, I selected 10% of articles from each year to be a part of the content analysis. A sample of articles ($n=288$)

was selected from the population ($N=2878$), resulting in 287 articles being coded in the final analysis.

Measure

Each article was coded depending on which culture or cultures were used in the study. The five coding categories are as follows: ethnicity, language, geography, religion, sexual orientation, and other. Intercultural research studies were coded “ethnicity” if the main group(s) was identified according to ethnic characteristics such as race or ancestral background. A study was coded “language” if the main group(s) were separated based on a common language or featured language (for example, the label Hispanic implies connection through the Spanish language). A study was coded “geography” if the main group(s) was identified by a geographical location. A study was coded “religion” if the main group(s) was separated by religious practices or beliefs. A study was coded “sexual orientation” if the main group(s) was identified by a sexual orientation. Lastly, any studies that do not fit in with any of the other categories were coded “other”.

Notes were also taken to record any specific nations or countries included in the aforementioned intercultural research studies.

Results

Research Question 1 and 2: Cultural Identification and Differences

Results from the content analysis showed that there are significant differences in how intercultural communications is approached and studied. 287 intercultural communications articles (10% of articles from each year) were included in the final analysis. Of the articles included in the study, 25% classified groups by ethnicity, 38% classified groups by language, 26% classified groups by geography, 8% classified groups by religion, 2% classified groups by sexual orientation, and less than 1% of articles coded classified groups by other means of classification. Articles that fell into the category “other” were distinctively different in their characteristics mentioned, such as disability or age.

Table 1

Distribution of Identifications of Culture within Intercultural Research (2000-2019)

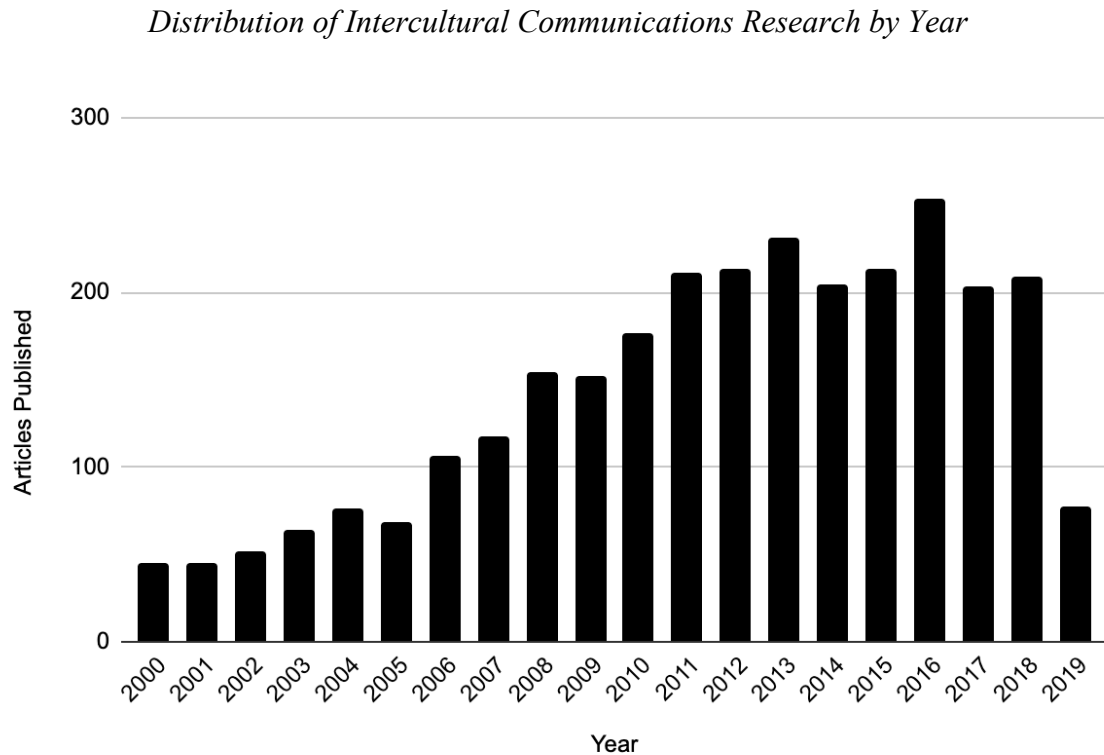
	Ethnicity	Language	Geography	Religion	Sexual Orientation	Other	Total
Observed	71	111	74	23	7	1	287
Expected	47.8	47.8	47.8	47.8	47.8	47.8	287
Percent (%)	25	38	26	8	2	1	100

RQ2: Cultural Quantities

When analyzing the second research question, it's clear that in terms of volume, intercultural communications research has increased exponentially. One important thing to note in the data provided below illustrates an *overall* trend upwards. Though it seems that research is tapering off in the last 3 years, what is perhaps more likely is that it takes the database several months and even years to compile all peer reviewed publications for a given year. This strong upward trend in the sheer number of articles published further

illustrates the explosion in intercultural research within the communications sphere. With such a drastic influx of articles, research, and publications, there is a need to categorize it, in order to see where communications research has gone in the past, where it is now, and what direction new research is taking the field of intercultural communications in.

Figure 1



When looking at the various cultures represented in the research, it's necessary to break down the research into two sub-sections in order to more accurately display the discrepancies and differences in articles recorded between various continents and also countries. Below are two different ways of looking at the data. First, by continent, and second, by country.

Table 2

Distribution of Intercultural Communications Research by Continent

	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percent (%)
North America	134	70	31.8
South America	7	70	1.7
Asia	167	70	39.8
Africa	25	70	6
Europe	74	70	17.6
Australia	13	70	3.1

Table 3

Distribution of Intercultural Communications Research by Country (Top 4)

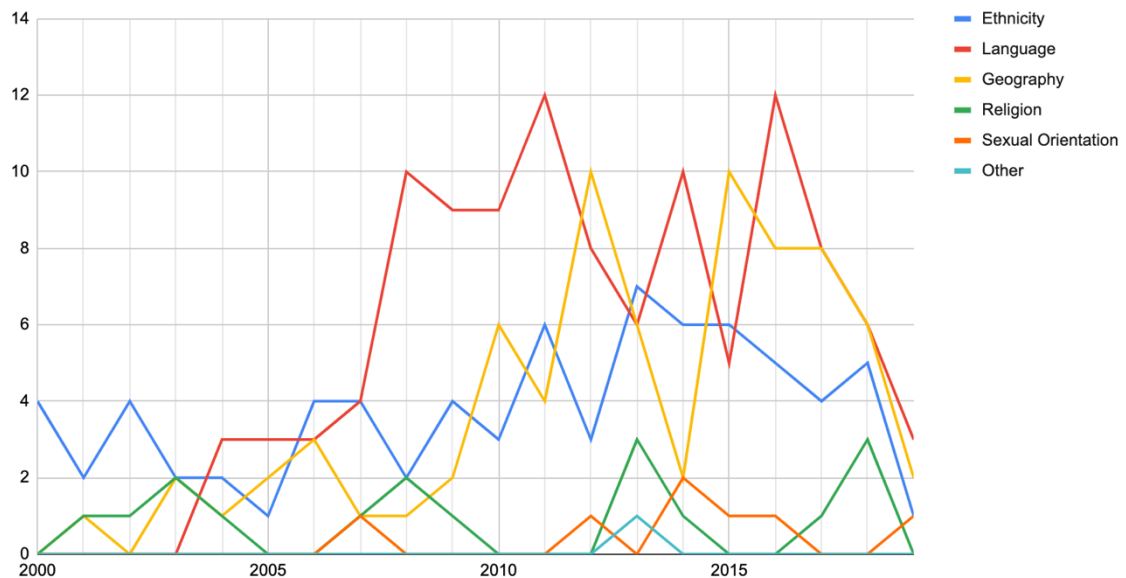
	Observed Frequency	Expected Frequency	Percent (%)
United States	128	54.25	59
China	50	54.25	23
Japan	24	54.25	11
South Korea	15	54.25	7

RQ3: Research Trends

Language. Intercultural communications research focused on the defining feature of language had the largest peak in the analysis. Looking year over year, the biggest jump in research focused on language occurred in 2015, as displayed in Figure 2. Though there are peaks and dips over the years in the amount of research, there is a steep decline in research at 2019—this is likely because there is a buffer period in time it takes to get an article published from the time the research was written—essentially, there may be far more articles written in 2019 that just haven't been published yet.

Figure 2

Trends in Intercultural Communications Research by Year (Sum)



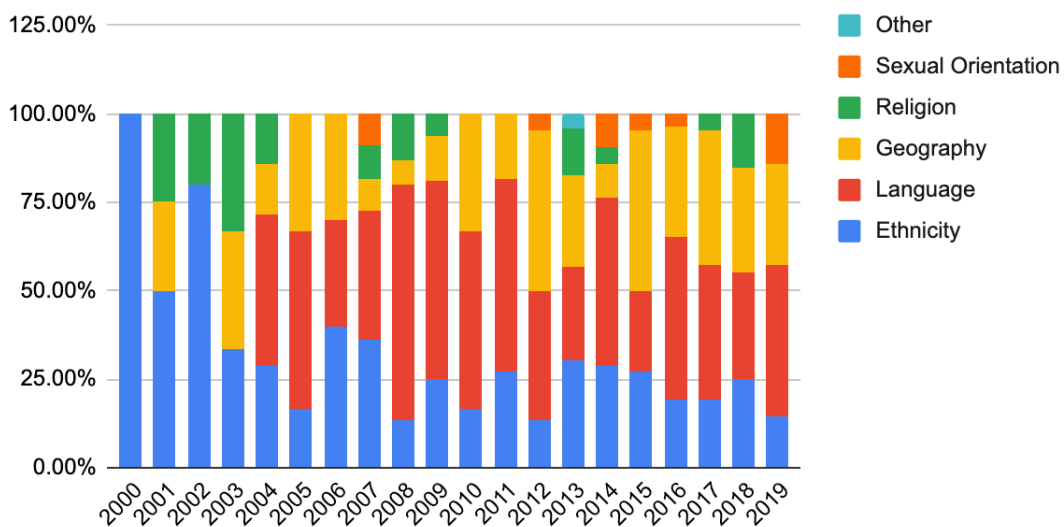
Another significantly large peak occurred in 2007. Both peaks could be attributed to current events that occurred a year or two prior to publication, giving researchers the opportunity to gather data and publish their work. A summary of current events from 2005-2007 included but were not limited to: the Summer Olympics (held in Greece), Hurricane Katrina, the creation of the popular video sharing website YouTube, the Sago Mining Disaster, and the release of the Wii by Nintendo. Between 2010 and 2013 (the years prior to the second big spike in language related research) the major events included: the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the 2010 Fifa World Cup in South Africa, as well as the continued rise in popularity of social media sites like YouTube, Twitter and Snapchat.

It's safe to say that current events and natural disasters both have elicited a worldwide response, and in turn, a peak in interest in studying that international response—namely, how individuals from different cultures are able to communicate with

each other and cross the barriers that language discrepancies can form. For example, with Hurricane Katrina, the Sago Mining Disaster and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the response was almost immediate and almost entirely international. Volunteers came from around the globe to help in whatever ways they could. This led to an interesting paradox that many communications scholars may have sought to understand—the ways in which we are able to interact on a global scale, though we don't all speak the same language or even have the same cultural cues, gestures, etc.

Figure 3

Trends in Intercultural Communications by Year (%)



Geography. The second most discussed topic in terms of trends was geography. The biggest peaks occurred in 2012 and 2015. Looking at current events in the years prior to both peaks, they included: the Summer Olympics, held in London, England, the Curiosity Rover landing on Mars, Hurricane Sandy, and the reelection of Barack Obama for his second term. In 2015, current events included but were not limited to: the Paris Attacks, migrant crisis in Europe, the Supreme Court affirming same-sex marriage, the Greek debt

crisis, and the Nuclear program deal with Iran. It's likely that the migrant crisis brought about a lot of discourse surrounding geographical borders, and the ways in which they are changing as a result of migration. It's also likely that scholars sought a way to understand the ways in which individuals interpret and understand geography and borders, as the migrant crisis forced many to re-examine the ways in which we understand and interpret geography.

Ethnicity. Ethnicity seemed to be the least frequently discussed topic overall, dropping off pretty steadily as we approach 2020. Interestingly, it seems that the majority of articles categorized as discussing ethnicity were about the United States. Perhaps that's because America is a place that is an ethnic melting pot of sorts, and the majority of research about intercultural communications in America are focused on ethnicity as opposed to geography or religion. Perhaps another reason that research about ethnicity is steadily on the decline is because international research is on a positive growth track, and much of the intercultural communications research produced internationally focuses on other aspects of culture.

Sexual Orientation. Studying sexual orientation as it pertains to intercultural aspects of communications remained relatively insignificant in terms of volume until recently. While the volume of research wasn't incredibly significant in my research, looking at the data year over year allows for a more thorough understanding the impacts of current events on intercultural communications research. It's likely that events such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and generally more understanding and acceptance of those who identify as LGBTQ+.

Discussion

Overrepresentation of U.S. Culture

In taking a survey of the various countries represented in the Mass Media and Communications Complete Database, it became very apparent that the United States makes up the majority of the research. Even other countries listed in this sample were for the most part compared to the United States as opposed to being discussed independently or in relation to other countries. While this is to be expected as I only used articles that were in English, it's still interesting to see such a drastic difference in articles published about the United States versus other countries. After the United States (at 59%), the next highest in volume of articles was China, with only 23%. When we look at it divided by continent, the overview is completely different: Asia makes up 39.8% of the articles while North America makes up 31.8% of the articles. Comparing the data, it's evident that there are lots of Asian countries with one or two articles written per year, and eventually, that adds up—especially the closer I got to 2020. This illustrates an exciting and new type of intercultural communications research; it seems that the research is beginning to shift from a western-centered focus narrative to a more worldwide approach and perspective. However, this leads to the question of why the United States has been the “control” when it comes to intercultural communications.

Ambiguous Cultural Groupings

Another fascinating discovery along the course of this research was the many ways in which various cultures are grouped together. While ethnicity and geography were certainly commonplace in grouping, language was actually a method utilized by researchers to group individuals together, and one that for the most part, was actually

pretty ambiguous. For example, researchers would classify a group as individuals who are Hispanic—traditionally, Hispanic incorporates everyone who is Spanish speaking—so in reality, they are discussing a group whose individuals could be from a range of places—Spain, Mexico, Columbia, the list really covers all of North, Central, and South America and pushes a huge variety of people from completely different countries into the same group. Creating such a generalization for a group that has distinct cultural ties overlooks all the unique aspects of each individual culture. This also brings into question the nuances in cultures that we may be overlooking whenever we study a culture other than our own. It's crucial that as intercultural communications researchers, we take the time to differentiate between cultures and specify what those differences are. For example, when discussing countries, researchers often distinguish individual European countries but group African countries as a whole, referencing to "Africa" as opposed to specific nations, and thus assuming that each country has the same culture, which we know is not the case. As research gets closer to 2020, it's clear that there have been great strides in eliminating cultural groupings that are ambiguous, however, there is still much work to be done on this front.

Correlation

One of the most difficult aspects of this research was determining what specific aspects of current events, advances in technology, etc were responsible for the trends seen in the research. While it's easy to say that research increased or decreased, it's much more difficult to attribute each of the fluctuations to certain events or trends in the global landscape. It's likely that doing an analysis of every single article may help illuminate what is influencing the trends, and perhaps creating a more concrete analysis of what

happened during those peaks (and perhaps even lulls) in research that may have affected or determined the results.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to illustrate shifts in intercultural communication research and to provide areas for future intercultural research efforts. The results indicated that there are significant differences among the research published by intercultural scholars. Similarly, there is a heavy hand of U.S. perspectives in the research—the majority of the research seems to be about either the United States or the comparing the United States as a sort of “base” to another culture.

One limitation of this study was that it was a sample analysis—10% of articles from each year were selected, coded, and categorized. Were I to do this analysis again, I would want to code and categorize *every* article published with “intercultural communications” in the database. By categorizing every article published, it’d produce a much more comprehensive and altogether more correct interpretation of the field of intercultural communications.

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