



The Role of Literature Review in Research

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Authors' Contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors.
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of literature review in research. As a crucial component of the research process, the role of literature review is indispensable and cannot be overstated. Most researchers find it difficult to tailor the pattern of a good literature review in research. This lack of understanding of what literature review is, its processes and approaches deemphasize the importance and result in poor research findings and reports. This work, therefore, aimed at correcting and proffering solutions to the observed fundamental flaws and knowledge gaps created by lack of understanding of the tenets of literature review. The work adopted the qualitative research method and relied on secondary sources of information. The work conceptualized what constitutes literature review and its importance. The work also examined the approaches to literature review, and its processes. Some of the findings revealed that literature review faces some challenges which include dearth of materials, value judgment, resource constraints and inability to determine what constitutes relevant materials. This work suggested that there is the need for a rigorous approach and process of literature review in order to realize the full potentials and result of a research endeavour.

Keywords: Literature review, review approaches, research process, challenges, results.

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INTRODUCTION

In conducting a research, one of the important aspects is the review of relevant literature. In doing this, a researcher aims to achieve a goal of having firm grip of the survey of existing research and scholarly works that are relevant to his research. Cooper (1988) opined that literature review is a type of scholarship that encompasses many attributes. It can be empirical, theoretical, critical, analytic or methodological in nature. It attempts to describe, summarize, evaluate, clarify and integrate the content of primary reports. Therefore, review of relevant literature serves as the bedrock of the research work; a fundamental piece of guide and a compass that gives a robust foundation to the research being carried out with the intent of citing both published and unpublished works that are relevant to the current study.

Cronin, et al (2008) explained that reviews are aimed at summarizing results of a number of other researches. Systematic reviews anchor on clear and methodological criteria to discover, synthesize and as well evaluate all literature relating to a particular topic. Literature review aims at the revision and appraisal of past scholarly works of previous researchers with the intent to gather more knowledge. In social science research for example, literature review forms a major segment which would amount to nullity without according it the pride of place it deserves. This means that research would amount to a futile exercise without literature review and would be considered grossly deficient. All academic successes are attributable to the pool of existing body of knowledge; contributions of notable academics which the present researches are hinged on. The appreciation of other notable academic contributors in the field of study helps the researcher immensely in familiarizing with the environment of the chosen field of discourse and topic being researched. It behooves therefore, that the current research or investigation is anchored on

precedence in order to take appropriate bearing in the existing body of knowledge.

However, many researchers do not achieve their desired goals because of poor organization and lack of understanding of the importance and challenges of literature review. It is imperative that researchers understand and take cognizance of the premium placed on literature review in order to achieve quality research. This work therefore, examines the importance and challenges of literature review.

CONCEPTUALIZING LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review could be referred to as an intellectual excursion into the pool of body of an existing knowledge with the sole aim of filling knowledge gap in academics. According to Osaze (2011), literature review entails review of concepts and definitions, present state-of-the art theory, methodology of research in the area and findings. In his own view, Agbogidi (2014) noted that literature review is a very crucial component of the research. Onwuka (2019) posited that literature review entails looking at books, newspapers, journals, conference papers, unpublished books etc, with a view to finding out what people have done or not done on a particular problem at hand. This implies that despite numerous works earlier done in the existing literature, virgin grounds are still lying fallow waiting to be explored. Alamu and Olukosi (2008) opined that literature review critically evaluates past research works and studies carried out in related areas to get a detailed information and knowledge of the selected research area.

The zeal for further knowledge acquisition in a chosen area births the need for familiarization with materials that are within the area of the research. This takes the form of survey of the existing manuals, written deposits in the library and other sources in the archive in the specific area of study. According to Saliu (2004), literature review is an intellectual

excursion into the existing body of knowledge. He further opined that literature review may be conceived as a familiarization tour of materials that relates to one's research efforts.

A literature review serves as the foundation for the remainder of a scholarly article. It outlines the scope and quality of existing knowledge while effectively conveying the relevance of prior research to the reader (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). As an academic endeavour, the review should not merely restate the subject matter but must add value by synthesizing the available material and critically evaluating the underlying theories (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). Adequacy and survey in its contextual state here refers to the researcher or his supervisor being able and wholly convinced that everything possible within the sphere and reach of someone at that level under consideration had been done; which satisfies human sense of judgment at that material time. Obviously, no researcher can exhaust relevant literature in his domain or career topic but should be adequate for conviction.

By literature review, the researcher takes the advantage of participating commensurately in the existing opinions of his predecessors and superiors or learned folks to have an informed standpoint. Through the singular act of literature review, the researcher gathers more facts and knowledge on the subject matter as well update existing knowledge or information as may apply. It equally helps the researcher to estimate milestone coverage in order to explore virgin grounds.

The Value of Literature Review in Research

The benefits of writing a standard literature review cannot be overemphasized because it forms the fulcrum of research. Literature review, being a systematic procedure in the course of investigation, provides the researcher with first hand information which is the cornerstone of the current investigative

effort of the researcher in an attempt to fill the knowledge gap observed in the previous works. It enables the researcher to understand what the new studies and researches are saying, and it will help him to build upon the foundation made by others (Hart, 1998).

Literature review helps to appreciate the contributions and growth in knowledge as the previous scholarly works are being surveyed. In relation to that, identification of new areas that have not been investigated is discovered. The accumulated knowledge drawn from the past works add to what can be referred to in the future (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011). Review of relevant literature is important and plays dominant role in the formulation of research problems through the entire journey of research itself. Unarguably, it is opined that research challenges that lack currency in literature are considered not strong.

Literature transcends scouting for information to the recognition and articulation of relationships between the literature and the field of research. Even when literature review may vary in terms of types of studies, the fundamental aim remains constant (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011). It provides researcher with the adequacy of establishing a knowledge gap while the review lasts. Without the review of literature, it would be extremely difficult to know what is missing along the line of research.

The researcher becomes more aware of the research terrain through review of literature, which guides him out of pitfalls and problems as the information gathered would place him in a vantage position to strategize well and pick methodology that is more applicable to his research (Boote, 2005). Through literature review, the researcher gains insights into the current work and as a result, knowledge gaps are updated by this act of the review, therefore, he is able to chart a new course of action through submissions. Okoli & Schabram, (2010) agree that as an academic piece may not regurgitate

everything, it should contribute to the work in its dual approach of synthesizing the available material and lending a scholarly critique of theory.

Another important benefit derivable from literature review is that it expands the researcher's capacity and infuses in him the courage to tackle problems and associated challenges. The researcher becomes fully equipped and primed for critical thinking through the knowledge gained while reviewing other literatures. It equips the researcher with the scope of the study thereby avoiding unreliable conclusion and to spot out areas that have been explored and discovering areas that need to be explored. The researcher is at advantage in minimizing errors made by previous researchers.

Reviews expose past mistakes and deficiencies thereby creating room for robust improvement. It also broadens researcher's horizon that could lead to confidence building through which the right things are done in the right direction. The review affords one avalanche of opportunity to have divergence of opinions drawn from different authorities in the field of study.

Approaches to Literature Review

- a. **Finding a researchable topic:** While reviewing literature, the task of choosing a topic is the first task to be considered and often times difficult (Timmins and McCabe, 2005). No meaningful review of literature can be carried out without a researchable topic. The first necessary step to be taken towards this direction is to have a research topic. In the case of an academic research that will eventually lead to the acquisition of a certificate, the selection of a topic requires the input of superior hand, who stands as the supervisor. Whatever goal the research is aimed at, its topic is fundamental because it will have a great influence on literature review.
- b. **Mapping or survey of literature:**

This involves the kind of literature that exists on the research topic and where they can be sourced. At this stage, direct contact with the literature is not necessary. Browsing through the internet, proceedings of conferences, newspaper cuttings by specialized libraries, etcetera give good information at this stage. A systematic approach is required to identify related materials that are suitable and relevant (Hek and Langton, 2000; Cronin et al, 2008). After identifying the relevant data, it is important to locate them, by mapping out strategies of consulting their location as there is the need to know their actual locations. Newell and Burnard (2006) opine that comprehensiveness and relevance should be the watch-ward of the researcher. The more explicit the topic or question is, the more focused the result will be (Cronin et al, 2008). The decision has to be made on how to go scouting for the materials where they are and reproduce or to procure them. The final decision, however, resides with the researcher. All what is required is that there must be an interaction with the relevant materials. Collection of relevant materials is an important step in literature review. Since it is impossible for a researcher to consult all available materials, there is the need to rank them in terms of relevance and importance to the current work. Emphasis should be placed on established authorities in the chosen area of research. The advantage of focusing on established authorities is that one's work will have the quality ingredients needed (Saliu, 2004). Reading through the materials is the next step to undertake. This is necessary to

have the first contact with the assembled materials. The researcher is expected to familiarize with the context; hence it is most regarded as familiarization reading. Jotting or penciling down certain things such as titles of articles or books, publishers, issue or volume numbers, names of editors/authors years of publication, number of pages are important.

c. **Reflection over what the researcher had read previously:**

Question such as can this or that fit in? Is this position I am taking relevant in view of the existing facts? These kinds of questions are important at this stage of literature review. At this stage, a researcher is expected to spend enough time on reflections because it is a thought provoking stage where regurgitation of earlier observations is brought to bear. The researcher comes out with his own ideas on the issues raised. Saliu (2004) states that the view(s) of the researcher at this point is(are) necessary but should be careful and critical with his opinion. In doing this, he must stand on a point of either in support or in opposition. He could as well be on his own

d. **The gathering of all relevant materials:** All materials pinned down for review have to be accessed either physically or mentally. Review cannot take place when the materials have not been put together or assembled. It may be necessary to sort them out on the basis of themes or issues so as to facilitate review. It is necessary to read through the assembled materials casually for the first time. This is for a researcher to be systematic in his approach to review, and the researcher can jot down salient points or even details

regarding what he has read to avoid skipping of items and ideas. Logically, he needs to read through the accumulated literature thoroughly and deeply at this stage by reading through with emphasis on areas of disagreement or agreement. Specifically, a researcher needs to reflect deeply on why scholars have disagreed and on what issues have they agreed. This is necessary for him to convince his readers that he has mastered all the issues involved. Mastery of the issues and terrain requires the researcher going through thick and thin of the controversies and coming out strong in the end. He should be an objective reviewer although without compromise thereby not expected to allow unsubstantiated or unconvincing arguments to push him. The researcher should focus on sound and superior arguments either contained in the materials or those he can readily come up with which can be substantiated and not to be enmeshed in frivolities (Saliu, 2004)

Processes in Literature Review

- a. **Paraphrasing:** Literature review involves the action of paraphrasing. Through paraphrasing, accurate representation of submissions of authors, scholars or even commentators on issues under consideration is made. The researcher is expected to properly acknowledge the source or sources at the end of presentation.
- b. **Re-Stating:** In literature review, we also re-state points made by earlier researchers or authors. This is appropriate when there is agreement between the researcher and other past works on the same subject matter.
- c. **Quoting or Citing of Authorities:**

By this, we mean that a researcher should learn to quote partly or wholly the submissions of scholars that are considered appropriate to his research work. Based on a researcher's sense of judgment, quoting verbatim what established authorities or policy makers have said on a topical issue is surely a plus to the research effort. It helps the researcher to illuminate on his work and thereby add value to his findings.

- d. **Indenting:** Indent when one is quoting verbatim long sentences and paragraphs from earlier works or interviews. Once the lines being lifted are more than three, we usually indent. Through indenting, it means separating foreign or borrowed ideas from our usual paragraphs with clear and distinct paragraphs and lines with the sources properly cited at the end of indented words.
- e. **Updating:** A researcher is expected to update data when carrying out review of literature, if found necessary. What this means is that a reviewer as a participant in the research is expected to bridge the information gap he has found in the literature.
- f. **Challenging:** We can challenge conclusions that are not supported by facts even at the time of drawing them. For instance, a reviewer will be doing a great disservice to scholarship if the submissions of an earlier work to the effect that Nigeria got her independence, from Britain in 1962 and the unfortunate civil war in the country started in 1968, are not instantly challenged and corrected as 1960 and 1967 respectively. However, in challenging, researchers are expected to be well grounded in the issues being raised as well as their various dimensions over time.

- g. **Manner of Review:** The language of review should be cultured and persuasive. This is because no matter how we try, there are usually other materials that we would not access. Our readers may have read other literature we could not read and whatever arguments we are presenting, may have been robustly made by previous authors.

Challenges to Literature Review

The art of reviewing literature has been bedeviled by a number of problems:

- a. **Unavailability of Materials:** Researchers are surprised when they discover that those materials earmarked for review are not where they thought they would be. This could be a function of low reading culture which has discouraged printing and publication of books, journals, monographs, etc. No meaningful review can take place when relevant materials cannot be accessed.
- b. **Value Judgment:** Social scientists, deal with human related issues. However, we cannot rise above our sentiments and values. The impact of this is that right from the selection of materials, we may introduce our biases. This tendency has affected the quality of review in the social sciences.
- c. **Resource Constraint:** Literature review depends on resources. In a situation where materials are scattered in various locations, the choice of a researcher is limited. In order for him to access a thorough literature review, he needs fund to procure the materials or transport him to libraries to read them up. He may also need to reproduce some materials. After gathering, then he needs a reasonable level of comfort to guarantee his concentration

during writing. Where the minimum material comfort is absent, the quality of review will be so affected.

- d. **Inability to Determine the Relevant Materials:** The decision on relevant materials is not entirely left to researcher to make. This is important if he is carrying out the research for purposes of certification. In some cases, it takes time to agree on what constitutes relevant materials.
- e. **Inability to make up one's Mind on Time:** A researcher may spend some time in making up his mind on what materials seem relevant to the research topic. This usually takes a considerable amount of time to clear off. He may seek the assistance of his senior colleagues to quickly get over it.
- f. **The Phenomenon of Foreign Authored Books:** Most books on social sciences are foreign authored. This poses two levels of problem. One, accessing them is rather difficult given the unreliable fall of most country's national currency. Secondly, the ideas contained in most of the foreign books are based on the experiences of the foreign nations which are very different from other national existence. Researchers are faced in most cases with the problems of accessibility, adaptation and misrepresentation of facts of existence especially in Africa.
- h. **Confusing Literature Review with Summary:** Literature review is different from summary and transcends that. The areas dealing with participation of researchers, updating of facts, challenging of conclusions etc, indicate that anyone that ventures in summary is on another mission away from literature review.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This work examined the importance of literature review with particular interest in social sciences research. It defined literature review and its concept, importance, processes and discussed the actions involved in reviewing literature. The work also discussed challenges faced by researchers in carrying out literature review. The work suggests that for researchers to be seen to be doing the correct thing in research, they must acknowledge from the beginning, that a quite number of other research works have been done and their efforts would concentrate on a few of them. Priority should be accorded relevant literature to the topic being investigated; following the prescribed steps. The work remarked that point of connection must be established between the research topic and the review of literature carried out.

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