

Review Article

Enhancing Rigor in Literature Reviews for Business and Management Research: Avoiding Prevalent Errors

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Abstract: The literature review is a crucial component of academic research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge and guiding future research agendas. However, researchers often make common mistakes that compromise the rigor and effectiveness of their literature reviews. This study aims to identify and discuss these prevalent errors in literature reviews for business and management research and provide researchers with a step-by-step guide to enhance the rigor of their literature reviews. The study highlights common mistakes such as a lack of systematic search strategy, failure to critically evaluate and synthesize the literature, unclear research objectives and questions, and overreliance on outdated or biased sources. By following a systematic approach and avoiding these prevalent errors, researchers can ensure that their literature reviews contribute to the overall rigor and quality of research in the field, facilitating the generation of new ideas, identifying research gaps, and enhancing the understanding of business and management phenomena. This study is vital for researchers, scholars, and business and management research practitioners, providing practical tools to improve the rigor and effectiveness of their literature reviews.

Keywords: Business research, literature review, management research, prevalent errors, research methodology, rigor.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature review is a crucial component of business and management research, informing future studies by comprehensively understanding the current state of knowledge (Kraus *et al.*, 2021). It is crucial in justifying research agendas and synthesizing existing work, enhancing the finished output's quality (Mishra, 2019). Furthermore, the literature review is precious in scrutinizing and synthesizing a large volume of research, identifying knowledge gaps, and setting directions for future studies (Al-Tabbaa *et al.*, 2019; Williams *et al.*, 2020). It helps to validate existing knowledge, identify gaps, and generate new ideas for the study (Schira, 1992). Moreover, it can reveal potential gaps in the existing literature and suggest directions for future research (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2016). The literature review provides a foundation for the research and guides the researcher in their potential work (Ernest *et al.*, 1978). Literature reviews have long been essential strategies to assess the state of the science (Cowell, 2012). In the social sciences, it is crucial to establish the significance of the research, provide background information, and demonstrate reliability (Parajuli, 2020).

Moreover, Suicheng (2011) highlights the need for a closer alignment between management theory and practice, a gap that literature reviews can help bridge. Additionally, Snyder (2019) underscores the importance of rigor and thoroughness in conducting literature reviews.

However, despite the critical importance of the literature review, researchers often fall prey to common mistakes that can compromise the rigor and effectiveness of their literature reviews.

While numerous studies have explored the relevance of literature reviews and their impact on research outcomes, more attention should be given to the frequent mistakes researchers frequently make when conducting literature reviews in business and management. These mistakes can result in an incomplete or biased understanding of the existing literature, leading to weak theoretical foundations and potential future research inaccuracies. Haddaway *et al.*, (2020) highlight the susceptibility to bias and the need for rigorous evidence synthesis methods. Therefore, there is a pressing need to address these limitations and provide

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researchers with guidance to avoid these prevalent errors. This study aims to highlight and discuss these prevalent errors, providing researchers with a comprehensive guide to enhance the rigor in their literature reviews for business and management research. The following research question guides this study:

What Common Mistakes Should Researchers Avoid When Dealing with the Business and Management Research Literature Review?

The subsequent objectives were formulated to answer the research question. The first is to identify and discuss the common mistakes made by researchers during the literature review process in business and management research. The second is to provide researchers with a step-by-step guide for writing an insightful literature review, avoiding the prevalent errors identified in the first objective.

This study is vital for researchers, scholars, and business and management research practitioners. Highlighting and discussing the common mistakes in literature reviews will enhance the understanding of potential pitfalls and provide practical tools to avoid them. This, in turn, will contribute to the overall rigor and quality of research in the field, ensuring that findings are based on a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the existing literature.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two provides an overview of the relevant literature on the importance of literature reviews in business and management research. Section three comprehensively discusses the challenges researchers face and the common mistakes they should avoid when conducting literature reviews. The fourth section provides a step-by-step guide for writing an insightful literature review, incorporating strategies to prevent these prevalent errors. Finally, the last section concludes the study by summarizing the essential findings, discussing the study's limitations, and arguing future research avenues.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LITERATURE REVIEWS: A CRITICAL SEARCH

The literature review plays a crucial role in research by comprehensively understanding existing knowledge and identifying research gaps. It helps researchers understand their field's current state of knowledge, identify gaps and opportunities for further research (Kraus *et al.*, 2021; Linnenluecke *et al.*, 2019), and justify their research agendas (Mishra, 2019). It also provides a strong foundation for the proposed study and can lead to the discovery of new ideas and methods (Schira, 1992; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). The literature review is critical in theory construction, where literature plays a pivotal role in shaping and informing the development of new theories (Phetlhu *et al.*, 2014). It is crucial in developing research questions and guiding the research process.

A critical literature review is a crucial research component, serving several vital purposes. It demonstrates the researcher's knowledge and expertise in the field (Haller, 1988), provides a context for the study, identifies gaps in the existing literature (Berressem, 2019), and can contribute new insights to the body of knowledge (Dodgson, 2021). Furthermore, Evans and Kowanko (2000) highlight the evolution of the literature review methodology, underscoring the need for high standards in conducting reviews. Schryen *et al.*, (2015) and Cowell (2012) emphasize the importance of literature reviews in knowledge creation. A well-executed literature review enables researchers to identify the current state of knowledge, including critical theories, concepts, and empirical findings relevant to their research topic. It helps them validate the significance of their research objectives. Additionally, literature reviews assist in adequately aligning research design, methodology, and data collection strategies, ensuring that the research is grounded in established theories and concepts.

As per Chigbu *et al.*, 2023, critical literature reviews help identify inconsistencies, contradictions, and gaps in the literature, guiding future research direction. This, in turn, enhances the quality and rigor of subsequent research studies. Literature reviews contribute to advancing business and management research by identifying research gaps and providing evidence for practice (Splenda, 2020). They synthesize diverse sources of information and provide a holistic understanding of the topic under investigation.

Rigor in literature reviews is crucial, as it ensures the reliability and validity of the findings. Coombes (2023) emphasizes the need for a systematic approach to review research, offering a three-stage protocol to optimize rigor.

However, conducting a literature review can be complex, requiring a shared understanding of theory and the assessment of theoretical quality (Hean *et al.*, 2016). In grounded theory methodology, the debate around the necessity of a literature review and the adoption of an epistemological position further underscores the importance of a thorough review of existing literature (Niasse, 2022). Similarly, Ramalho *et al.*, (2015) argue that a literature review can constrain grounded theory research. Additionally, traditional approaches to literature reviews may be biased, leading to incorrect decisions, and systematic reviews are recommended as a more rigorous alternative (Haddaway *et al.*, 2020).

CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS IN CONDUCTING LITERATURE REVIEWS

The challenges in conducting literature reviews are multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, methodological, conceptual, and ontological aspects (Chen *et al.*, 2016). The rapidly increasing number of publications further complicates the process,

necessitating effective strategies for literature searches (Brocke *et al.*, 2015). Denisov (2021) highlights the difficulties in conducting meta-analysis and systematic analysis and the need to choose the appropriate review type and methodology. Besides, Tranfield *et al.*, (2003) explore the application of systematic review processes from the medical sciences to the management field and the challenges in developing an appropriate methodology. Moreover, Dilevko (2007) and Joshi *et al.*, (2012) highlight the literature review challenges, notably the need for a more imaginative and diverse approach.

Despite the importance of literature reviews, researchers often make common mistakes that can compromise their effectiveness and reliability. Zekkoub (2023) identifies neglecting previous studies as a critical mistake. Researchers in business and management often make mistakes in conducting literature reviews, such as relying on cursory and narrative reviews (Linnenluecke *et al.*, 2019), ignoring methodological guidelines (Snyder, 2019), and failing to consider the existing academic literature (Stone, 2011). Qualitative international business research errors include not following case study methodology and field-specific guidelines (Vissak, 2020).

Awareness of these challenges and mistakes is crucial to ensure the rigor and accuracy of the literature review. Below are the pitfalls researchers should avoid when conducting a literature review.

Lack of Systematic Search Strategy

The lack of a systematic search strategy can significantly impact the quality and outcomes of a literature review. Harari *et al.*, (2020) emphasize the importance of comprehensive search strategies, particularly in applied psychology. Kitchenham *et al.*, (2009) further underscore the need for a broad search, highlighting the potential trade-offs in terms of paper quality. Finfgeld-Connett and Johnson (2013) and Wanyama *et al.*, (2021) stress the need for transparent and iterative search strategies, with the latter also highlighting the impact of database selection on review outcomes. Many researchers fail to conduct a comprehensive and systematic search for relevant literature. This can result in the omission of crucial studies and biases in the information gathered, leading to an incomplete understanding of the topic.

Failure to Critically Evaluate and Synthesize the Literature

It is essential to critically analyze and synthesize the findings from different studies to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research field. Researchers often fail to evaluate the quality and relevance of the studies they include in their literature reviews, leading to potential biases or inadequate topic coverage. As Perera (2020) suggests, the quality and relevance of studies included in literature reviews are

crucial for the validity and credibility of the review's findings.

Lack of Clear Research Objectives and Research Questions

A lack of clear research objectives and questions can significantly impact the literature review writing process. It can lead to the use of naive research instruments, problems with sense-making, and difficulties in claims-making (Berressem, 2019). This can result in a literature review needing more coherent construction, essential theme synthesis, and well-argued analysis (Baumeister, 2000). The omission of a problem statement, which provides context, focus, and the knowledge gap, can further exacerbate these issues (Connell, 2010). A literature review should align with clear research objectives and research questions. Researchers often need help articulating these objectives and questions clearly, resulting in a lack of focus and coherence in their literature reviews.

Overreliance on Outdated or Biased Sources

More reliance on outdated or biased sources can significantly impact the quality of a literature review. Jukola (2017) and Haddaway *et al.*, (2020) highlight the potential for bias in the peer review process and the need for more rigorous evidence synthesis methods. This bias can be perpetuated by the "bubble effect" introduced by internet search engines, as discussed by Ćurković and Košec (2018). Mcleod and McAllister (2007) emphasize the importance of selecting high-quality, reputable sources for a literature review, which outdated or biased sources can compromise. Researchers should aim to include a range of relevant and up-to-date sources in their literature reviews. However, many researchers rely on outdated or biased sources, which can lead to inaccuracies or incomplete understanding of the current state of knowledge. The temptation by the review to apply outdated literature is a challenge facing literature review applications in the 21st century (Tayo *et al.*, 2023).

CRAFTING AN IMPACTFUL LITERATURE REVIEW: A GUIDE TO AVOIDING COMMON ERRORS

Researchers should follow a systematic and disciplined approach to write an insightful literature review and avoid the common mistakes outlined above. Irwin (2015) emphasizes the importance of meticulous writing and avoiding careless mistakes in literature reviews. This includes ensuring error-free manuscripts, specifying significant assumptions, and being mindful of ethical considerations. The following step-by-step guide can serve as a framework.

Clearly Define the Research Objectives and Research Questions

It is crucial to clearly understand the research objectives and questions before conducting the literature review. This will guide the search process and ensure the

review is focused and purposeful. Researchers must establish clear pathways and a conceptual framework for their literature review to ensure its successful execution (Neupane, 2020).

Develop a Systematic Search Strategy

Researchers should develop a comprehensive and systematic search strategy to identify relevant literature. This includes using appropriate keywords, searching multiple databases, and consulting relevant experts in the field.

Evaluate the Quality and Relevance of the Literature

When reviewing the selected studies, researchers should critically evaluate the quality and relevance of each source. This involves assessing the study's methodology, sample size, validity, and the soundness of its theoretical foundations. Biased or irrelevant sources should be excluded from the review.

Synthesize and Analyze the Findings

Researchers should synthesize the findings from the selected studies to develop a coherent narrative. Identify common themes, patterns, and gaps in the literature and highlight the key debates and controversies in the field. The research objectives and research questions should guide this synthesis. Baumeister (2000) and Rifkin (2002) stress the need for a well-structured, coherent review that summarizes and critically assesses the literature, identifies gaps, and evaluates potential research methodologies.

Provide a Clear and Logical Structure

A well-structured literature review should have a clear introduction, main body, and conclusion. The introduction should provide background information and justification for the topic, while the main body should present the synthesized findings logically and organized. The conclusion should summarize the key findings, identify research gaps, and highlight the significance of the study.

Stay Up-To-Date with the Literature

Researchers should continuously update their literature review to ensure that it reflects the most current state of knowledge. Regularly reviewing new studies and publications in the field will help prevent reliance on outdated sources and biases.

By following these steps and incorporating strategies to avoid the common mistakes discussed earlier, researchers can ensure their literature reviews' rigor, comprehensiveness, and reliability.

CONCLUSION

The literature review is a critical component of business and management research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge and guiding future research agendas. However, researchers often need to catch up on common

mistakes that compromise the rigor and effectiveness of their literature reviews. These mistakes include a lack of systematic search strategy, failure to evaluate and synthesize the literature critically, unclear research objectives and questions, and overreliance on outdated or biased sources. To enhance the rigor in literature reviews for business and management research, researchers should adopt a step-by-step guide that includes clearly defining research objectives and questions, developing a systematic search strategy, evaluating the quality and relevance of the literature, synthesizing and analyzing the findings, providing a clear and logical structure, and staying up-to-date with the literature. By avoiding these prevalent errors and following a comprehensive approach, researchers can ensure that their literature reviews contribute to the overall rigor and quality of research in the field, facilitating the generation of new ideas, identifying research gaps, and enhancing the understanding of business and management phenomena.

However, the study displays limitations. While this study provides a step-by-step guide to avoiding prevalent errors, it fails to address the unique challenges and considerations that may arise in specific research contexts or disciplines.

Future research avenues could include a more extensive examination of the particular difficulties and mistakes encountered in literature reviews across different fields and developing and validating tools or frameworks to assist researchers in conducting rigorous and comprehensive literature reviews. Additionally, research could explore the impact of various errors on the quality and validity of research outcomes and investigate strategies for mitigating these errors to enhance the overall rigor of literature reviews.

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