

THE RELEVANCE AND FUNCTION OF LITERATURE REVIEW IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Practically all human knowledge can be found in published or unpublished sources. Man builds upon the accumulated and recorded knowledge of the past. His constant adding to the vast store of knowledge makes possible progress in all areas of human endeavour. The investigator can ensure that his problem vacuum and that considerable work have already been done on topics which are directly related to his proposed investigation. For any specific research project to occupy this place in the development of a discipline, the researcher must be thoroughly familiar with both previous theory and research. To assure this familiarity, every research project has as one of its early stage, a review of the theoretical and research literature. A literature review is based on the assumption that knowledge accumulates and that we learn from and build on what others have done. Scientific research is a collective effort of many researchers who share their results with one another and who pursue knowledge as a community. Today's studies build on those of yesterday. Researchers read studies to compare, replicate, or criticize them for weaknesses. A good literature review gathers information about a particular subject from many sources that are relevant to the topic area. It is expected to be well written and contains few if any personal biases. It should contain a clear search and selection strategy. Good structuring is essential to enhance the flow and readability of the review. Referencing should be accurate throughout the literature review, accurate use of terminology is important and jargons should be kept to a minimum. Therefore, from the above background, this manuscript gives a detailed explanation of each of the following: literature review, its importance, functions and sources as well as procedures and suggestions for reporting literature review.

Keywords: Research, literature review

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature review is an essential aspect of research on a chosen topic. It involves looking for relevant sources of information that may throw or shed more light on the topic under investigation. It is an aspect that is most poorly written because many researchers do not know the reasons for reviewing literature, how to review literature and also lack the language on how to review literature. Select a limited number of works that are central to your area rather than trying to collect a large number of works that are not as closely connected to your topic area. According to Kauru (2015), a literature review can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organisational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organisation or a reshuffling of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations. This manuscript explains the following aspects in relation to literature review: meaning, nature, goals, types, need, objectives, importance, functions, procedures, sources and also suggestions for reporting literature review.

2. MEANING OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The phrase “*literature review*” consists of two words: *literature* and *review*. The word ‘*literature*’ has conveyed different meaning with reference to the languages e.g. English literature, Hausa literature etc. It includes subject content: prose, poetry, dramas, novels, stories etc. However, in research methodology the term ‘*literature*’ refers to the knowledge of a particular area of investigation of any discipline which includes theoretical, practical and its research studies. The term ‘*review*’ means to organize the knowledge of the specific area of research to evolve an edifice of knowledge to show that a study would be an addition to an existing knowledge. The task of review of literature is highly creative and tedious because researcher has to synthesize the available knowledge of the field in a unique way to provide the rationale for his/her study. The phrase “*literature review*” has been defined in the following ways:

Charter and Good (1963) define literature review as, the key to the vast storehouse of published literature that may open doors to sources of significant problems and explanatory hypotheses and provide helpful orientation for definition of the problem, background for selection of procedure, and comparative data for interpretation of results. In order to be creative and original, one must read extensively and critically as a stimulus to thinking. Also a literature review is an objective, thorough

and critical summary of the relevant available research and non-research literature on the topic being studied (Hart, 1998). According to Yogesh (2006), literature review forms the foundation upon which all future work will be built. If we fail to build the foundation of knowledge provided by the review of literature our work is likely to be shallow and naive and will likely duplicate work that has already been done by someone else. Its goal is to make the reader up-to-date with current issues on the topic and form the basis for another goal, such as the justification for further research in the area.

3. NATURE OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically literature review is meant to answer a number of questions (Eboh, 2002). First, what has been done on the subject? In other words, what have other scholars said about what the researcher intends to do? Second, what is the relevance of what has been done to what the researcher intends to do? Meaning, is the information in the literature relevant to the study in terms of problem definition, research design and empirical proof? Third, what are the gaps in the existing body of literature and how can the proposed research bridge these gaps? Fourth, what does the researcher accept or reject from what has been done and why? Finally, how can the proposed research build upon or add to what is known? Eboh (2002) also outlined four major approaches to literature review:

- i. Thematic Approach: This approach brings together all the literature relating to the same issue or area. Under such an approach, the information that is pertinent to the sub-theme is carefully synthesised and organised in a logical manner and related to the problem under investigation. The significance of thematic approach lies in its capacity to enable the researcher to select what to include and what not to include in the literature. The way themes and sub-themes are arranged and presented makes for logical sequence and easy comprehension of ideas, arguments and scientific knowledge.
- ii. Convergence Approach: This approach is presented on the basis of similarity or commonality of knowledge, views, arguments and propositions. This approach converge the literature, even though scattered in various sources.
- iii. Functional Approach: This approach involves the arrangement of existing literature into the three facets of scientific knowledge (i.e. conceptual and theoretical literature, methodological literature and empirical studies literature). All the literature pertaining to the same facet of scientific knowledge are collected and presented under the same sub-heading.
- iv. Chronological Approach: This approach presents literature in a historical-evolutionary manner. It is a time-series approach to literature, depicting the developments that have taken place in an evolutionary context.

4. GOALS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Different kinds of reviews are stronger at fulfilling different goals as reviews vary in scope and depth. The goals of literature review are to:

- i. Demonstrate a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility. A review tells the reader that the researcher knows the major issues of the research work.
- ii. Know the path of prior research and also know how a current research project is linked to it. A good review places a research project in a context and demonstrates its relevance by making connections to a body of knowledge.
- iii. Integrate and summarize what is known in an area. A good review points out areas where prior studies agree or disagree and where major question remains for future research.
- iv. Learn from others and stimulate new ideas. A good review tells what others have found so that a researcher can benefit from the efforts of others.
- v. Identify variables. Important variables that are likely to influence the problem situation are not left out of the study.
- vi. Help in developing theoretical framework. A theoretical framework is conceptual model of how one theorizes or makes sense of the relationships among several factors that have been identified as important to the problem under study. Theoretical framework incorporates the following features:
 - i. Make an inventory of variables i.e. the variables considered relevant to the study should be clearly identified and labeled in the discussion.
 - ii. Specify the direction of relationship.
 - iii. Give a clear explanation of why the proposed relationship is expected to exist.
 - iv. Make an inventory of propositions i.e. stipulation of logical relationship between any two variables.
 - v. Arrange these propositions in a sequential order.

- vi. Give a schematic diagram of the theoretical model so that the reader can see and easily comprehend the theorized relationship.

5. TYPES OF REVIEW

When beginning a review, researcher may decide on a topic or field of knowledge to examine how much depth to go into, and the kind of review to conduct. The following are six types of review According to (Yogesh, 2006):

- i. **Self-Study Review:** This type of review increases the reader's confidence. A review that only demonstrates familiarity with an area is rarely published but it often is part of an educational program.
- ii. **Context Review:** One of the goals of review is creating a link to a developing body of knowledge. This is a background or context review. It introduces the rest of research and establishes the significance and relevance of research question.
- iii. **Historical Review:** It traces the development of an idea or shows how theory has evolved over time.
- iv. **Theoretical Review:** It presents different theories that purport to explain the same thing. In addition to examining the consistency of predictions with findings, a theoretical review may compare theories for the soundness of their assumptions, logical consistency and scope of explanation.
- v. **Integrative Review:** It summarizes what is known at a point in time. This type of review presents the current state of knowledge and pulls together disparate research reports in a fast growing area of knowledge.
- vi. **Methodological Review:** In this type of review, the researcher evaluates the methodological strength of past studies. It describes conflicting results and shows how different research designs, samples and measures account for different results.

6. TYPES OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Coughlan, Cronin and Ryan (2007) outlined two main types of literature review, these are:

- i. Traditional or Narrative Literature Review
- ii. Systematic Literature Review

6.1 Traditional or Narrative Literature Review

This type of review critiques and summarizes a body of literature and draws conclusions about the topic in question. The body of the literature is made up of the relevant studies and knowledge that address the subject area. It is typically selective in the material it uses, although the criteria for selecting specific sources for review are not always apparent to the reader. This type of literature review is useful in summarizing and synthesizing the volume of literature gathered in a specific subject. Its primary purpose is to provide the reader with a comprehensive background for understanding current knowledge and highlighting the significance of new research. It can inspire research ideas by identifying gaps and inconsistencies in a body of knowledge, thus helping the researcher to determine or define research questions or hypothesis. Beecroft, Rees and Booth (2006) argue that a sufficiently focused research question is essential before undertaking a literature review. Equally, however, it can help refine or focus a broad research question and is useful for both topic selection and topic refinement. It can also be helpful in developing conceptual or theoretical framework (Coughlan, Cronin & Ryan, 2007).

6.2 Systematic Literature Review

Systematic literature review uses a more rigorous and well defined approach to reviewing the literature in a specific subject area. This means that, systematic reviews use explicit and rigorous criteria to identify, critically evaluate and synthesize all the literature on a particular topic. Parahoo (2006) suggests that a systematic review should make the time frame to be detailed within which the literature was selected, as well as the methods used to evaluate and synthesize findings of the study in question. Coughlan, Cronin and Ryan (2007) posit that in order for the reader to assess the reliability and validity of the review, the reviewer needs to present the precise criteria used to:

- Formulate the research question.
- Set inclusion or exclusion criteria.
- Select and assess the literature.
- Access the quality of the literature included in the review.
- Analyse, synthesize and disseminate the findings.

Types of Systematic Literature Review Systematic literature review is divided into two, namely:

- i. **Meta-Analysis:** This is the process of taking a large body of quantitative findings and conducting statistical analysis in order to integrate those findings and enhance understanding. It involves taking the findings from several studies on the same subject and analysing them using standardised statistical procedures. This helps to draw conclusions and detect patterns and relationships between findings (Polit & Beck, 2006).
- ii. **Meta-Synthesis:** This is a non-statistical technique used to integrate, evaluate and interpret the findings of multiple qualitative research studies. Such studies may be combined to identify their common core elements and themes. Findings from phenomenological, grounded theory or ethnographic studies may be integrated and used. According to Polit and Beck (2006), meta-synthesis is unlike meta-analysis, where the ultimate intention is to reduce findings, meta-synthesis involves analysis and synthesising key elements in each study, with the aim of transforming individual findings into new conceptualisations and interpretations.

7. NEED FOR LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Yogesh (2006), the literature review is essential due to the following four (4) reasons:

- i. One of the early steps in planning a research work is to review research done previously in the particular area of interest and relevant area. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of this research usually give the worker an indication of the direction.
- ii. It is very essential for every investigator to be up-to-date in his information about the literature, related to his own problem already done by others. It is considered the most important pre- requisite to actual planning and conducting the study.
- iii. It avoids the replication of the study of findings to take an advantage from similar or related literature as regards, to methodology, techniques of data collection, procedure adopted and conclusions drawn. He can justify his own endeavour in the field.
- iv. It provides as source of problem of study, an analogy may be drawn for identifying and selecting problem of research. The researcher formulates his hypothesis on the basis of review of literature. It also provides the rationale for the study. The results and findings of the study can also be discussed at length.

8. OBJECTIVES OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review serves the following purposes in conducting research work according to Yogesh (2006):

- i. It provides theories, ideas, explanations or hypothesis which may prove useful in the formulation of a new problem.
- ii. It indicates whether the evidence already available solves the problem adequately without requiring further investigation i.e. it avoids replication.
- iii. It provides the sources for hypothesis. The researcher can formulate research hypothesis on the basis of available studies.
- iv. It suggests method, procedure, sources of data and statistical techniques appropriate to the solution of the problem.
- v. It locates comparative data and findings useful in the interpretation and discussion of results. The conclusions drawn in the related studies may be significantly compared and may be used as the subject for the findings of the study.
- vi. It helps in developing experts and general scholarship of the investigator in the area investigated.

9. IMPORTANCE OF LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Yusuf (2006), the importance or usefulness of literature review are many, some of which are given below:

- i. It helps the researcher to identify gaps in current knowledge and enable the researcher to be able to explain how his/her proposed study will differ from previous works.
- ii. It helps the researcher to avoid duplication. There is nothing wrong with repeating a previous study if the intent is to challenge or verify its findings. This however, is on the condition that such intentions are made known to the reader right from the onset.
- iii. It assists the researcher to develop or improve his/her ability to search, scan and synthesise existing literature.
- iv. Allows the researcher to identify areas of agreement and areas of controversy within the field of his/her investigation.

- v. It gives the researcher opportunity to weigh the strength or weaknesses of earlier findings.
- vi. By looking at the references of the material under review, the researcher would find other sources of information that would be of great help to him/her.
- vii. It allows the researcher to make comparison between his/her findings with the past findings and see if they tally with or deviate from them, thereby identifying his/her contributions to knowledge.
- viii. It helps the researcher to theorize and conceptualize his/her ideas so as to formulate further questions for further research.
- ix. It increases the researchers' knowledge in the area of his/her interest.
- x. It helps the researcher to identify methods used by other researchers that could be relevant to the problem at hand.

10. FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

There are five functions of literature review, these are:

- i. The conceptual frame of reference for the contemplated research.
- ii. An understanding of the status of research in problem area.
- iii. Clues to the research approach, method, instrumentation and data analysis.
- iv. An estimate of the probability of success of the contemplated research and the significance or usefulness of the findings and, assuming the decision is made to continue.
- v. Specific information required to interpret the definitions, assumptions, limitations and hypotheses of research.

11. SOURCES OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is almost based on secondary sources of data. According to Yusuf (2006), the secondary sources of data could either be published or unpublished:

Published Sources: The word "*publication*" means the act of making any printed or soft copies available to the general public. Publication is defined as the distribution of copies of a work to the public by sale or other transfer of ownership. Therefore, published sources are copies of work that are made available to the general public with the consent of the author. The following published sources are briefly discussed:

- i. Scholarly Journals: Scholarly journals are rich source of well-researched, peer-reviewed papers that are up-to-date information on various fields of knowledge. Some of the features of a journal include its regularity, vastness of contributors and the quality of the papers it contains.
- ii. Academic Books: Books are also important sources of literature in the sense that they provide already synthesised data. It is advisable to use a book that is up-to-date and also published by reputable publishers. Books are in various formats, they include texts books, handbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedia, biographies, anthologies, thesaurus, and so on.
- iii. The Internet: The internet provides a wealth of information on almost all aspects of knowledge. It gives researchers opportunity to have a variety of literature in many forms through the use of search engines. The search engines are computer software that compile list of documents, most commonly those on the World Wide Web (www). Search engines respond to a user entry or query by searching the lists and displaying a list of documents that match the search entry or query (Encarta Encyclopedia, 2003). Some search engines include www.google.com, www.wikipeadia.com, www.search.com, www.askjeeves.com, and www.yahoo.com among others.
- iv. Conference Proceedings: These are usually compiled papers presented at conferences, seminars and workshops by professionals, governments, NGOs and so on. Academic departments and research centers also organise conferences and publish proceedings, which can be consulted and reviewed.
- v. Newspapers, Magazines and Popular Media: Although information from newspapers, magazines and popular media are not taken seriously in academic research, they never the less provide important reference points for literature review.
- vi. CD-ROM: CD-ROMs are also important sources of information, they are handy and give researchers access to a large amount of information which would otherwise be very difficult to carry about. Journals, encyclopedias and other forms of reports are now produced on a CD-ROM.
- vii. Monographs: These are books produced on a selected subject usually bigger and more detailed than journal articles. They are usually commissioned by government and private organisations which can be used in literature review.

viii. Government and Corporate Bodies Publications: Federal and state governments publish periodicals which are also sources of literature review. Examples include federal government gazettes, decrees, state year book etc.

Unpublished Sources: A work that has not undergone publication and thus is not generally available to the public or for citation in scholarly or legal contexts is called an unpublished work. In some cases unpublished works are widely cited or circulated via informal means. The following unpublished sources are briefly discussed:

- i. Unpublished Research Projects, Essays, Dissertations and Theses: These are mainly research works that have not been published which include research projects, essays, dissertations and theses. In almost all academic departments, ND, NCE, HND, undergraduate and postgraduate students are usually expected to conduct a research and submit a written report before being awarded a diploma or degree. Research works are only accepted and used as source of literature review when they are adjudged to have contributed something new to the existing knowledge.
- ii. Archival Materials:- Encarta Encyclopedia (2003) defines archival as a collection of historically valuable records, ranging from papers, documents, photographs, films, videotapes and sound recordings. Archives provide access to old government and private documents that provide a wealth of information. All closed and declassified files of the government are stored in the archives. Researchers can go through and study how and why certain decisions were made at particular point in time.

12. PROCEDURES FOR REPORTING LITERATURE REVIEW

Yogesh (2006) posits the following steps or procedures which are to be taken while reviewing the literature:

- i. Read the portion of the literature that is related to a particular aspect of your study or topic you are reviewing. Do not copy what you did not understand because you will not be able to defend it and make sure all reviews are in line with the research questions.
- ii. Summarise as briefly as possible the aspects of the review that are related to the topic being reviewed.
- iii. Critically analyse the viewpoints you have summarised.
- iv. Gather the viewpoints that you summarized together even in a situation where many authors are saying the same thing.
- v. Be sequential in your review. The review should be in chronological order. That is, review the work of earlier author that worked chronological lane (The work of 2015 comes before that of 2016 and so on).
- vi. Use the review as a basis for designing the methodology and the instrument to be used in your study.

13. SUGGESTIONS FOR REPORTING LITERATURE REVIEW

Olaofe (2010) outlined some suggestions to be taken in reporting literature review, these include:

- i. The reviewing of literature is a continuous process. A researcher begins the review of literature even before selecting a problem of research. The review of literature generally helps in identifying and selecting a research problem. If researcher has selected a problem on his own or suggested by some expert; even then he has to review literature for its justification that it is a novel problem. After selecting and defining a problem, he has to formulate hypotheses for the problem. The review of literature provides the rationale or basis for these hypotheses. The results and findings are discussed at length with the help of review of literature. The findings of earlier studies may support his/her formulation or contradict it. The review of literature is used from selecting a problem up to reporting the findings of a study.
- ii. Second suggestion is that knowledge is increasing or advancing rapidly and research studies are ongoing processes. A research scholar should remain in touch with library literature or the field throughout the period of his research work. He should be up-to-date at the time of reporting review of literature and discussing his findings.
- iii. The reporting of literature review makes the research study very scientific and up-to-date. It is not only useful in preparing and writing a thesis but also in the mastery of the techniques of literature review.

14. CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of a review is to bring out gaps that the new study will fill and utilise some of the gains from the review of diverse literature texts for the improvement of your own study. The manuscript highlighted some strategies that are required in literature review. Reading the literature and summarising it, critical analysis of the summarised literature, acceptance, rejection and or modification of reviewed items to suite the current study are some of the review strategies suggested in this manuscript.

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