The Literature Review

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Norin Arshed and Mike Danson

Being able to establish what is known about a subject area, and by association what is not yet known, is an important skill for students, researchers and practicing managers alike. In academic circles this is referred to as reviewing literature, and allows you to understand the current state in a subject area, to relate this to the ongoing research, and to identify gaps in this knowledge. A literature review may resolve a debate, establish the need for additional research, and define a topic of inquiry. This chapter concentrates on establishing and understanding the purpose of the literature review and the steps involved in undertaking a comprehensive literature review.

The purpose of the literature review

The purpose of a literature review is simple: it is to educate oneself in the topic area and to understand the literature before shaping an argument or justification. A literature review is "an important chapter in the thesis, where its purpose is to provide the background to and justification for the research undertaken" (Bruce, 1994, p. 218). The writer "extracts and synthesises the main points, issues, findings and research methods which emerge from a critical review of the readings" (Nunan, 1992, p. 217) to build a "coherent argument which leads to the description of a proposed study" (Rudestam and Newton, 2007, p. 63). Over the years, numerous types of literature reviews have emerged, but the four main types are traditional or narrative, systematic, meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. The primary purpose of a traditional or narrative literature review is to analyse and summarise a body of literature. This is achieved by presenting a comprehensive background of the literature within the interested topic to highlight new research streams, identify gaps or recognise inconsistencies. This type of literature review can help in refining, focussing and shaping research questions as well as

developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Coughlan et al., 2007). The systematic literature review in contrast undertakes a more rigorous approach to reviewing the literature, perhaps because this type of review is often used to answer highly structured and specific research questions. The meta-analysis literature review involves taking the findings from the chosen literature and analysing these findings by using standardised statistical procedures (Coughlan et al., 2007). Polit and Beck (2006) argue that meta-analysis methods help in drawing conclusions and detecting patterns and relationships between findings. They also discuss meta-synthesis, a non-statistical procedure, which evaluates and analyses findings from qualitative studies and aims to build on previous conceptualisations and interpretations.

Of the four approaches described above, the two dominant styles of literature review are the traditional or narrative literature review and the systematic literature review. Therefore it is important to distinguish the traditional literature review (which usually adopts a critical approach) from the systematic literature review (which aims to identify all the literature in the topic area to ensure that no existing understanding or knowledge is missed). The systematic literature review has been long used in healthcare literature (Ernst and Pittler, 2001) and is a "method of making sense of large bodies of information, and a means to contributing to the answers to questions about what works and what does not" (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006, p. 2). The traditional social science and business management literature review is useful in identifying gaps in knowledge whereas the systematic review concentrates on promoting research knowledge. Jesson et al. (2011, p. 11) provide a continuum of the different approaches to both of these literature reviews (Figure 3.1).

Narrative view	⟷	Systematic review
Variety of styles	⟷	Structured approached
No defined method	⟷	Rigorous method
No specified analysis	⟷	Synthesis, meta-analysis
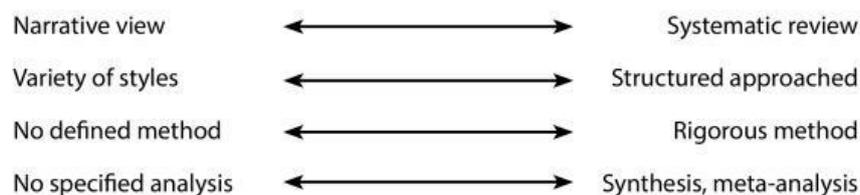
Figure 3.1: A continuum of literature review approaches

Our aim is to provide guidance on undertaking a traditional literature review, concentrating on the context of doing a more traditional and critical literature review rather than a systematic literature review. Literature reviews are important for numerous reasons. First, by undertaking a litera-

ture review, the information gathered from credible articles or studies that are of relevance, important and valid can be summarised into a document (for example, a thesis or a dissertation). This can then allow for the rationale or reason for a study to emerge, which may include a justification for a specific research approach (McGhee et al., 2007). Second, it provides a starting point for researchers where they are required to identify and understand what has been written about a particular area. That will usually mean reading all the relevant texts and then going through each to summarise, evaluate, critically review, synthesise and compare these research studies in their chosen area. Third, by carrying out a literature review it not only highlights the gaps in knowledge but it means that students, researchers and managers alike are not replicating or repeating previous work – it identifies discrepancies, knowledge gaps and inconsistencies in the literature. Finally, it can support "clarity in thinking about concepts and possible theory development" (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2006, p. 350). The purpose of a literature review is to follow a process as illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Identification of problem domain

Critical discussion of what has been done

Identification of knowledge gaps

Objectives
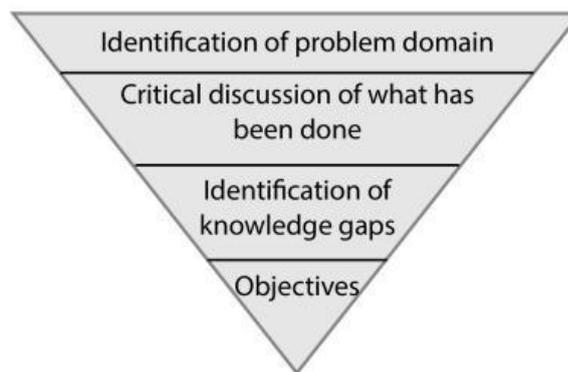
Figure 3.2: The purpose of the literature review. Source: Maier (2013, p. 4)

Often business students will find that there are many subject areas, themes, strands, theories, etc. that overlap with one another. For example, in marketing studies, 'opportunity' and 'creativity' are both themes that are essential for marketers to understand because this is how they develop marketing plans. However, 'opportunity' and 'creativity' themes are also discussed in the entrepreneurship field where 'opportunity' and 'creativity' are based on seeking gaps in the market and developing a business plan to address the gap. Both share many fundamental concepts but depending on what field of research that you undertake or follow, the language and labels used may differ slightly. It is imperative that your literature review is clear and consistent over such issues. Therefore, if you choose to look at

the themes 'opportunity' and 'creativity' within the entrepreneurship field, you would have to ensure that the scope of your research remained within the field of interest.

Ideally the literature review will be able to answer the following questions:

1 What do you know about the research area?

2 What are the relationships between key ideas, dynamics and variables?

3 What are the current theories, trends and themes?

4 What are the inconsistencies, implications and shortcomings of previous studies?

5 What needs further investigation because evidence is lacking, inconclusive, contradictory and/or limited?

6 What methodological approaches have been taken and why? Are the methodological approaches justified?

7 Why does this area of research need to be studied further?

8 What contribution will your work make to the current debate?

Given these questions, the initial literature review will reveal areas requiring further research and will help to formulate your research question(s). However, literature reviews are not without their problems. If a literature review is not undertaken with a comprehensive and focussed search of the existing literature, the literature review is potentially weak. The literature review could be too narrow, too general with little structure, include obsolete citations, and searches may be of little value if they are primarily taken from websites, textbooks, press articles and so forth. The issue for you is not to review or cite as many authors as possible, but rather to *synthesise* and make an adequate argument for the purposes of the chosen research. By synthesising, you are required to critique the existing literature: to think, read and write critically in a manner which is consistent and supports and justifies your argument in your chosen area of interest.

Selecting a topic

Selecting a topic can be overwhelming. As a first step, the selection of a topic should be based on your interest and understanding of that domain. But many students ask "how do I choose which topic to review?" This may seem like a daunting task but your main ideas for studying or researching