

Imperative of Systematic Literature Review in Academic Research: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

Systematic literature review in contemporary academic research has come to define the significance of knowledge production and expansion within the framework of body of literature. Although review of literature has been a long existing intellectual enterprise, considering its imperatives in gaps identification for proper articulation of research problem, its modern methodology has been scarcely known to researchers. This is because only few literature focuses on the exposition of systematic review of literature. This results in difficulties of novice researchers to discover knowledge gaps and to embrace modern tools, methods and techniques in conducting literature review. Based on this therefore, this paper adds to the few existing literature of systematic review by looking at its imperative to academic research and the shift in paradigmatic approach. It is based on conceptually qualitative methodology using inclusion-exclusion strategy for literature searching and synthesis. The paper argues that systematic literature review marks a point of departure from the traditional or narrative literature review. Even though both the two approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, synthesising their strengths in systematic stages and steps is the focus of this paper.

Keywords

Systematic Review, Narrative Approach, Paradigm Shift, Social Science Research & Literature Search and Mapping

1. Introduction

Research in social sciences is anchored in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodological approaches to knowledge claim [1]. These approaches define methodological orientation upon which social sciences research is based. Research in social sciences and other sciences is multi-stage in nature. One of the stages that is critical to the whole process is literature review. However, as important as literature review is in the social sciences research process, it seems to be the most neglected aspect of the research processes. Its neglect is perhaps due to poor understanding of what it is, why it is and how it is done, especially in the modern time. This results to poor articulation of research problem and research problematique, which led to production of poor quality of research outcomes, in spite of the introduction of technological instruments for systematic literature review [2,3,4,5]. Some researchers take summarising major research findings in related area as the same with literature review. It is just a step out of numerous steps of conducting literature review [4]. Literature review in social sciences research goes beyond summary of existing body of knowledge.

Scholars of research methodology are in harmony in conceptualising literature review in terms of a framework that provides a contextual linkage between an existing research and previous researches undertaken in related areas [3,5]. The modern ways of conducting literature review is guided by scientific and systematic methodologies models, which help in formulating some certain questions that are referred to as literature review questions [6]. These questions define the purpose of reviewing literature in terms of conceptual, theoretical, methodological or empirical. The literature questions will lead the process towards the overall objective of scientifically systematic literature review, which is to fill an identifiable knowledge gaps. However, in social sciences research, literature gaps are expressed in terms of conceptual, theoretical, methodological, population and gaps in research findings, which are termed as empirical gaps [2,3,6,7]. More so, literature questions help researchers to be specific about the intended area of coverage in reviewing existing literature [6]. Specification is one of the principles of systematic literature review, which uses literature questions as check-list for thematic arrangement, especially when thematic way of organising literature review is adopted [2,4,6].

Moreover, Saur-amara talks about the need for systematic approach to literature review, which is based on the utilisation of technological elements in knowledge production [5]. Systematic approach to literature review does not only mark a point of departure from the traditional approach, which is unsystematic; its adaptation to social sciences research brings about the needed changes and enhances investigation of social phenomena. The problem of plagiarism can considerably reduce through systematic review of literature using literature mapping for quality outcome. Mapping

out literature enables researchers to locate missing gaps in the existing literature. Literature mapping can be done in various ways. This helps in scoping the review within the context of the current problem being investigated. Added to the literature mapping in the process of systematic literature review is the concept of review protocol. Hempel highlights the importance of review protocol in systematic review of literature [6]. Nonetheless, PRISMA-P, which stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocol is an example of a review protocol that is part of the defining elements of the modern method of literature review. It is a useful tool that helps researchers in reviewing relevant literature [6].

In a related development, the purpose of literature review is seen in a multi-dimensional ways. Biereenu-Nnabugwu argues that literature review is important because of its function of expanding research problem and serving as a basis for raising research questions and hypothesis development [2]. For Xiao & Watson, background review of literature is the first stage for justifying the design to be used and situating the research into theoretical context [8]. This is because, the choice of a tentative research topic is informed by background review of literature [1,2,4]. Besides, the usefulness of literature review to social sciences research hinges on the fact that it represents a thorough knowledge of the problem being investigated and to serve as a basis for familiarising the current research with the existing body of knowledge in related area. It is a process of searching and interrogating existing knowledge relating to current research problem with the aim of developing conceptual and theoretical frameworks that would integrate research findings with existing knowledge in the same area [4]. However, with the consideration of the importance of literature review and the abundance of documented literature, some researchers still find it difficult to review literature in systematic way.

For over the years, the conduct of literature review has been known to be adopting traditional or narrative approach. This has been meant to be summarising and analysing a body of documented literature with the aim of highlighting new research trends, to identifying gaps and recognising inconsistencies in the body of knowledge in related areas [9]. However, the application of systematic approach to literature review has exposed the slow nature of the narrative or traditional approach. This is largely because systematic approach to literature review introduces a rigorous method that is scientific in nature, thereby simplifying the process of literature gaps identification and establishing linkage between current studies and the existing body of knowledge in related areas [8,10]. While adoption of some elements of systematic approach to literature review has simplified the process in social science research, integrating them with the traditional or narrative approach gives a new paradigm in the conduct of literature review in social sciences. Whereas traditional or narrative approach helps in identifying knowledge gaps in extant literature, systematic approach facilitates the promotion of that knowledge gaps to articulated problem statement [9]. This integrative approach defines the paradigm shift this paper focuses on by integrating some elements of the narrative approach to literature review with systematic approach to make the process more rigorous and elaborate.

In other words, the paper discusses what literature review is all about, why is literature review important in academic research and how is literature review conducted in this systematically integrative way? The paper is structured into six sections, starting with the ongoing introduction as the first section. It is followed by examining the importance of literature review to academic research as the second section. The third section discusses the methodology of the paper and it is followed by how systematic literature review is conducted as the fourth section. This examines the various stages and steps for the conduct of systematic literature review, whereas in discussing the various stages and steps, some elements of narrative approach to literature review are integrated with elements of systematic review strategy. The fifth and the sixth sections deal with the challenges faced in the conduct of literature review and conclusion, respectively.

2. Why Literature Review in Academic Research?

Arising from the above background, this section discusses the need for literature review in academic research. Although understanding the use of literature review is important in social sciences, Creswell & Creswell argue that how literature review is used or how it is conducted in social research is equally important [1]. However, different scholars have given different uses of literature in academic research. While Ramdhani, Ramdhani, & Amin; Kumar; Creswell & Creswell assert that literature review brings about clarity in articulating research problem and methodological soundness, Biereenu-Nnabugwu maintains that literature review helps in the expansion of a research background [1,2,4,11]. Other importance of literature review are summarised as follows:

- Literature review serves as searchlight for methodological soundness and adaptability. Getting an appropriate research methodology is a function of good literature review. Methodological review of literature helps researcher to uncover a very sound methodology and adapt it as research design [1,4].
- Literature review gives a conceptual background for developing conceptual framework. Conceptual framework as part of the process of reviewing literature is important because of its function of categorising and describing relevant concepts and mapping out their relationships [12].
- It serves as a theoretical root of developing theoretical framework. Theoretical review of literature is important in establishing theoretical roots of the current research. Theoretical framework serves as a framework of analysis, which is used as a vehicle to linking research findings with the existing relevant literature. Theoretical framework helps to contextualise research findings within the existing theoretical body of knowledge [4].
- It broadens researchers' intellectual horizon in the areas of their research by scrutinising the state of knowledge

currency and profoundness [2].

- Through systematic review of relevant literature, knowledge gaps are identified. Scholars argue that the main essence of literature review is to identify gaps in different dimensions, which basically serve as the bases of articulating problem statement [1,2].

3. Methodology

This paper is based on the inclusion-exclusion method of literature search and evaluation. Inclusion-exclusion is a conceptual-qualitative methodology used for searching and selecting relevant information in writing conceptual paper. It is adapted from Xiao & Watson in their joint article titled “Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review” [8]. The method is used in searching conceptual documents of literature, which is classified based on the need for the research. Documents such as academic books and published articles on research methodology are included in the literature searching. In utilising the searched materials however, literature that are not relevant to the subject matter of the paper are excluded in order not to overburden the analysis with irrelevant information. The inclusion and exclusion criterion takes cognisance of multidisciplinary nature of the social sciences research methodology to have recommended searching for literature from multidimensional sources [8]. In synthesizing the literature from the searched documents, some information are excluded due to their irrelevance. This gives the opportunity to search for only literature that specifically address the problematique of the paper, which is defined by its purpose of how to conduct systematic literature review.

3.1 The Integrative Systematic Literature Review in Social Sciences Research: Towards Actualising Shift in Paradigm

Scholars of research methodology have diverse views on the process and the steps of conducting systematic review of literature. Brereton, Kitchenham, Budgen, Turner, & Khalil as well as Xiao & Watson have all agreed that process of systematic literature review is broadly classified into three stages [8,13]. These three broad stages are further broken into steps, ranging from eight to ten. However, the three stages of systematic review of literature are review planning, conducting the review and outcome reporting stage [8,13]. Each of the three stages is further divided into steps, ranging from four to two. The review planning stage has four steps, which are the proposed research topic selection, literature searching, literature mapping and review protocol development and validation steps. The conduct of literature review stage under this model has three steps. They include information extraction step, literature sorting for inclusion and exclusion; literature quality assessment [8,13]. The last stage of systematic literature review is literature outcome reporting, which is divided into two steps. These steps include literature analyses and syntheses, as well as the step of reporting the outcomes of literature review [8]. Furthermore, the diagram below summarises the elements of process of systematic literature review and the various steps taken by systematic reviewers.

The Three-Stage Process and Eight-Steps Model to Systematic Literature Review

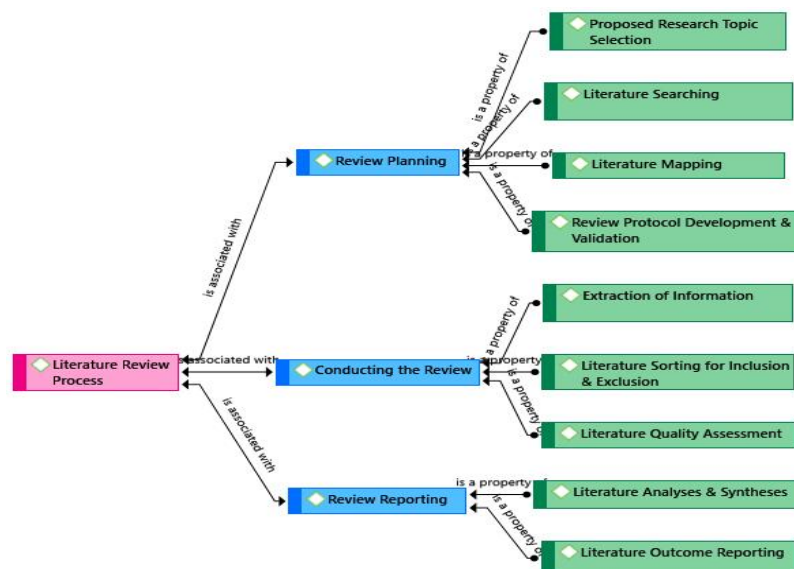


Figure 1. Literature Review Process and Steps

Source: Computed by the Author, 2023

3.2 Proposed Research Topic Selection

Based on the Figure 1: Literature Review Process and Steps, the first step is to select a proposed topic for research problem formulation. It begins by asking questions that drive the entire process of literature review for developing a tentative research topic [8,14]. However, starting research with the development of a tentative research topic is part of the intellectual contribution of many scholars of research methodology [5,15,16,17,18]. Similarly, Fisch & Block have

also maintained that the first step to be taken in literature review is the development of a motivating research topic that will lead to raising research questions [19]. At this stage, the topic is tentative because it can be altered with at subsequent levels of the research process. The proposed topic must be arranged in such a way that all attributes of researchability must manifest. A good research topic is identified by clearly establishing relationship between dependent and independent variables. Selecting proposed research topics facilitates searching of available relevant literature.

3.3 Literature Searching

After selection of a proposed topic, as shown in the Diagram 1.1, the next step in systematic review of literature is to begin searching for literature. There are different sources of literature in social sciences. Although academic libraries used to be manual repositories of information, some of such information resources have now been deposited in electronic databases. Electronic databases have emerged to boost the searching process of literature, in addition to backward and forward searching [8]. All these are part of the elements of systematic literature searching. Many world libraries are now digitally converted into electronic databases for easy access. Academic books, journal articles, conference papers, dissertations and thesis are very good sources of literature that are openly accessed from different electronic libraries [2,4,20]. Nagmode talks about systematic manual search for hard-copies journal and other academic materials as a literature searching strategy [21]. Other strategies include using keywords of a published articles, backward searching of references of a published article or book and forward searching using citations made to previous published articles or books [22]. However, Creswell & Creswell classify electronic databases into two [1]. According to their classification, there are some databases for general literature search across different academic disciplines and others are for specific disciplines. While Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, ProQuest and JSTOR are databases used for general literature searches; ERIC, Sociofile and PsycINFO, among others are for specific disciplines [1]. Berg argues, “As you are doing this literature searching, keep records on which pieces of literature you have obtained and notes about what each one says” [23]. This record keeping of the searched literature is usually done in literature mapping.

3.4 Literature Mapping

More so, the literature searching is usually accompanied with literature mapping. Literature mapping is a visual summary of the published studies that have been conducted by others [1]. Similarly, Kipnis defines literature mapping as a graphical interface used to create a geographical representation of a research topic [24]. It can be done based on author, year of publication, title, methodology, theoretical framework, main argument, major findings and remark that will indicate limitations to the mapped out literature. The idea behind the mapping is to present an overview and pictures of existing published studies in the same areas [1]. It is within the context of this argument that Abdullah, Rahman, Harun, Alashwal, & Beksin assert, literature mapping is adopted in systematic review as a classificatory model of reviewing the existing knowledge [25]. This classification helps social researchers to identify patterns and directions of literature within the area of social research interest, in addition to gaps identification. Through literature mapping, knowledge gaps can easily be identified and classified into methodological, conceptual, theoretical and empirical. The whole essence of literature mapping according to Kipnis, is to trace recently published literature in the same area, to create a bibliographical references of a chosen topic and to identify gaps in knowledge [24]. However, the table 1 below gives an example of how the literature mapping will be done on a chosen topic.

Table 1. Literature Mapping

S/ N	Author (s)	Year	Title	Methodology	Theory	Arguments	Findings	Remarks
1	Xiao, Y. & Watson, M.	2019	Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review	Qualitative and Conceptual	None	Previous methods of review lack rigorous systematic strategies in reviewing literature	Review of literature is the cornerstone of any academic inquiry	This literature lacks theoretical framework
2	Fisch, C. & Block, J.	2018	Six tips for your (systematic) literature review in business and management research	None	None	Literature review is supposed to be systematic in nature	The paper itemises 6 tips for systematic literature review	There are methodology and theory used in the paper
3	Ekeh, P.P.	1975	Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A theoretical statement	Historical methodology	Dialectical materialism	Colonialism has divided African societies into 2 publics. That is private and public realms	Our post-colonial experience has been defined by colonial past	

Source: Prepared by the Author, 2024

3.5 Development of Review Protocol and Validation

The last step for systematic review of literature under planning stage is development and validation of review protocol. This normally comes after a researcher thinks of what to write on. It is a practical planning stage where a standard is set for thinking of literature sources and how to generate information from them [6,26]. Besides, review protocol is used in both literature searching or in the selection of publications and functions as a working draft for refining review methods as well as for recording interim results [6]. Literature review protocol must contain some basic elements for systematic review, which include aim of the study in a precise manner, central research questions, inclusion-exclusion criteria, literature search strategies and literature screening procedure for quality assessment [8]. More so, after developing a review protocol as an instrument for literature review, it must be subjected to content validity. This validation is done by giving the instrument to group of experts in the research area for critical perusal [8]. However, different examples of review protocol are given in literature. While Hempel suggests the use of PRISMA-P (i.e. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Protocol) as review protocol, Tawfik et al. suggest two review protocol instruments that are used for quantitative, qualitative and mixed method researches [6,26]. The two review protocol instruments are PICO (Population Intervention Comparison Outcome) that is used for quantitative research and SPIDER (i.e. Sample Phenomenon of Interest, Design and Evaluation Research), which is used for both qualitative and mixed method type of researches [26].

3.6 Information Extraction

Extraction of information is part of the conduct of literature review. This is done while reading the searched literature by jotting down some important points, concepts and variables that are relevant to the problem under study. Scholars have talked about coding as a veritable strategy for extracting information [8]. In both qualitative and quantitative literature review, coding is done with the help of Nvivo and ATLAS.ti software as employed for data analysis [3,8]. Information extraction is also achieved through extensive reading of the relevant literature. While reading the literature, reviewers can carefully take note on the relevant debates on concepts and variables that inform the purpose of reviewing the literature. The extracted information will also help in organising the review in terms of thematic or chronological synthesis [2]. However, literature-mapping strategy can be used for extracting relevant information that can be used for analysis and synthesis.

3.7 Literature Sorting for Inclusion and Exclusion

After searching, mapping out and extracting the information from relevant literature, the next step to be taken is to sort out the literature for the purpose of inclusion and exclusion. This is done by establishing a criterion that guides reviewers in screening and sorting [8]. Literature sorting goes with inclusion-exclusion criterion, which is used in sorting out relevant information. The inclusion-exclusion criteria can be based on the centrality of the research questions to the problem being investigated; the soundness of research methodological approach in terms of quantitative, qualitative or mixed; based on study's location and or study's population [8,27]. By using this criteria, a reviewer can screen out irrelevant literature and include the relevant ones.

3.8 Literature Quality Assessment

The sorted and included literature can further be subjected to quality assessment using three criteria. These include internal validity for methodological soundness, external validity for the generalizability of the previous study and the ranking of high impact as determined by citations (Kitchenham & Charters, 2021; Templier, 2015; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Using these criteria assists a reviewer to minimise review biases in choosing methodology and frameworks [6, 28]. An article citation is usually determined by several factors such as the quality of the journal or the database, and the author(s) of the published article. Although high frequency of citation is often determined by topicality of the issue investigated and accessibility of the article, it is equally measuring literature quality.

3.9 Literature Analyses and Syntheses

This is one of the two steps of the literature reporting process. Analysis and synthesis step of literature review defines the rigorous interrogation of literature by examining debate on concepts, methods, theories and empiricisms, among others. The examination of the debate should be logically organised in form of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis to borrow from the Marxian Dialectical Materialism Hypothesis. The thesis stands as the supporting views or arguments and the counter-views or counter-arguments stand as the anti-thesis. The reviewers' views about the two competing arguments stand as the synthesis, which is later metamorphosed into literature outcome. The thesis and anti-thesis define the thematic categorisation and organisation of literature review [2, 8]. However, the process of cross-examination of thesis and anti-thesis in literature review is called literature analysis, which aims at producing outcomes as synthesised views as literature report. Templier describes this step as a situation that requires reviewers "... to organise, compare, collate, summarize, aggregate or interpret the information previously extracted in order to suggest a new contribution to knowledge". More so, in analysing and synthesising literature, the methodology is informed by qualitative or quantitative nature of the literature. In this case, Xiao & Watson (2019, p. 107) argue that "Qualitative studies were analysed by finding descriptive themes and distilling them into analytic themes whereas quantitative studies were combined using meta-analyses. The analytic themes were the framework for combining the findings of the quantitative studies into a final synthesis".

3.10 Literature Outcome Reporting

The final point of systematic literature review is the step of reporting the outcome of the review. This presents the products of the entire process starting from literature searching that is characterised by inclusion-exclusion strategy (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The results of the entire seven or eight steps are brought out to bear here to be presented in form of a chapter in the case of a thesis or a dissertation; or in a section in the case of a journal article. The efforts embedded in the entire review process are revealed here in documenting the body of knowledge. The results of literature searching, literature mapping, quality assessment for literature inclusion and exclusion as well as analysis and synthesis must all manifest in reporting literature (Xiao & Watson, 2019). Besides, the entire skills of academic writing that include creativity in the use of language and knowledge of referencing style, among others, are all brought to bear at this level.

However, two important things are worth noting in this case: organisation of the analysed and synthesised literature in either thematic or chronological basis and the acknowledgement of sources (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Whereas chronological organisation is based on historical trend of the literature documentation, there is no unilateral way of thematic organisation of literature. Some researchers thematise their literature review on the basis of research objectives or some important concepts and variables (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2006). In terms of acknowledgement of sources, researchers are advised to stick to any style of referencing recommended for them. If the research is for writing thesis or dissertation, researchers must be guided by Management Board of the graduate school where the study is undertaken. Similarly, if it is for journal publication, every journal publishers has underlined rules guiding article publications. A particular referencing is normally recommended to adopt in the whole process of writing. This must be adhered to even in reporting literature review [28]. In reporting review of literature, a reviewer must always acknowledge sources properly in order to avoid being guilty of plagiarism [29].

4. Challenges of Conducting Systematic Literature Review

While Hempel identifies selection bias and reporting bias as the two major challenges to the conduct of systematic literature review, this paper includes management of references as additional challenge [6]. Firstly, literature selection bias occurs when a researcher becomes confused on how to establish a relevance of the searched literature with the current research problem or research topic. The confusion normally begins with the literature search. Researchers are always confronted with what will be the starting point or what will constitute literature of the chosen topic. However, this challenge of literature selection bias is overcome by adopting systematic literature searching strategies using keywords of the proposed research topics or concepts and variables as embedded in the topic. Similarly, research questions that emerge from the proposed research topic can be used as literature searching questions to guide in selecting relevant literature [1,6].

Secondly, literature reporting bias occurs when a research adopts unbalanced, uncritical, distorted and inconsistent way of analysis and synthesis of literature [6]. Reported literature is supposed to be balanced, critical, clear and consistently analysed and synthesised, with the aim of scrutinising the state of accumulation of the current knowledge in the area of study [2]. To achieve this, a literature review needs to be conversant with the procedures of systematic methodology of reviewing literature. Relatedly, the problem of use of language in social research is part of the reporting challenge of literature [29].

Lastly, literature reviewers are faced with the problem of managing references and bibliography. This challenge is, in fact, common to various disciplines. Many researchers complain about missing references after conducting literature review. They waste times searching for documents they reviewed to write their references. This challenge comes as a result of poor management of literature sources. However, technology has introduced a number of soft wares that facilitate management of references. These soft wares such as mendeley, Zotero, etc. are readily available to help in the management of citation, references and bibliography [1,24]. Similarly, Microsoft word has a simple interface for literature sources management that is not known to many researchers.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is understood that the importance of literature review in social sciences research can never be overemphasised. This is because it is the bedrock of all research process. Literature review is a critical factor in any social research. It generates deeper understanding and effective organisational framework of research. The art of literature review is more iterative than linear process. That is to say all the stages and steps are interwoven than simultaneously applied together. Their essence is to ease the process of conducting literature and to derive the multiple benefits that the exercise comes with. Systematic literature review remains one of the best methods in different disciplines. This is because it has the most dynamic applicability index. It adopts and adapts rapid changes of research methodology in terms of accommodation of technological instruments and gadgets.

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