

Systematic Review on the Theory of Internal Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review synthesizes internal marketing (IM) research from 2000-2024, employing rigorous methodology to analyze theoretical and empirical studies and establish clarity in this strategically important domain. Through comprehensive database searches and quality assessment, the review reveals that internal marketing has evolved from a tactical employee satisfaction tool to a multidimensional strategic approach that helps organizations understand employee needs, prioritize development, and enhance communication and teamwork (Huang, 2021), while integrating employee, customer, and organizational foci (Chen et al., 2021). Five factors have elevated internal marketing's strategic importance: growing emphasis on employee experience; adaptive change management requirements; digital transformation challenges; talent retention imperatives; and internal-external customer alignment needs. The review identifies significant gaps in theoretical integration (limited connection with innovation theories), methodological approaches (insufficient longitudinal research), and contextual applications (underexplored public sectors and cross-cultural contexts). Contemporary trends include digitalization of IM delivery, personalization approaches, and data-driven strategies, while persistent challenges involve measurement difficulties and ROI demonstration. This synthesis contributes by integrating fragmented knowledge, revealing patterns, and establishing a research agenda that advances scholarship and provides practitioners with evidence-based guidance for implementing effective internal marketing strategies.

Keywords: Internal marketing, theoretical approach, human resources, service, public sector

INTRODUCTION

William George (1990) refers to internal marketing as a management philosophy concerning the human resources of an organization, based on marketing theory, operating in two ways: a) ensuring that employees at all levels understand and experience their work and its whole nature as a framework that supports the development of customer consciousness and b) ensuring that all employees are prepared and motivated to operate service-oriented. Human resources are the "internal market" of a public service and that is precisely where internal marketing aims, to create strong bonds between management and staff, mutual relationships governed by trust, understanding, commitment and a spirit of cooperation with the aim of providing quality services to the citizen (Magatef & Momani, 2016).

Initially, Internal Marketing (IM) was proposed as a theory that aimed to treat employees as internal customers, with the aim of designing jobs as products that satisfy and motivate employees to provide high-quality services (Berry, 1981). However, it is argued that there is

an additional factor that influences the role of internal marketing: ensuring that departments, functions, organizations, and employees collaborate and behave in a particular way according to a concept of internal supplier-customer relationship (George, 1990; Panigyrakis & Theodoridis, 2009). Internal marketing is an alternative construct that can be used to increase innovation at both the individual and organizational levels that can lead to creative ideas from employees.

According to Grönroos (1990), internal marketing is primarily “a philosophy for personnel management and a systematic way to develop and implement a service culture.” In summary, research examining the concept of internal marketing can be categorized into three main approaches:

- Internal marketing as a means of satisfying employees’ needs: This is a holistic approach that aims at job satisfaction and is implemented through effective communication with employees (Berry et al., 1976; Sasser & Arbeit, 1976; George, 1990).
- The development of customer-oriented employee behaviour: in this approach, the aim is to increase awareness about the services and cultivate a customer-centric mindset (Grönroos, 1985, Conduit & Mavondo, 2001).
- Human resource management orientation: according to some researchers (Joseph, 1996; Cooper & Cronin, 2000), internal marketing should be integrated into human resource management, with the aim of motivating and encouraging staff to provide higher quality services.

OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the review include:

- Mapping the evolution of internal marketing theory
- The evaluation of the empirical findings of the last decade
- Identifying the main trends and challenges
- Highlighting research gaps and future directions

INTERNAL MARKETING MODELS

Internal marketing, which was first introduced in service industries, has its fundamental principles dating back to the 1980s (Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013). Grönroos (2020), in his widely recognized internal marketing model, argued that internal marketing should function as a strategic process with a dual objective: on the one hand, cultivating a customer-centric mindset among staff and on the other hand, maintaining high levels of motivation so that employees deliver excellent standards of customer service. Internal marketing, as Yalabik et al. (2013) point out, tends to enhance job commitment by creating job satisfaction.

I will specifically mention 4 marketing models:

1. Berry Model

Leonard Berry is one of the pioneers who developed the concept of internal marketing, recognizing the importance of employees as the "internal customers" of the company.

According to his theory, internal marketing is as important as external marketing for the success of a service company. Employees are treated as internal customers and jobs are the "products" offered to internal customers. At the same time, the attraction, development and motivation of suitable personnel are encouraged, with an emphasis on spreading a customer service mentality through employee involvement in decision-making and encouraging a service culture. Berry emphasizes that internal marketing is not just a program or campaign, but a management philosophy that must permeate the entire organization. When companies effectively implement internal marketing, they create an environment where employees feel valued and motivated to provide excellent service to external customers.

2. Grönroos Model

Christian Grönroos, a Finnish professor and researcher, developed an important theory of internal marketing alongside Berry. His approach contributed significantly to the development of the Scandinavian School of Services Marketing and offers a complementary perspective to Berry's theory. Grönroos (1981) defined internal marketing as the process of "selling the company to its employees" before it tries to sell its products/services to external customers. He considers internal marketing as a key prerequisite for effective external marketing. Grönroos' model emphasizes that internal marketing is not simply a function of the marketing department but a holistic management process that includes:

- Employee training
- Administrative support
- Internal interactive communication
- Reward systems
- Internal information management

Grönroos contributed significantly to the development of internal marketing by:

1. The emphasis on the management approach: It highlighted internal marketing as a management philosophy and not simply as a function of the marketing department.
2. Recognizing interdependence: Emphasized the connection between internal marketing, external marketing, and interactive marketing (the "service triangle").
3. Expanding the concept of marketers: Introduced the idea that all employees in a service business function as marketers.
4. Emphasis on the continuous process: It highlighted internal marketing as a continuous process and not as a single campaign.

3. Rafiq & Ahmed Model

Mohammed Rafiq and Pervaiz K. Ahmed have developed an important model of internal marketing that attempts to synthesize and extend previous approaches, particularly those of Berry and Grönroos. Their model offers a more integrated approach, incorporating elements from marketing, human resource management, and change management. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) identified three distinct stages in the evolution of internal marketing. Based on their analysis of the three phases, Rafiq and Ahmed proposed the following definition:

"Internal marketing is a planned effort using a marketing-type approach to overcome organizational resistance to change and to align, motivate, and integrate employees across departments toward the effective implementation of corporate and operational strategies, with the goal of delivering customer satisfaction through a process of creating motivated and customer-oriented employees."

1. Employee satisfaction and motivation phase

- It is based on Berry's approach
- Focus on employee satisfaction to improve service quality
- Employees are treated as internal customers

2. Customer orientation phase

- It is based on the Grönroos approach
- Recognizing the importance of seller-buyer interactions
- Emphasis on creating customer awareness among employees

3. Strategy implementation and change management phase

- Recognizing the role of internal marketing in implementing strategies
- Internal marketing as a mechanism for overcoming organizational inertia
- Emphasis on eliminating functional silos and interdepartmental conflicts

Rafiq and Ahmed's model have contributed significantly to the development of internal marketing theory in the following ways:

1. **Synthesis of previous approaches:** Incorporates elements from Berry and Grönroos' models into a more comprehensive framework.
2. **Broadening application:** Extends internal marketing beyond service businesses, making it applicable to all organizations.
3. **Strategic orientation:** Emphasizes the role of internal marketing in implementing strategies and managing change.
4. **Interdisciplinary approach:** Combines principles from marketing, human resource management and organizational behavior.
5. **Practical application:** Offers specific tools, such as the internal marketing mix, for implementing internal marketing.

4. Modern Hybrid Models

In recent years, modern models have been developed that incorporate:

- I. Digital internal marketing tools
- II. Detailed employee data

- III. Digital employee management tools, digital data and analytics
- IV. Internal branding
- V. Holistic approach to "employee experience"

Modern hybrid models for internal marketing combine traditional and digital approaches to create more effective employee communication strategies. These models aim to create more engaged and productive teams, improving internal communication and enhancing company culture. These models are the foundation for the development of theoretical frameworks and practical applications of internal marketing. Hybrid internal marketing models offer an integrated approach that combines the best of traditional and digital methods. Successful implementation requires strategic planning, appropriate technological infrastructure and continuous adaptation to employee needs. Organizations that adopt these approaches can achieve higher levels of employee engagement, better internal communication and a stronger corporate culture.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, which aims to study primary research sources in an objective, synthetic and critical manner (Torgerson, 2003). Aiming to find all the information on a topic, it both summarizes the general picture of a field of knowledge (Ridley, 2012) and synthesizes the results to further inform research and practice (Munn et al., 2018). To conduct the review, successive steps are followed: a) the clear formulation of the research questions to which the review is required to provide answers, b) identifying the type of articles under investigation, c) conducting a thorough literature search), d) quickly reading the results of the articles, with the aim of selecting or not, based on the inclusion criteria, e) thoroughly examining and critically evaluating the included articles and g) synthesizing the results (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

Table 1

No.	Research Dimensions	Application in Research
1.	Topic Definition	How has internal marketing theory evolved between 2000-2024 and what are the dominant trends and prospects?
2.	Research Questions	1. What are the main theoretical approaches that have emerged and how do they differ? 2. What are the dominant theoretical models of internal marketing that have been proposed? 3. How have these models evolved and what are the current trends?

		4. What data collection methods have been used? 5. What is the thematic framework of the articles and what are their findings?
3.	Keywords	1. Internal Marketing, Theory, review
4.	Databases	1. Six Databases: Science Direct, Springer Link, Emerald, Elsevier, Wiley, Taylor and Francis, Sage
5.	Posting evaluation	Validity and reliability assessment of selected articles

This study reviews inbound marketing (IM) articles from the decade (2000 to 2024). The research was conducted during the period February-March 2025 using the following databases: Science Direct, Springer Link, Emerald, Elsevier, Wiley, Taylor and Francis, Sage. The specific keyword database used to identify and collect existing studies, as well as the keyword search algorithm based on Boolean logic (AND / OR / NOT). For the process of selecting or rejecting a research article, a series of criteria were defined in a systematic way (Table 2), which included the following: language of writing, time range of publication, type of publication, methodological design, accessibility and content. After applying the criteria and following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis) protocol (Page et al., 2021), 200 articles were examined for inclusion, of which 150 were excluded based on the criteria. Finally, 50 articles were selected and analyzed and categorized. The analysis was based on the following research questions:

- Q. 1: What are the main theoretical approaches that have emerged and how do they differ?
- Q. 2: What are the dominant theoretical models of internal marketing that have been proposed?
- Q. 3: How have these models evolved and what are the current trends?
- Q.4: What data collection methods have been used?
- Q. 5: What is the thematic context of the articles and what are their findings?

Table 2: Selection criteria for Scientific Articles

Language of Writing	English
Publication Time Range	20 00 -2024
Publication Type	Scientific Articles
Article Types	Empirical Data or Theoretical Analyses

Accessibility - Validity of articles	Full Access to the entire content of the article
Search Terms	Internal Marketing AND Theory

KEY SEARCH CRITERIA:

- Search Terms: "Internal Marketing" AND "Theory"
- Type: Full text, Research articles/Academic articles
- Language: English
- Time period: 2000 -2024

Table 3

DATABASE	Search	Filters	TOTAL ARTICLES
SCIENCE DIRECT	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	112
SPRINGER LINK	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	89
EMERALD	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	156
ELSEVIER	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	98
WILEY	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	76
TAYLOR & FRANCIS	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	143
SAGE	Internal Marketing" AND "Theory	Research articles, 2000 - 2024	92

DETAILED PRESENTATION:

BASIC THEORETICAL APPROACHES (See Table 4)

INTERNAL CUSTOMER THEORY

The Internal Customer Theory is an extension of the customer-centric philosophy and is the basis of Internal Marketing. It derives from the recognition that in order to satisfy the final (external) customer, the "internal customers" - the organization 's own employees - must first

be satisfied. Satisfied employees are more productive, more willing to provide quality service, and more likely to stay with the company, leading to a better experience for the final customer.

VALUE EXCHANGE THEORY

The Value Exchange Theory is one of the core concepts of marketing. It is based on the idea that every transaction – whether between a business and a customer, between two individuals, or even within an organization – is an exchange of value. It is not simply the product or service, but the set of benefits (functional, emotional, social, etc.) that a transaction party derives, in relation to the cost (financial, time, mental, etc.) that is incurred. Internal Marketing: Within the organization, this theory is applied to the employer-employee relationship. The employee offers their labor, skills, and time (cost to themselves) and in return expects value in the form of salary, benefits, good working conditions, recognition, development opportunities, and a positive work environment. The company, for its part, offers all of these (cost to the company) in order to derive value from the employee's productivity, commitment, and loyalty.

SERVICE-PROFIT CHAIN THEORY

The Service -Profit Chain Theory is an integrated model developed by Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, Jr., and Schlesinger (originally published in the Harvard Business Review in 1994).

The chain works as follows:

1. **Internal Service Quality:** Refers to the work environment, human resource policies, training, support and recognition provided to employees.
2. **Employee Satisfaction:** High internal service quality leads to satisfied employees. Satisfied employees are more positive, motivated and willing to perform better.
3. **Employee Loyalty:** Satisfaction contributes to employee retention by reducing turnover and the cost of hiring/training new staff.
4. **Employee Productivity:** Loyal and satisfied employees are more productive and efficient.
5. **External Service Quality:** High productivity and positive employee attitudes translate into higher quality services offered to external customers.

These three theories complement each other and highlight the importance of a holistic approach to management and marketing. They highlight that the internal functioning of an organization is directly linked to market success and customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Theoretical Approaches in Internal Marketing

Internal Customer Theory	Value Exchange Theory	Service-Profit Theory	Chain
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Treating employees as customers	Mutual exchange of value between the organization and employees	Internal-external quality connection
Emphasis on meeting work needs	Focus on the two-way relationship	Impact on profitability
Link to external quality of service	Developing work commitment	Holistic service approach

CONCEPTUAL MODELS (Table 5)

Table 5: Conceptual Models in Internal Marketing

Berry model	Grönroos model	Rafiq & Ahmed Model	Modern Hybrid Models
Employees as customers	Supportive management	Interdepartmental coordination	Integrating digital technologies
Work as a product	Internal communication	Employee motivation	Flexible working structures
Focus on employee satisfaction	Staff training	Customer orientation	Personalized approach

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS (See Table 6)

Table 6: Theoretical Frameworks in Internal Marketing

Strategic Framework	Operational Framework	Holistic Framework
Alignment with corporate strategy	Daily practices	Consolidation of approaches
Management commitment	Implementation tools	Systemic approach
Long-term planning	Performance measurements	Multi-level implementation

Internal Marketing Strategic Framework

It is based on Strategic Management Theory and the Resource and Capability (RBV) Theory. It views internal marketing as a critical element in achieving the organization's strategic goals.

Basic Principles

- Aligning employees with the organization's strategy

- Developing strategic capabilities through human resources
- Creating competitive advantage through internal differentiation
- Long-term orientation and sustainability

Internal Marketing Operational Framework

It is based on Operations Theory and Applied Work Psychology. It focuses on the practical application of techniques and tools for daily operation.

Basic Principles

- Immediate applicability of practices
- Measurable results and specific indicators
- Short-term improvement in performance
- Standardization of procedures and good practices

Holistic Internal Marketing Framework

It is based on Systems Theory, Integration Theory and the Ecological Approach to organizations. It views the organization as a single ecosystem of interacting elements.

Basic Principles

- Integrated approach to all organizational functions
- Interaction between different systems
- Balance between individual and organizational needs
- Sustainable development and social responsibility

The analysis of the Prisma diagrams leads to the following conclusions:

1. Theoretical Approaches (50 articles)- Figure 1:

- Service-Profit Chain Theory (20 articles)
- Internal Customer Theory (18 articles)
- Value Exchange Theory (12 articles)

2. Conceptual Models (50 articles)- Figure 2:

- Berry Model (15 articles)
- Rafiq & Ahmed Model (14 articles)
- Grönroos Model (13 articles)
- Modern Hybrid Models (8 articles)

3. Theoretical Frameworks (50 articles)- Figure 3:

- Operational Framework (19 articles)
- Strategic Framework (16 articles)
- Holistic Framework (15 articles)

Ramarks:

1. The majority of articles focus on theoretical approaches
2. The Service-Profit Chain Theory is the most frequently studied
3. There is a relatively balanced distribution between the classical models
4. Modern hybrid models are the least represented

Figure 1

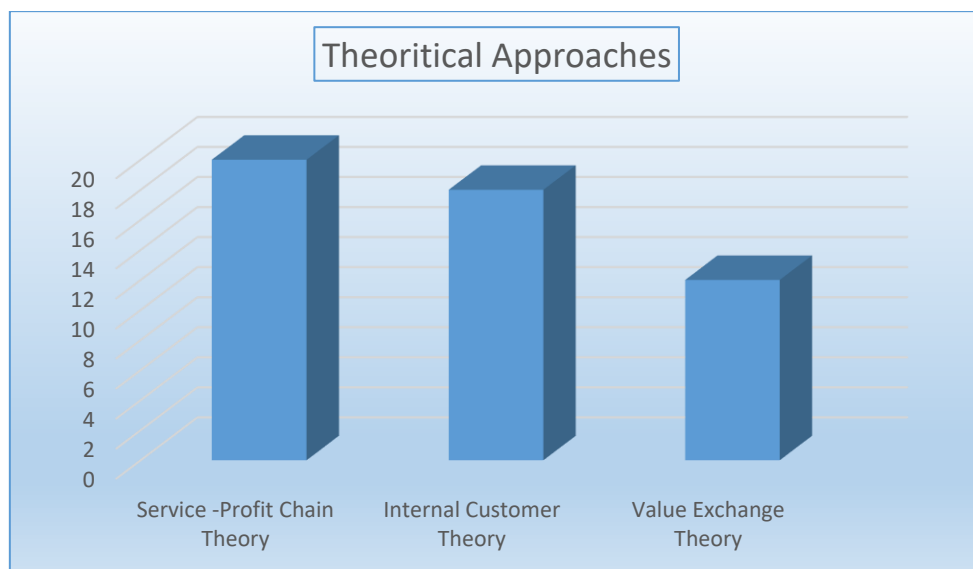


Figure 2

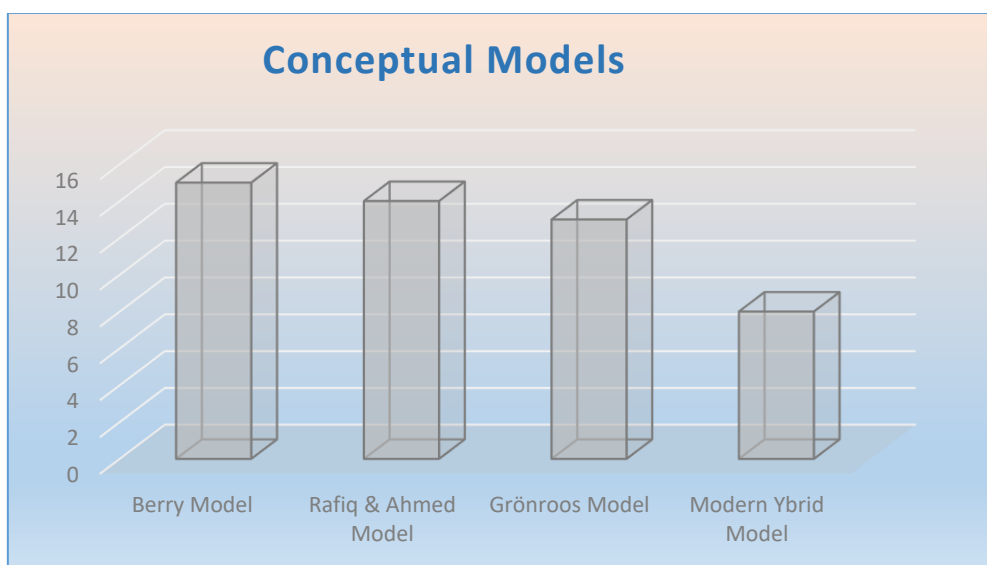
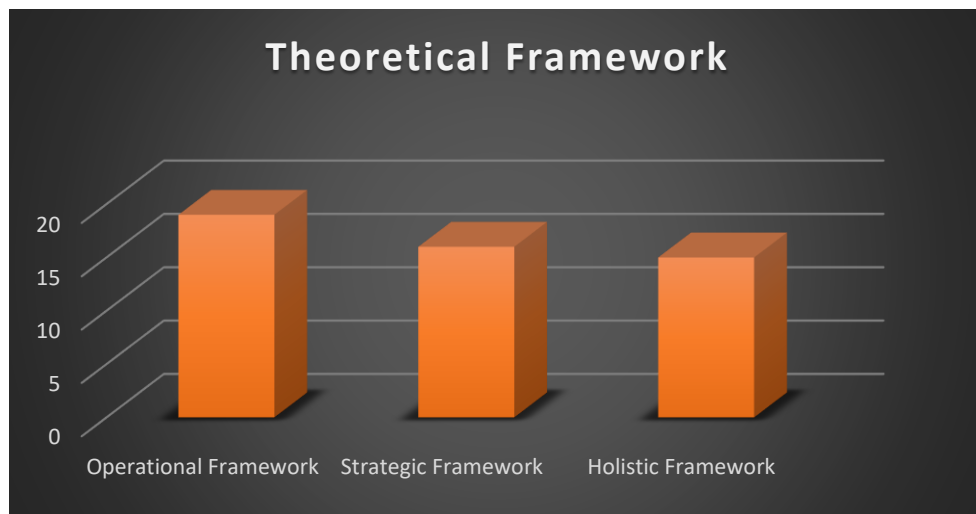


Figure 3



INTERCONNECTION ANALYSIS:

1. RELATIONSHIPS OF THEORIES WITH MODELS:

a) Internal Customer Theory (18 articles):

- It forms the basis of the Berry Model
- Significantly influences the Grönroos Model
- Main emphasis: employee as customer

b) Value Exchange Theory (12 articles):

- Contributes to the Rafiq & Ahmed Model
- Incorporated in the Modern Hybrid Models
- Main emphasis: mutual benefit

c) Service-Profit Chain Theory (20 articles):

- Foundation for the Grönroos Model
- Expands to the Rafiq & Ahmed Model
- Main emphasis: connecting internal-external quality

2. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS:

a) Berry Model (15 articles):

- Mainly applied to the Operational Framework
- Emphasis on practical application
- Connected to everyday practices

b) Grönroos model (13 articles):

- Incorporated in the Strategic Framework
- Emphasis on long-term approach
- Linked to management decisions.

c) Rafiq & Ahmed model (14 articles):

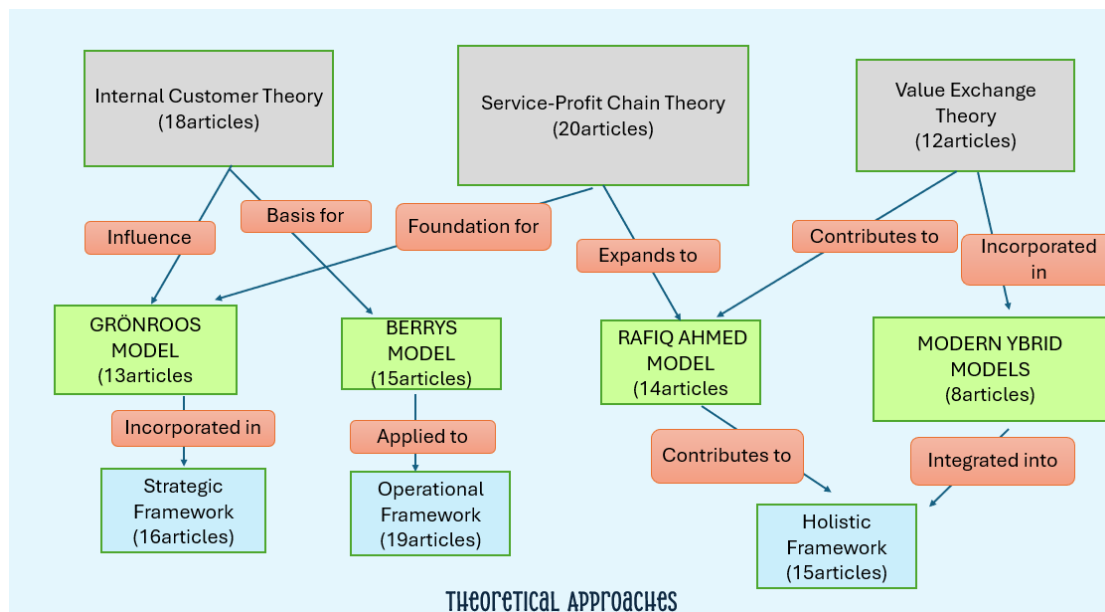
- Contributes to the Holistic Framework
- Emphasis on a multidimensional approach
- Linked to a systems approach

d) Modern Hybrid Models (8 articles):

- They are integrated into the Holistic Framework
- Emphasis on innovation
- Connected with modern trends

Figure 4

Interconnections of Theoretical Approaches to Internal Marketing



Analogy of empirical studies versus theoretical analyses:

Empirical studies: Approximately 23-25 articles out of 40 (~60%)

- Studies with primary data collection through questionnaires
- Quantitative research with statistical analysis
- Case studies
- Meta-analyses (e.g. Lee, Kim & Kim, 2016)

Theoretical analyses: Approximately 15-17 articles out of 40 (percentage ~40%)

- Conceptual studies
- Books and theoretical texts
- Critical reviews
- Systematic literature reviews (such as Tortosa-Edo et al., 2009)
- Theoretical frameworks and models (such as the articles by Rafiq & Ahmed)

More specifically, it can be observed that in the most recent articles (2016-2024) there is a greater emphasis on empirical studies, with approximately 7 out of the 10 most recent articles being based on empirical data. In conclusion, the majority of the articles in the list are based on empirical data, although there is a significant number of theoretical works that contribute to the conceptual development of the field of internal marketing

CONCLUSIONS

Evolution and Maturation of the Theory

Timeline: The theory has evolved from early theoretical approaches (18 articles) to more applied and comprehensive studies, reaching modern hybrid models (8 articles).

Theoretical basis: The theoretical foundation remains strong with 20 articles focusing on basic principles and the service-profit chain, demonstrating the maturity of the field.

Differentiation in Theoretical Approaches

Diversity of models: The existence of four different theoretical models (Gronroos, Berry, Rafiq Ahmed, Holistic) demonstrates the complexity of the field but also the lack of a unified approach.

Specialization: The emergence of specialized frameworks (Strategic 16 articles, Operational 19 articles) indicates the need for different approaches depending on the level of implementation.

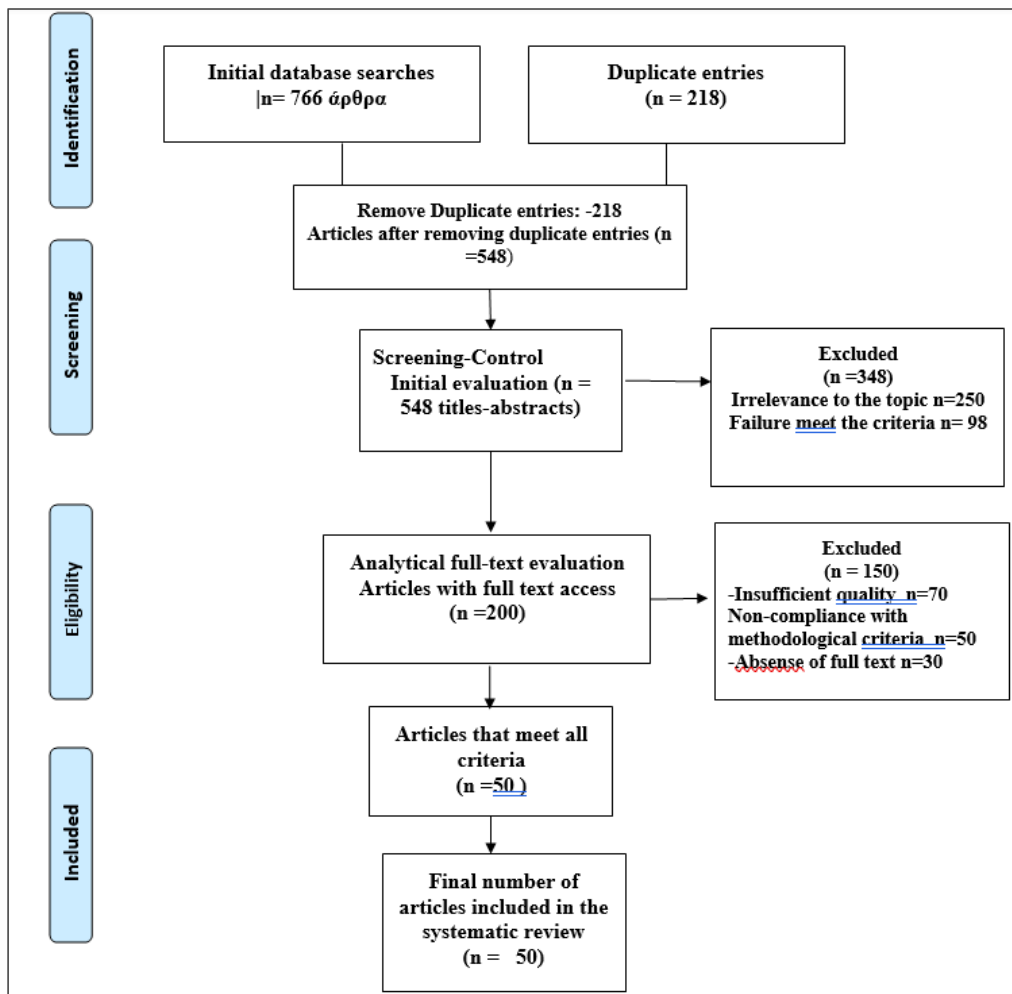
Contemporary Trends and Challenges

Hybrid models: Modern hybrid models (8 articles) indicate the effort to adapt to the modern business environment and new technologies.

Value exchange: The value exchange theory (12 articles) highlights the modern trend towards two-way relationships between organizations and employees.

PRISMA CHART

Figure 5



I will analyze the main research gaps identified in internal marketing theory:

1. Methodological Shortcomings

- Limited longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of internal marketing practices
- Lack of comparative studies between different sectors and countries
- Need for more qualitative research that delves into employees' experiences

2. Theoretical Gaps

- Limited understanding of the relationship between internal marketing and organizational culture
- Unclear connection with modern theories of management and leadership
- Lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework for the implementation of internal marketing

4. Digital Transformation

- Insufficient understanding of the impact of digitalization on internal marketing
- Limited research on the use of new technologies
- Need to study internal marketing in remote work environments

5. Innovation and Creativity

- Limited research on the relationship between internal marketing and innovation
- Lack of studies on the impact on employee creativity
- Need to investigate the contribution to the development of new ideas

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