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Understanding the evolution of international human resource management research: A bibliometric review over the past 25 years (1995-2019)

Abstract

Design/methodology/approach: This paper employs bibliometric analysis to examine the evolutionary path of international human resource management (IHRM) research from 1995 to 2019. A dataset of 1,507 articles from journals specializing in IHRM, international business, and general management was created. Analysis at the keyword, thematic, and network levels was conducted to identify trends, historical context, and the interrelatedness of research themes.

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to offer a comprehensive overview of the field of IHRM research by tracing its evolutionary development over a 24-year period. The study seeks to understand how the field has progressed, by considering historical research themes and their subsequent integration into more recent scholarly work, thereby identifying the current and emerging research trends.

Findings: The analysis reveals that IHRM research has gone through several phases of thematic focus, from initial emphasis on cultural differences and expatriate management to more recent topics like global talent management and digital transformation. Earlier research themes continue to be incorporated and re-contextualized in modern scholarship, highlighting the field's dynamic nature.

Originality/value: This paper is one of the first to use a bibliometric approach to systematically examine the evolution of IHRM research. It not only provides a historical perspective but also outlines future research trends, incorporating the institutional logic perspective. The findings offer deep insights that are valuable for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the development of IHRM research and its practical implications.

Keywords. international human resource management (IHRM); research trends; systematic review; bibliometric analysis; bibliographic coupling analysis; keyword network analysis

1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in international human resource management (IHRM), which examines a variety of issues concerning the worldwide management of human resources (Brewster et al., 2016; Schuler et al., 2002), has dramatically increased in the last few decades. Since the mid-1980s, a substantial body of literature on IHRM has been created as a result of individual and collective scholarly contributions (Cooke et al., 2019). As IHRM research develops, the research topics and subjects have become increasingly complex (DeNisi et al., 2014; Kaufman, 2014; Guttormsen & Lauring, 2022). When a discipline reaches a certain degree of maturity, a new branch of research emerges and considers the discipline to be the object of research (Ramos-Rodriguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004) – our object of research here is IHRM research itself. Numerous studies have extensively reviewed how human resource management (HRM) literature has evolved over time (Björkman & Welch, 2015; Brewster et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2017). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the IHRM literature with only a handful of exceptions.

As a sub-field of both HRM and international business, IHRM has matured as a discipline in its own right over the decades. The impact of IHRM on the management and performance of multinational firms has become increasingly important (Andersson et al., 2019), and scholars have called for a comprehensive review and synthesis of how IHRM literature has evolved over the past years. Previous review articles have addressed the major advances in IHRM research structure from a static viewpoint, narrowly focusing on a particular aspect of IHRM, such as global staffing (Collings et al., 2009), global talent management (Tarique & Schuler, 2010), and expatriation (Harvey & Moeller, 2009; Takeuchi, 2010), or on a certain context and/or perspective, such as IHRM in the context of uncertainty and crisis (Ererdi et al., 2021), HRM in the context of multinational firms (Cooke et al., 2019), and IHRM from a North American perspective (Schuler & Tarique, 2007). Although these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of IHRM literature, they have rarely focused on the dynamic features and changes that occurred in the discipline over time. Moreover, little research has adopted a large-scale data-driven approach that allows the review of a massive number of articles to construct a scientific structure of research topics, identify key themes, and explain the internal networks of the focal literature without interference from a potential bias of researchers

(Zupic & Cater, 2015).

The recent exception is the work of Fan et al. (2021), which has identified three key clusters of IHRM research based on an extensive bibliographic analysis of 1,924 articles published over the last five decades. In responding to the call for a more holistic review of IHRM literature using a data-driven approach (Andersen, 2019; Cooke et al., 2019), Fan et al. (2021) revealed three main research areas and nine associated themes that researchers have explored over the past decades. This work has clearly advanced our knowledge of the development of IHRM research by addressing how the three key research areas have evolved, with a particular focus on the last 25 years (1996-2020). Yet, what has not been addressed is how new research themes have emerged over time and how key research themes have branched out into more specific ones.

This study aims to extend our understanding of the evolutionary path of key research themes and their relations with previous literature by providing complementary evidence to the work of Fan et al. (2021). By adopting a data-driven approach together with a historical perspective, this article explores the historical evolution of research trends in the IHRM literature and provides evidence of how and what earlier research themes and contributions have been incorporated by more recent studies. To fulfil our purpose, we conduct a bibliometric analysis of 1,507 articles published in the field of IHRM between 1995 and 2019 at the keyword, thematic, and network levels. This study focuses on the recent 25 years, during which IHRM has gradually matured as an integrated body of knowledge (Cooke et al., 2019) and a greater number of both theoretical and empirical studies have developed compared to the previous decades (Fan et al., 2021). Based on bibliographic coupling relations, we identify key research themes in the three time periods (1995-2004, 2005-2014, and 2015-2019) and investigate the structural characteristics of the bibliographic network in each time period. Moreover, this study examines the bibliographic network across the overlapping periods (1995-2014 and 1995-2019) to trace the evolutionary path along which key research themes have developed during the periods. By doing so, we present a more nuanced picture of how IHRM research has evolved and provide a deep insight into how the current research themes are formed.

We made a deliberate choice to exclude the timeframe between 2020 and 2023. We selected 1995 as

the starting point based on prior research and 2019 as the endpoint due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the landscape of IHRM research, the deliberate selection of study periods is crucial for ensuring the relevance and accuracy of findings. This decision is underpinned by our focus on the evolutionary trajectory of IHRM, methodological considerations, and the transformative impact of the pandemic on the field (Lin & Luo, 2023). The study delineates that IHRM research is characterized by a complex semantic structure, socially formed and evolving over time. However, studies during the COVID-19 period are not readily comparable to those in previous periods (Rani & Salanke, 2023). The study methodically tracks the evolution of key research themes across three distinct time periods, highlighting the dynamic nature of the discipline. This empirical approach, crucial for building a comprehensive theory on the evolution of IHRM, necessitated a focused analysis period that excludes the Covid-19 pandemic where we observed a significant shift in the focus of many IHRM-related journals towards topics emergent from the global crisis (Patrick et al., 2022). This shift is indicative of the complex, socially formed nature of IHRM research, where external events like the pandemic can profoundly influence research themes.

Our review paper aims to function as a foundational guide for IHRM scholars, offering a detailed mapping of the evolution of pivotal research themes in the field from a historical standpoint. Recognizing the significant role of IHRM within the broader spectrum of international business and management, it is imperative to comprehend the historical progression of human factors in international business endeavors, a task that holds substantial value for both academics and practitioners. By meticulously analyzing these historical patterns of research evolution, we establish a platform for predicting potential future trends in IHRM research, while consciously delineating our study period up to the pre-pandemic era to maintain focus and relevance in the context of rapid changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the unprecedented impact of the pandemic, drawing significant academic attention, could introduce biases into our analysis of IHRM research evolution. Investigating IHRM trends during the pandemic necessitates a separate research initiative, ideally focused on the pandemic period itself. This should employ a more precise methodology, possibly a thorough bibliographic coupling analysis. However, it would be optimal to conduct this analysis some years later, given the time required for paper citations to fully develop.

2. Bibliometrics approach to understand the evolution of IHRM research

Quantitative techniques have recently been more widely used to understand the development of a research area in a more systematic and standardized way. Many disciplines have increasingly and more regularly analysed the published literature using bibliometric analysis to obtain a more thorough understanding of a research area (Keathley-Herring et al. 2016). The bibliometric method applies mathematical and statistical techniques to analyse large volumes of documentation (Diodato, 1994). Scholars have utilized bibliometrics to understand how knowledge flows between different disciplines (Van Leeuwen & Tijssen, 2000) and examine the research trends in the literature (García-Lillo et al., 2017; Zupic & Cater, 2015).

Bibliometric analysis can help researchers identify important contributions in a research area and guide academics toward producing impactful studies (Akhavan et al., 2016). Citation analysis is a key part of bibliometrics that examines scientific communication through formal publication channels by using a statistical method to large-scale bibliographic datasets (Leydesdorff, 2012). Co-citation analysis in particular, is often used to measure the level of similarity in the relationship between documents and map the relationships between key ideas to a specific scientific domain (Small, 1973). A co-citation measure reflects the opinion of many authors, representing a useful indicator of subject similarity and aiding in the identification of fundamental articles in the field (Zitt & Bassecoulard, 1994). Co-citation analysis is also useful to capture influential authors in the research area and visualize a representative proportion of the literature on a particular field and its interrelationships (White & McCain, 1998). Many studies have demonstrated that co-citation analysis provides a valid method to grasp the structure of a research discipline (Di Guardo & Harrigan, 2012; Ramos-Rodriguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004) and a forward-looking assessment of document similarity to understand the evolution of a research field since the citations a paper receives in the future are dependent on the evolution of an academic field (Garfield, 2001).

There have been some bibliometric studies in the field of IHRM. For example, García-Lillo et al. (2017) analysed all the research papers published in *The International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM)* during the period between 2000 and 2012 to identify the main research lines, in other words, the

'intellectual structure' of the IHRM research. Dabic et al. (2015) conducted an in-depth bibliometric review of research on expatriates and their impact on firm performance from 1970 to 2012, highlighting the relevance of expatriation research with both HRM and international business and management research. While these studies adopted a narrow scope, providing a focused insight into the IHRM studies, Fan et al. (2021) has analysed the literature with a more extensive scope. By analysing 1,924 articles from 19 academic journals in the management and business field, Fan et al. (2021) showed an overall picture of the vast IHRM literature over the last five decades. The study identified that IHRM research comprises three main clusters, namely, expatriation management, global human capital, and IHRM practices and policies. It also revealed that the IHRM field has experienced two major stages of development. In the first stage (1969-1995), the literature embraced scattered research findings concerning human functions in global business activities, which are of great relevance to practitioners such as international managers and workers. In the second stage (1996-2020), IHRM has gradually matured as an integrated body of knowledge, producing a much greater number of theoretical studies and empirical tests as well as some highly influential works. More recently, Patrick et al. (2022) conducted a literature review using a pool of 69 papers published in 16 journals between 1990 and 2022, addressing the topic of strategic international human resource management. This paper is more focused on the evolution of the strategic nature of IHRM and analyses in depth a smaller number of studies to depict several propositions and define avenues for future research.

To understand the evolution of IHRM research in more detail, Fan et al. (2021) conducted a co-occurrence analysis of keywords on each of four five-year windows from the last two decades, presenting how specific themes of IHRM research have evolved over time. Specifically, the study revealed that the issue of expatriate management attracted the most attention from IHRM researchers in the 2000s, but their research focus was switched to the topic of global human capital, and then to IHRM policy and practice transfer until the mid-2010s. In the most recent five years, however, the topic of expatriate management became rejuvenated with the most substantial body of IHRM studies, while the studies on the other two topics have received less attention. This finding has shed significant light on our knowledge by mapping the terrain of IHRM research. However, only showing the snapshot of each five-year period, the work of

Fan et al. (2021) failed to exhibit how new research themes in the IHRM field have emerged and how key themes have branched out into more specific ones over time. This constitutes a gap in our understanding of the evolution of IHRM research because any discipline's evolution involves increasing its scope while breaking into specialized subdisciplines (Wright et al., 2015).

This study aims to address this research gap by depicting the evolution of IHRM research focusing on the historical development of key research themes in the IHRM literature. In particular, we analyse IHRM articles published in the period between 1995 and 2019 to understand their bibliographic network. We investigate key research themes and the structural characteristics of the bibliographic network in the three time periods (1995-2004, 2005-2014, and 2015-2019). We further explore the bibliographic coupling network across the overlapping time periods, i.e., in an accumulative manner (1995-2014 and 1995-2019) to trace the evolutionary path and understand how and what earlier research themes and contributions have been incorporated by recent studies. As noted, we decided to exclude the Covid-19 pandemic period (2020-2023) to fulfil our objective to understand well-established themes and trends that have been scrutinized and validated over time while avoiding the methodological shortcomings of pandemic-driven research (Bramstedt, 2020). By doing so, our bibliometric analysis provides some critical insights into the historical development and evolution of IHRM research as a discipline and complements recent efforts to conduct a more systematic and scientific review of IHRM literature.

3. Method

We collected our data from Web of Science (WOS) and conducted descriptive, hierarchical clustering, and bibliographic coupling analyses to understand the evolutionary path of the IHRM studies over the 25 years from 1995 to 2019. As Fan et al. (2021) revealed, IHRM has matured as an integrated body of knowledge during this period, and a much greater number of both theoretical and empirical studies have been developed in this period compared to the previous 25 years (1969-1995). WOS provides several pieces of information about research papers published in around 2,500 social sciences journals in more than 50 disciplines (García -Lillo et al., 2017). We build on previous review studies (e.g., Cooke et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2021) to

develop a series of keywords for identifying journal articles on the topic of IHRM: "IHRM" or "international human resource management" or "international" or "multinational" and "career", "expatriates", "strategic management", "national culture", "staffing", "performance management", "training", "human resource development", "reward", "self-initiated expatriates", "SIE", "talent management".

Based on these keywords, we collected IHRM articles and the associated bibliometric metadata in the WOS within all journals in the field of business and management. The initial search identified 6,519 articles. To select the articles that genuinely examined the IHRM topics, two authors reviewed 3,260 articles independently and cross-checked the results for validation. For the second stage of selection, the first author went through the articles based on abstract and keywords and reassessed their relevance to IHRM discipline. As a result, a total of 1,507 articles that were published from 1995 to 2019 were identified. Table 1 shows the top sources of identified articles. Finally, research articles are clustered differently in multiple datasets based on time.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

We collected all the publication and citation data for the selected articles. We examined the evolution of IHRM research across the three time periods separated by a decade: time period 1 (TP1) includes 1995-2004, time period 2 (TP2) includes 2005-2014, and time period 3 (TP3) includes 2015-2019. The number of publications for each time period is 214, 796, and 497 respectively, indicating the rapid development of IHRM research in more recent years (Fan et al. 2021). To understand the evolution of IHRM research from a historical perspective, we conducted hierarchical clustering and bibliographic coupling analyses on the data accumulated across the time periods. Therefore, our dataset includes 214 articles during TP1 (1995-2004), 1010 articles during TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014), and 1507 articles during TP1, TP2, and TP3 (1995-2019). The bibliographic coupling analysis ties a pair of journal articles when they cite the same research article. The authors are also coupled with the referring papers. Based on the cumulation of co-occurrences

of the citation, a set of papers forms a network structure that approximately represents a research front of a discipline (Zupic & Cater, 2015). We used the Pearson's r correlation coefficient to measure the maximum possible similarity of each paper, which is most commonly used in bibliometric research (van Eck & Waltman, 2009). The hierarchical cluster represents research themes, which can identify clustering and groupings of the study that best represent empirically measured relations of similarity (Johnson, 1967). Based on the results of the hierarchical cluster analysis and reviewing the literature within each cluster, we named research themes in each time period. The citations and co-citations were tabulated with the aid of the bibliographic coupling analysis package using *Biblioshiny* which is an open-source application for non-coders (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the number of publications every year from 1995 to 2019. The number of publications has shown an increasing trend, and it hits the peak in 2015 and 2016 with 116 and 117 publications.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The result of hierarchical cluster analysis shows that TP1 (1995-2004) has two themes, TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014) have 4 themes and TP1, TP2, and TP3 (1995-2019) contain 8 themes. Figure 2 illustrates the results, representing the evolution of IHRM over the last 25 years. We indicate the path that links to the themes in the next time period to track the roots and origins of themes based on the data. We draw a solid line to indicate the path when more than 20% of the papers that belonged to the previous theme are linked to the theme in the next time period, while we use a dotted line when more than 5% of the papers from the previous theme are linked with the theme in the next time period. For instance, we find that 58 papers out of 87 papers (67%) that belong to 'international assignments' theme in TP1 are clustered in the 'international assignments (individual level)' theme in TP2, thus the path is drawn with a solid line. Another 13 and 14 papers out of 87 papers (15% and 16% respectively) that belong to 'international assignments'

theme in TP1 are clustered in 'high performance work system in different contexts' and 'subsidiary staffing' themes, respectively, and the paths were indicated with dotted lines. We find the two papers from 'international assignments' theme in TP1 are included in 'managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)' theme in TP2, but the path is not drawn as it accounts for less than 5% of the papers from the theme in TP1.

In TP1, we identify two themes, 'international assignments' and 'HRM practices in MNEs' that account for 40% and 60% of the papers that belonged to the period. The emergence of these two themes reflects the major concerns of multinational management in the mid-1990s. There was a growing interest in studying how to organise and manage worldwide operations. Nohria & Ghoshal (1994) stated that organising the relationship between headquarters and subsidiaries is a key challenge for many MNEs. Deploying expatriates to foreign subsidiaries to control overseas business activities had become increasingly important (Harzing, 2001), and subsequently, international assignments received substantial attention from scholars and professionals during the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (TP1). Moreover, MNEs have recognized the importance of HRM practices including recruitment, selection, labour relations, development, and compensation in subsidiary management. Many scholars have examined a broad range of HRM practices in the MNE context (Cooke et al., 2019), which become a key research theme in TP1.

In our analysis of TP1 and TP2 (1995-2015), four themes emerge. The 'international assignments' theme in TP1 diverges into three themes in TP2, namely, 'international assignments (individual level)', 'high performance work system in different contexts', and 'subsidiary staffing'. The 'HRM practices in MNEs' theme in TP1 shows a strong connection with two themes in TP2, namely, 'subsidiary staffing' and 'Managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)'. In TP2, a more globalized world has urged MNEs to adopt a more sophisticated approach to MNE management, resulting in the emergence of more specific research themes at both individual and organisational levels (McNulty & Tharenou, 2004). Notably, we find the emergence of subsidiary staffing research in TP2, which reflects the MNE's effort to balance the dual pressures of global integration (standardization) and local responsiveness (localisation) (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Lee, 2022). Being influenced by both research themes in TP1, 'subsidiary staffing' emerges

as an important research theme that accounts for more than 30% of articles in TP1 and TP2.

In the analysis of all time periods from 1995 to 2019 (TP1, TP2, and TP3), eight themes have emerged. The papers clustered as 'international assignments (individual level)' theme in TP2 are mostly (i.e., more than 90%) linked to the theme that we call 'expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)' in TP3. Yet, we find the other three themes in TP2 have influenced the emergence of various sophisticated research themes in TP3. The papers included in 'high performance work system in different contexts' theme in TP2 are linked to the four different themes in TP3 that we name as 'expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)', 'knowledge transfer', 'strategic IHRM' and, 'global integration (GI)/ local responsiveness (LR) and hybridisation'. The articles clustered in the 'subsidiary staffing' theme in TP2 have been divided into five different themes in TP3. They have influenced the emergence of research themes that are closely related to MNE/subsidiary management such as 'subsidiary-level HR activities in the MNE', 'GI/LR and hybridisation', and 'strategic IHRM'. They are also related to the 'expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)' and 'cultural differences in MNEs' themes in TP3. Finally, the papers clustered in 'managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)' theme in TP2 are divided into four themes in TP3. We find that 'managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)' theme has influenced the emergence of more sophisticated research themes, shifting the focus from the traditional elite expatriates to other types of international workers such as SIEs (Doherty et al., 2011), migrants and refugees (e.g., Hajro et al., 2021). The emergence of the 'repatriation' theme in TP3 is also relevant to the research on 'managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)' in TP2.

Our results demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature or development of IHRM research over the past decades. In particular, 'expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)' theme is found to be a major research theme over the past 25 years that accounts for about 35% of the sample (535 out of 1,507). We find that this major research theme has its root and origin in the research on international assignments, while the research on high performance work system, expatriate career management, and subsidiary staffing has also contributed to its development. This study also finds that research on 'strategic IHRM' and 'GI/LR and hybridisation' has largely influenced by the studies on both 'high performance work system' and

'subsidiary staffing'.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

4.1 Bibliographic coupling analysis

Figures 3, 4, and 5 illustrate the network of bibliographic couplings between research themes in TP1 (1995-2004), TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014), and TP1, TP2, and TP3 (1995-2019), respectively. As explained above, the results clearly show that there are two clusters in TP1 (1995-2004), 4 clusters in TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014), and 8 clusters in TP1, TP2, and TP3 (1995-2019). The nodes indicate citing documents (i.e., articles), while the edges (ties) represent the strength of bibliographic coupling, in other words, how strong the nodes are tied to each other, which is determined by the number of references shared by two nodes (van Eck & Waltman, 2014). Table 2 shows the detailed metrics of bibliographic coupling analysis. With regard to the network position of articles, centrality measurements have a strong relationship with the number of citations in an article (Yan & Ding, 2009). Centrality indicates the extent to which a node is centrally placed in the network, structurally relatively independent from other nodes. Centrality ranges from 0 to 1 (Nikoleta & Vincent, 2021). The centrality close to 1 means that the social structure has formed a more independent cluster (Glynatsi & Knight, 2021). Density refers to the extent to which the nodes are closely linked to each other. The larger size of overlapped references in the authors' publications leads to a higher density of the network (Qiu et al., 2014). For instance, in TP1, 'international assignments' theme has a higher density (0.624) than 'HRM practices in MNE' theme (0.202), indicating that papers that belong to 'international assignments' theme are more closely interconnected with each other (i.e., having a larger number of co-citation). Table 2 also presents key papers of each research theme that are selected based on the centrality, authors' nationality, research type, and topic (Tsai & Wen, 2005).

[Insert Figures 3, 4, 5 and Table 2 about here]

4.2. Paper co-citation and what it tells us about networks in IHRM research

Table 2, together with figures 3, 4 and 5, allow us to identify the outcomes of the bibliocoupling analysis, the main characteristics of the network in terms of density and centrality, but also the main papers within a certain cluster. For example, at TP1, the papers by Selmer & Leung (2003) and Shaffer & Harrison (2001) are key within the cluster 'HRM practices in the MNE' and the papers by Taylor et al. (1996) and McMahan et al. (1998) are key within the cluster 'international assignments'. There are then other papers that make a bridge between these two clusters in terms of co-citations. An example at TP1 is the paper by Harzing (2001), which is about the control role of expatriates in foreign subsidiaries and a closer read at its contents demonstrate that it is exactly linking the topic of 'international assignments' with 'HRM practices in the MNE'.

As the discipline evolves, we see that the number of papers that act as 'bridges' between clusters increases. One example is the paper by Caligiuri & Bonache (2016), which is central in the 'expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)' theme but has a significant number of links with themes like 'expatriates' careers including SIEs' and 'knowledge transfer'.

Research in different clusters also seems to be associated with how different disciplines have addressed each topic, which tends to be associated with different levels of analysis. For example, focusing again on TP3, we are able to see that the 'expatriate adjustment and development' and the 'expatriate's careers including SIEs' themes (clusters 1 and 4) are more likely to be published in journals focusing more on organisational behaviour or human resource management, and tend to have an individual level of analysis. In contrast, the 'GI/LR and hybridisation' and the 'subsidiary-level HR activities in the MNE' themes (clusters 5 and 6) tend to be published in international business and general management journals and are generally focused on the subsidiary or MNE levels of analysis. By identifying the key papers, clusters, patterns of research, and levels of analysis, researchers can gain a better understanding of the current state of the field and the areas where further investigation may be needed.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study makes several contributions to the IHRM literature, bringing clarity and nuance to the depiction of its evolutionary path. It builds on and extends previous review works, such as Fan et al. (2021), by illuminating the emergence and branching of research themes over time. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how IHRM research has increased its scope while simultaneously breaking into specialized subdisciplines.

In addition, our study confirms and refines the findings of Fan et al. (2021) about the rejuvenation of 'expatriate management' as a key research theme. We further reveal that this theme has branched into more specialized subthemes, such as expatriate adjustment and development, expatriates' careers including SIEs, and repatriation.

Our bibliographic coupling analysis, while complementing extant IHRM review papers, also uncovers the intricate landscape of IHRM research, which incorporates various international business contexts. We further identify 'bridge' papers that create links between different clusters of research, indicating the presence of invisible colleges and fostering interdisciplinarity within IHRM research. This underscores the centrality and importance of multiple levels of analysis within the field.

It is also our aim to go beyond the descriptive element of the bibliographic coupling analysis and explain the formation of the different themes through time. One important finding has to do with the fact that there seems to be a co-existence of the level of analysis on the first period of data analysis. In particular, on the first time period, we have ‘International assignments’ theme focusing more on the individual level of expatriates and the strategic nature of their roles, and ‘HRM practices in the MNE’, which takes a more firm-level or macro level approach. However, later in the analysis (TP2 and TP3), we see that the differences between themes are no longer related to the level of analysis, but instead to the particular content focus of each theme.

The idea of a differentiation based on the nuances of each theme rather than level of analysis is particularly relevant on the third wave of data analysis. Taking for example themes 1 and 7, namely ‘Expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)’ and ‘Expatriate’s careers (including SIEs)’. These

two themes are very similar in terms of research topic and are both mostly focused on the individual level of analysis, which places them in two very close clusters, as depicted in Figure 5 (red and blue). However, we can see from Figure 2 that they emerge from two streams of research that were quite different in the first phase of the IHRM evolution we analysed. Having thoroughly analysed the TP3 papers under 'Expatriate adjustment and development (individual level)', we see a prevalence of articles which have strongly focused on the measurement of adjustment, with a strong focus on assigned expatriates (e.g., Hemmasi et al, 2010). In TP3, 'Expatriate's careers (including SIEs)' theme, the nature of the papers is more prevalently focused on expanding the focus of IHRM research beyond the careers of traditional expatriate assignments (e.g., Andresen et al., 2014, Baruch & Vardi, 2016). Focusing still on the individual level of analysis, 'Repatriation' theme emerges being thematically close to 'Expatriate's careers (including SIEs)' theme. Its origin is still based on a literature that expands the focus on a wider perspective on careers, but there seems to be an increasing specialisation regarding the way we look at a particular stage of expatriates' careers, namely repatriation (Suutari & Välimaa, 2002).

Another example of the fact that IHRM evolved towards a differentiation based on the nuances of each theme rather than level of analysis can be found when looking at two other TP3's themes, namely 'Strategic IHRM' and 'GI/LR & Hybridisation'. As depicted in Figure 2, both themes are composed by almost the same number of papers that come from TP2's themes 'High performance work systems in different contexts' and 'Subsidiary staffing', which originally come from two separate streams at TP1. This suggests that the field evolved in the sense that there was a separation of the focus on strategy in relation to IHRM (Song et al., 2017), and the specific debates around 'GI/LR & Hybridisation' (Van der Laken et al., 2019).

5.2. How will IHRM research continue to evolve?

This study opens avenues for future research. First, this study shows that IHRM research themes are diverging into more sophisticated themes reflecting changing environments that MNEs face. Following an institutional theory perspective (Lewis et al., 2019), which emphasises the importance of both institutional

and macro-economic contexts, we predict that IHRM research themes will be more divergent in the future by incorporating many important environmental changes (Cooke et al., 2019; Fan et al., 2021). In response to environmental changes, the last three to four years have witnessed dramatic changes in nature of work, workforce allocation and workplaces. Those changes can be affecting IHRM research in the future.

First, employees in the organizations have started to think over the meaning of work in their lives because they had the opportunity to be with family members and stay at home due to a sudden implementation of remote work (Sull et al., 2022). Employees have begun to believe that work should not be seen as the most important part of life and then they are willing to quit the job once it starts having a negative impact on their well-being (i.e., the great resignation; Bojanowska et al., 2021). Therefore, organizations across the globe should find the way of how to increase employee retention and engagement, offering employees opportunities for personal and professional growth (Li & Yeo, 2011). Providing training and development programs, mentoring, and coaching can help employees feel valued and supported in their career goals. In TP 3, we find that expatriation management has evolved into 'expatriate adjustment and development', 'expatriate's career', and 'repatriation' themes from TP 1 and TP 2. By reflecting these changes in the nature of work, we anticipate that future research about expatriation will be divergent into a direction of how to retain and engage expatriates in MNEs. Along with these engagement and retention practices, we predict a growth in research on alternative forms of international working, such as digital nomads (Mancinelli, 2020). Furthermore, future research should investigate the management of expatriation within the context of talent management. It is essential to understand the intersection between these two areas and their joint impact (Cerdin & Brewster, 2014). Despite its recognized importance for firm performance, expatriate management frequently appears isolated from a company's comprehensive global human resource strategy. Integrating expatriate management into the wider scope of talent management could lead to more effective handling of expatriate assignments. Such an approach would ensure that expatriate practices are in harmony with the strategic goals of talent management, potentially improving overall organizational effectiveness.

Second, the IHRM landscape is progressively aligning with digital transformation, reshaping

conventional work arrangements and expatriate management (Amladi, 2017; Caligiuri et al., 2020). This evolution is particularly significant in light of recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and analytical capabilities, which profoundly impact knowledge management and strategic IHRM considerations (George & Schillebeeckx, 2022; Grimpe et al.2023). MNEs are increasingly leveraging digital platforms for efficient knowledge transfer processes, underpinning a transformative shift in their operational strategies (Hossain & Lassen, 2017). Given this backdrop, it becomes imperative to reassess the roles and competencies of expatriates within these digitally enhanced environments. Traditional methods of tacit knowledge transfer, heavily reliant on expatriates, face the risk of knowledge attrition when expatriates exit organizations. Digital collaboration technologies offer a solution by enabling the explicit documentation and tracking of knowledge, safeguarding it against such losses (Canhilal et al., 2022). This shift underscores the growing importance of expatriates' proficiency in using digital platforms and comprehending their outcomes for international management purposes including recruitment (Banks, et al. 2019) and retention (Grimpe, et al. 2023), a theme that warrants further exploration in future IHRM studies in the digital era.

Furthermore, the increasing prominence of virtual global mobility activities in MNEs calls for a renewed focus on skill development for virtual teams. This aspect becomes particularly salient considering the potential for virtual global mobility to complement or substitute physical global work assignments, a concept extensively explored in recent literature (Selmer et al., 2022; Holtbrügge & Schillo, 2008; Holtbrügge et al., 2011). In addition, the integration of virtual assignments in MNEs underscores the evolving nature of expatriate roles in a digitalized environment. This advancement suggests the potential for virtual assignments to supplement or even replace traditional expatriate roles, offering a cost-effective, flexible alternative that still facilitates the transfer of knowledge and cultural understanding (Wicht & Holtbrügge, 2023).

Fourth, the integration of AI and big data analytics in IHRM presents new frontiers for predicting human behavior at various organizational levels, offering promising avenues for future research (Ghauri, Strange, & Cooke, 2021). Future studies in IHRM should also delve into the interactions between AI

applications and the work dynamics of local employees and expatriates, exploring both the challenges and opportunities inherent in this digital transformation. For instance, future research may focus on theorizing the preconditions, such as cultural and strategic factors, necessary for organizations to successfully implement AI-driven HRM functions. This includes testing their impact at both employee and organizational levels to assess effectiveness. Additionally, scholars should explore the optimal balance in delegating tasks and decision-making between humans and AI technologies, aiming for an effective human-AI interplay in the workplace. Investigating strategies like job redesign and employee upskilling is also essential to support these transitions. Furthermore, specific HRM applications such as AI-enabled human resource planning, personalized employee coaching, and tailored training recommendations are crucial for providing actionable insights for future HR practices. Alongside these positive aspects, it is important to consider potential conflicts arising at both the individual and organizational levels. These might include issues like psychological contract breaches between humans and social robots, identity challenges, and cognitive dissonance experienced in environments with non-human and humanoid systems (Budhwar, et al. 2022; Malik et al. 2022).

Fifth, more diversified topics such as gender identities and sexual orientation (Valenti, 2021), generations and race are likely to be studied in the future. In TP 3, cultural differences in MNEs were emerged as a cluster with 51 papers. This cluster is likely to expand and may even divide, as it incorporates topics associated with diversity management. Along with cultural differences in MNEs, differences in gender, generation and identities can simultaneously present both opportunities and risks in managing MNEs. Thus, further studies about various factors of workforce diversity management (beyond culture) are likely to be conducted in the future research within IHRM. An important group that has recently received additional attention is that of migrants and low-skilled expatriates. The understanding of different migrant flows and the movement of lower-skilled expatriates is gaining the attention of IHRM researchers, who are particularly interested in their motivations and quality of working life, at an individual level, but also on the way this workforce is being utilized by organizations in different host countries (Brewster & Haak-Saheem, 2022).

Sixth, topics related to change in workplaces and worktime are likely to be included in future IHRM research. Virtual work within MNEs has been studied but there is a still low number of studies on this topic despite its relevance and the fact that it can change the concept of collaboration across countries (Bian et al., 2021). These future studies are likely to emerge from the 'Subsidiary-level HR activities in the MNEs' theme in TP 3. Also, future IHRM research is likely to reflect the current debates on worktime reduction, including the four-day workweek policy, which has been associated with a reduction in stress and burnout (University of Cambridge, 2023). It is likely that future studies in IHRM will investigate how MNEs can deal with another type of time difference between headquarters and subsidiaries and manage flexible working hours. Furthermore, given the increasing complexity within the MNE network, which is dispersed across various regions and involves a complex organization of diverse value chain activities worldwide, future research should also closely examine the roles of expatriates and local talent in managing organizational and environmental complexities in MNE management (Lee, 2019; 2022).Finally, making sense of contemporary careers is an important feature of scholarly work in IHRM (Kinsella et al., 2020). A definable employer-employee relationship inside the organisational boundary has increasingly become blurry in the gig economy (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). While a central topic associated with contemporary careers and the gig economy is mobility and alternative work arrangements, many MNEs are facing challenges to manage employees who have or pursue higher mobility and alternative work arrangements. Future IHRM research is likely to focus on how MNEs are rethinking their IHRM strategies concerning recruitment, compensation, and development. In sum, future studies of change in the nature of work, workforce and workplace are likely to be the core of future research in IHRM discipline and the cluster pattern we identified is likely to significantly change within the next decade.

5.3. Future research direction after COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on IHRM during 2020-2023 can expand our findings in terms of IHRM evolution. We suggest the future research direction after COVID-19 pandemic. First, the adaptive IHRM strategies in post-pandemic agile organizations should be studied. Future investigations should

concentrate on how IHRM can act as a catalyst for organizational agility and resilience, particularly in the milieu of the post-COVID-19 era (Aleem et al, 2023). This encompasses an in-depth exploration of adaptive human resource strategies that empower organizations to nimbly respond to fluctuating market demands and unforeseen global disruptions. Key areas of inquiry should include the examination of human resource roles in nurturing a culture conducive to continuous learning, cross-functional collaborations, and accelerated decision-making processes. Further, the integration of remote working paradigms and digital tools into HR methodologies to sustain organizational efficacy warrants comprehensive scrutiny (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023). Other research themes influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in IHRM encompass the impact on employees' personal well-being, career progression, family life and gender roles, health and safety, and labor market dynamics (Aleem et al, 2023).

Second, sustainable IHRM practices in the context of global environmental and social challenges need to be investigated. A critical area for future research is the exploration of how IHRM can contribute to organizational sustainability and social responsibility, particularly in addressing overarching global challenges such as climate change, diversity, equity, and inclusion. This research should probe into the role of human resources in propelling sustainable business practices, advocating environmental stewardship, and cultivating an inclusive and diverse work environment (George & Schillebeeckx, 2022). This research trajectory holds the potential to position IHRM as an integral entity in effectuating organizational transformation towards heightened social and environmental accountability, aligning with broader global sustainability objectives. These proposed domains for forthcoming research are intended to address the evolving exigencies and prospects in the international business environment, particularly under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee, 2022; Liu et al.2020). They offer an expansive view of the potential strategic contributions of IHRM in navigating and thriving within a dynamic global business milieu (Patrick et al., 2022).

5.4. Implications for Business and Management Practice

The findings of this study have practical implications for business and management practice. The

identification of major themes and their evolution in IHRM research can help practitioners prioritize their focus areas and adopt best practices in a dynamic and international business environment. The mapping of 'bridge' papers that link different research clusters also has practical utility, guiding practitioners to the intersection of organizational behavior and international business and other relevant areas, thereby fostering interdisciplinary approaches in their practices.

Moreover, our study's methodological contributions have significant practical implications. Our bibliometric approach provides a more objective and comprehensive overview of the IHRM field, which may influence future research strategies and the operationalization of important concepts in the field. It offers insights into key subjects and relationships, thus supporting future information retrieval procedures and enhancing scientific communication.

Overall, the evolution of IHRM research and the identification of its current themes and trends offer valuable insights for practitioners, aiding them in developing effective international human resource strategies and practices.

5.4. Limitations

This study has several limitations. To begin with, we conducted a bibliometric analysis, and hence, this study is not free from commonly addressed limitations associated with the method. The bibliometric analysis does not consider the intentions of authors when citing other articles. Citation and co-citation approaches are dependent on the academic context, and it is hard to recognise the reasons behind citation choices (García-Lillo et al., 2017). We draw the sample from WOS to improve the quality and reliability of the research. However, there might be other journals that have recently grown in popularity but have not been indexed by WOS. Furthermore, our sample does not contain potentially relevant research published in other languages than English.

Second, this study does not include publications from the recent years (2020-2023) because the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has drawn huge attention, and this may have some potential compounding effects on our analysis of the evolutionary path of IHRM research. However, without a doubt,

it has inspired IHRM scholars to consider relevant research topics such as managing unpredictability, promoting multinational and global collaboration, and redefining organizational performance in times of crisis (Caligiuri et al., 2021). We believe these topics will become important research topics and influence the clustering structure of IHRM research. However, a more accurate view through bibliographic coupling analysis will bring robust results only after some years, because the citation of papers takes some time to be recognizable and the amount of time passed upon recovery from the pandemic is still quite short to advance any conclusions about the evolution of the IHRM discipline post-pandemic.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper conducts a bibliometric analysis to examine the evolutionary path of IHRM research over the last 25 years. By adopting a historical perspective and mapping the semantic structure of the literature, this study reveals a complex semantic structure of IHRM research and identifies the main research themes that contributed to the development of IHRM research. This research resonates with calls for a more comprehensive review and synthesis of how IHRM literature has evolved using a large-scale data-driven approach. Given that IHRM is one of the most important functional fields in international business and management, understanding how human factors in international business activities have evolved is hugely relevant to both researchers and practitioners. Informed by the current clusters we identified, we aimed to provide a map on the historical trends within IHRM research, but also inform potential paths for future research in this field.

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Table 1. Top sources titles of IHRM research

	Source titles	Number of articles	Percentage of the identified articles
1	International Journal of Human Resource Management	514	34.11
2	Journal of World Business	91	6.04
3	Human Resource Management	86	5.71
4	Personnel Review	64	4.25
5	Journal of International Business Studies	57	3.78
6	International Business Review	50	3.32
7	International Journal of Manpower	45	2.99
8	Journal of Business Ethics	45	2.99
9	European Journal of International Management	43	2.85
10	Human Resource Management Review	32	2.12
11	Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources	31	2.06

Note: Source counting for more than 2% of the identified articles were included.

Table 2. Full network, factor analysis and network metrics with key papers (1995-2019)

Time period	Research themes	Natwork analysis				Key papers
		No of nodes	Number of edges	Centrality	Density	
TP1 (1995-2004)	HRM practices in MNEs	127	3,234	0.412	0.202	Selmer & Leung (2003), Shaffer & Harrison (2001)
	International assignments	87	284,676	0.297	0.624	Taylor et al. (1996), McMahan et al. (1998)
TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014)	International assignments (individual level)	233	35,974	0.245	0.665	Bolino (2007), Hemmasi et al. (2010)
	Managing expatriates' careers (organisational level)	152	10,582	0.342	0.461	Oltra et al. (2013), Johnson et al. (2006)
	High-performance work system in different contexts	216	27,798	0.351	0.598	Colakoglu et al. (2009), Gonzalez & Chakraborty (2014)
	Subsidiary Staffing	319	32,154	0.546	0.316	Rabl et al. (2014), Björkman et al. (2007)
TP1, TP2 and	Expatriate adjustment and	535	128,376	0.377	0.449	Tüselmann et al. (2006),

TP3 (2015-2019)	development (individual level)					Smale (2008)
	Knowledge transfer	54	1,416	0.341	0.494	Fan et al. (2017), Reiche (2011)
	Strategic IHRM	231	14,910	0.434	0.280	Song et al. (2017), Gaur et al. (2007)
	Expatriate's careers including SIEs	199	18,730	0.369	0.475	Selmer & Lauring (2012), Andresen et al. (2014)
	GI/LR and hybridisation	214	23,728	0.335	0.520	Caligiuri & Bonache (2016), Van der Laken et al. (2019)
	Subsidiary-level HR activities in the MNE	143	12,864	0.312	0.633	Lertxundi & Landeta (2011), Demirbag et al. (2014)
	Repatriation	39	1,152	0.147	0.777	Vidal et al. (2010), Suutari & Välimaa (2002)
	Cultural differences in MNEs	51	1,610	0.253	0.631	Hauff & Richter (2015), van Hoorn (2015)

Figure 1. Number of articles in a year published on IHRM research included in our sample

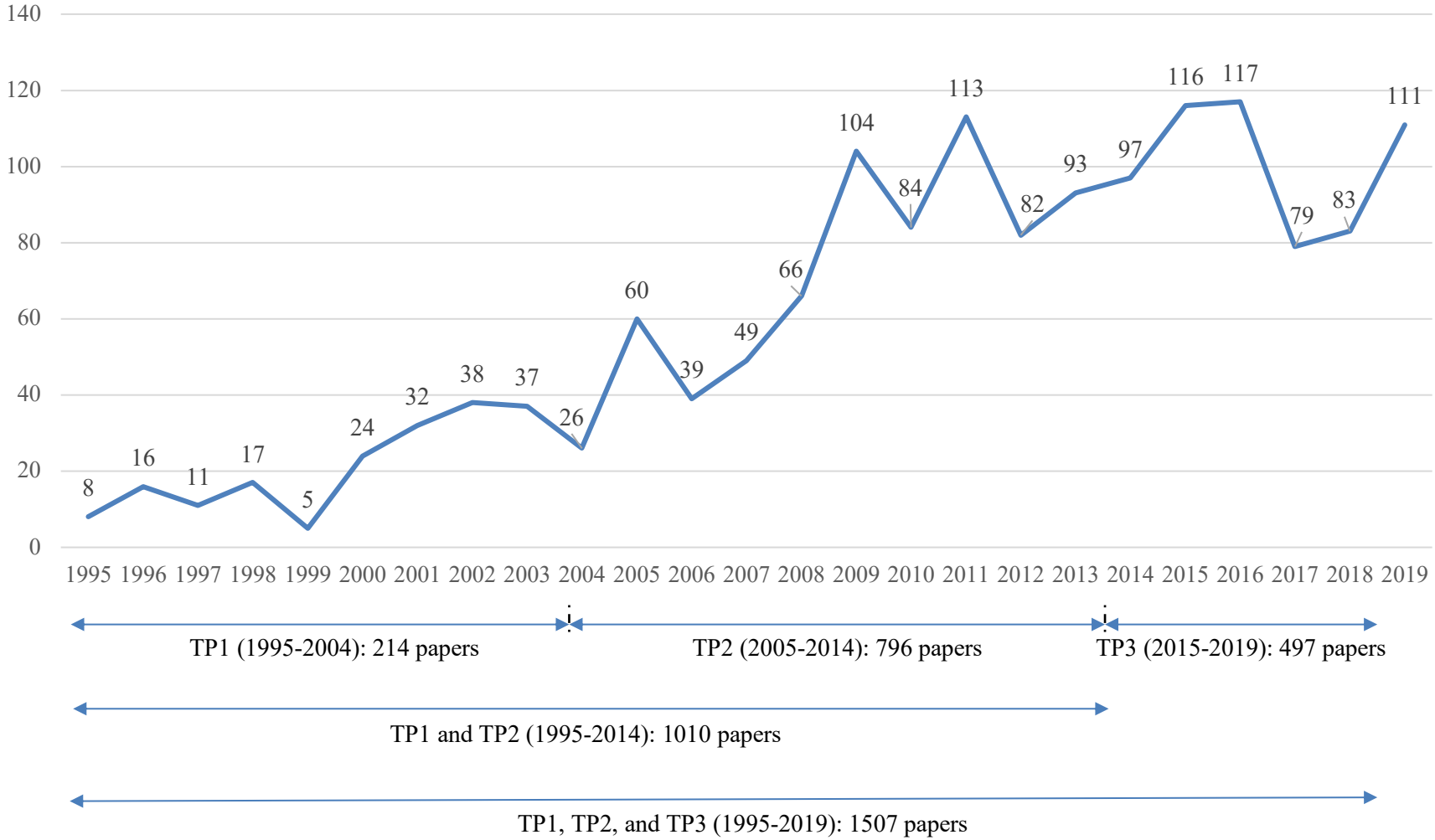
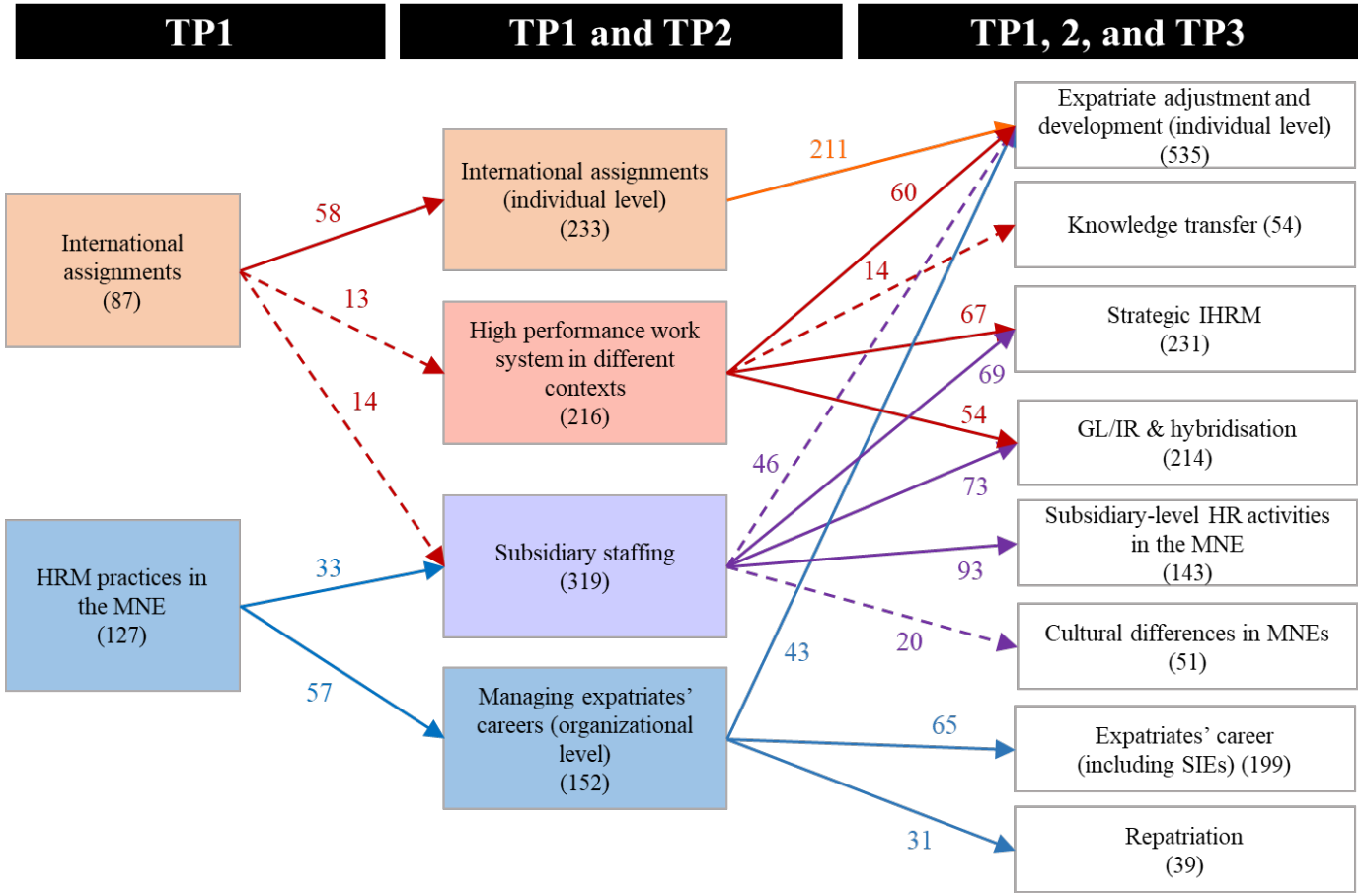
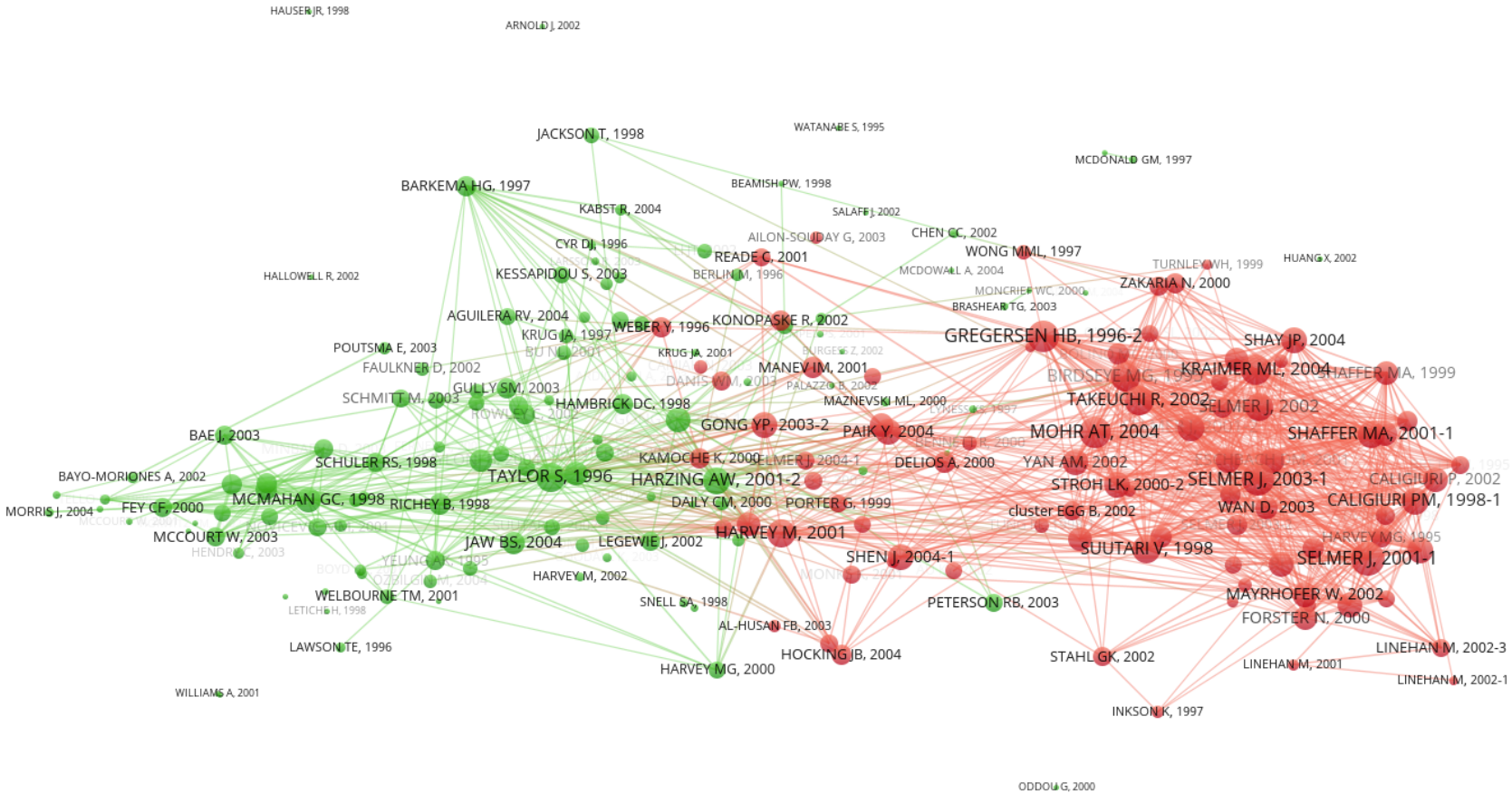


Figure 2. The evolutionary path of the research themes in the field of IHRM during 1995-2019



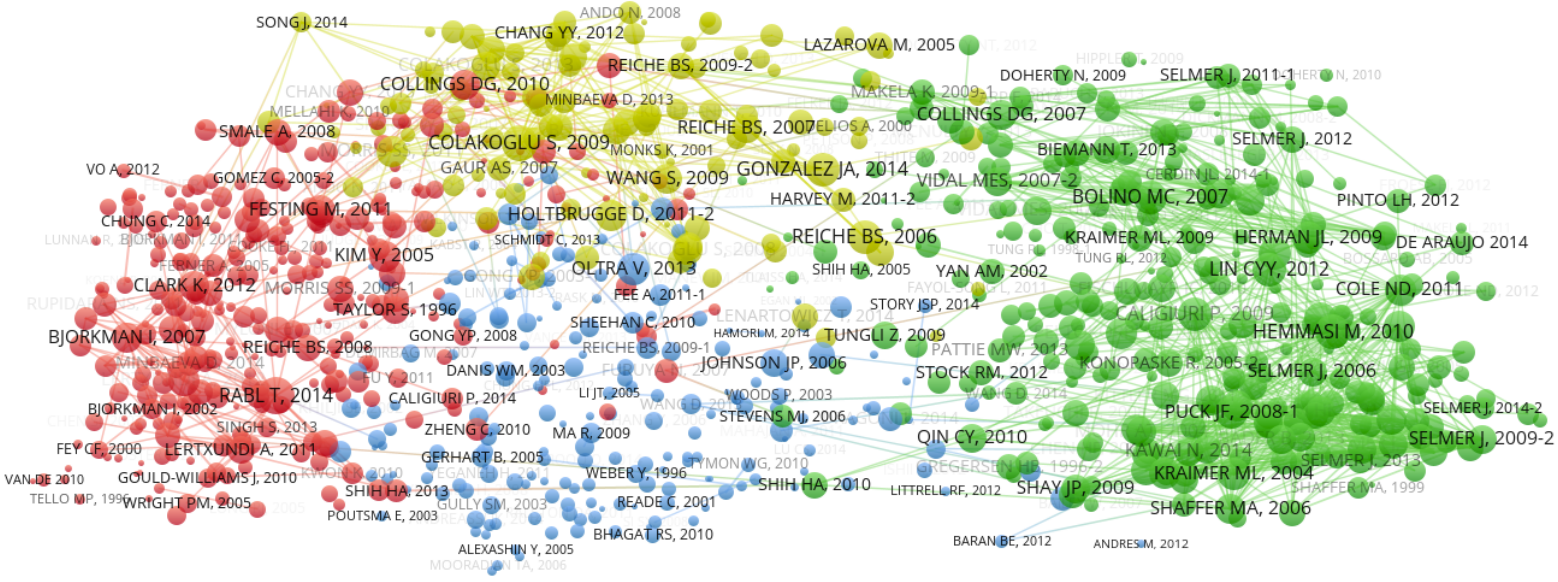
Note: Number of papers in the parenthesis; 90 papers were not clustered in the analysis of TP1 and TP2; 41 papers were not clustered in the analysis of TP1, TP2 and TP3. A solid line indicates a path when more than 20% of the papers that belonged to the previous theme are linked to the theme in the next time period; A dotted line indicates a path when more than 5% of the papers from the previous theme are linked with the theme in the next time period.

Figure 3. Bibliographic coupling analysis in TP1 (1995-2004).



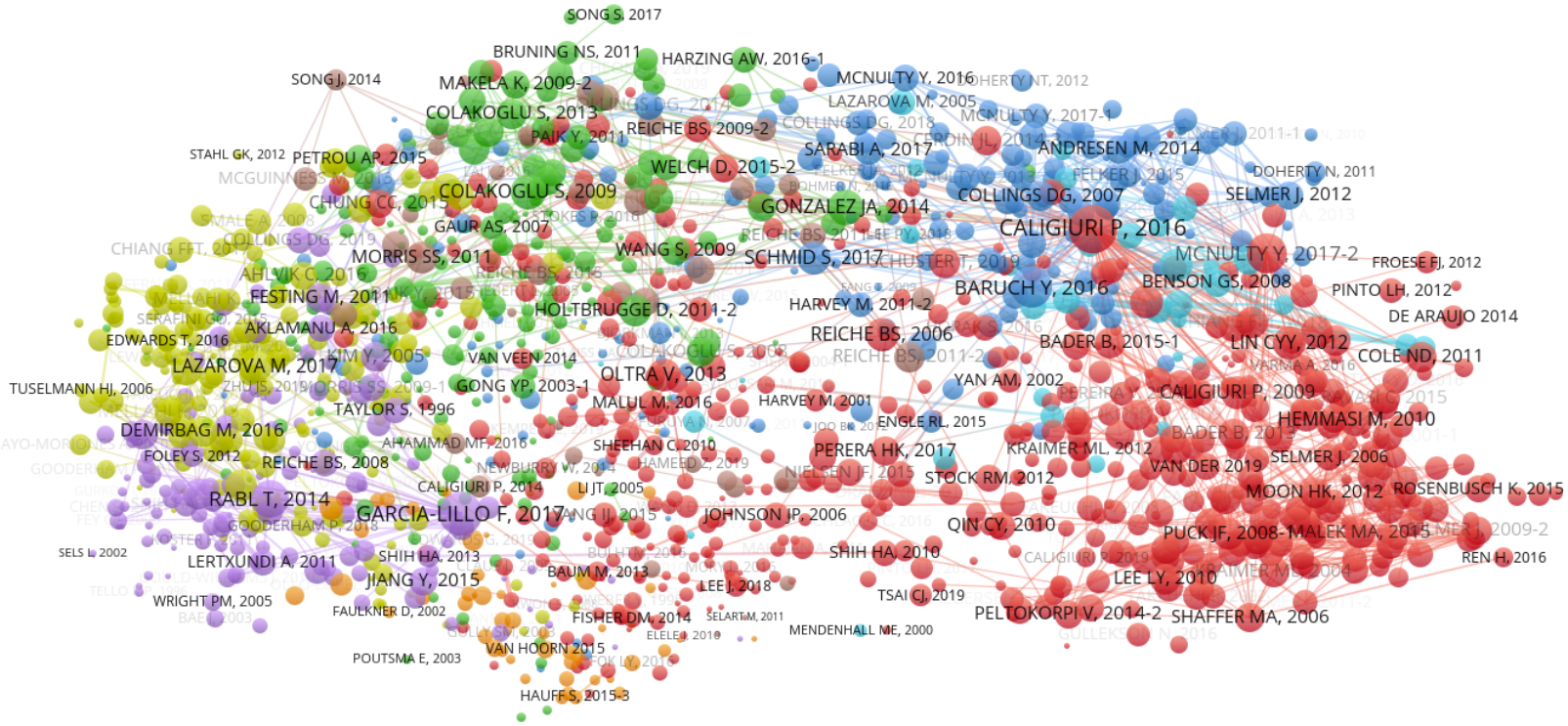
Note: Red = international assignments, Green = HRM practices in the MNE

Figure 4. Bibliographic coupling analysis in TP1 and TP2 (1995-2014).



Note. Red = Subsidiary staffing; Yellow = High-performance work system in different contexts, Blue = Managing expatriates' careers (organisational level); Green = International assignments (individual level).

Figure 5. Bibliographic coupling analysis in TP1, TP2 and TP3 (1995-2019).



Note. Yellow = GI/LR and hybridisation, Purple = Subsidiary-level HR activities in the MNE, Green = Strategic IHRM, Orange = Cultural differences in MNEs, Brown = Repatriation, Blue = Expatriates' careers including SIEs, Light blue = Knowledge transfer, Red = Expatriate adjustment and development (individual level).