



Research Article

RETHINKING LITERATURE REVIEWS: KEY PITFALLS AND STRATEGIES FOR POSTGRADUATES

Michael Mncedisi Willie ^a

^a Council for Medical Schemes, Pretoria, South Africa

Article Info

Article history:

Received 01 June 2025

Revised 17 June 2025

Accepted 20 July 2025

Available online 30 July 2025

Keywords:

academic writing,
conceptual framework,
critical synthesis,
literature review,
methodology,
postgraduate research,
research gaps,
thematic analysis

Abstract

The literature review was a fundamental component of postgraduate research, but it was often misinterpreted and underused as a vital tool for critical analysis. This study explored common pitfalls encountered by postgraduate students in constructing literature reviews, including over-reliance on descriptive summaries, thematic fragmentation, outdated sourcing, and insufficient synthesis across studies. Through a qualitative content analysis of peer-reviewed guidelines and academic writing literature, key themes emerged that emphasised the importance of thematic organisation, critical engagement with current and high-quality sources, explicit identification of knowledge gaps, and consistent alignment with research questions. The findings highlighted the need to integrate conceptual and theoretical frameworks as intellectual scaffolding and to promote reflexivity to enhance scholarly rigour. This study offered practical recommendations for postgraduate researchers to transform the literature review from a mere summary into a compelling, theory-informed argument that effectively justified the relevance and originality of their research.

© 2025 IJCAR. All rights

Introduction

Despite its pivotal role in shaping the direction and credibility of scholarly work, the literature review is frequently underestimated or misinterpreted by postgraduate researchers. Instead of merely cataloguing previous studies, the literature review serves as the intellectual foundation of a research project. It should contextualise the research problem, evaluate and synthesise prior findings, and clearly articulate the gaps that justify further inquiry (Cronin, 2011; Boote & Beile, 2005). When executed effectively, it also highlights competing theories, methodological trends, and unresolved debates that shape the current state of knowledge (Snyder, 2019). Nevertheless, many students approach this chapter as a series of summaries rather than an analytical narrative that interrogates the existing body of work.

One major pitfall is the over-reliance on descriptive summaries structured around individual authors. This fragmented approach often lacks synthesis and fails to show how studies interrelate or differ. Effective literature reviews should instead be thematically organised, enabling the writer to highlight convergence, divergence, and research trends across multiple sources (Okoli & Schabram, 2010).

When students compare existing studies regarding their aims, research methods, target populations, and findings, they are better positioned to evaluate the strengths and limitations of current evidence. This critical approach reveals areas where knowledge is well-established and highlights gaps where further research is needed (Okoli & Schabram, 2010; Cronin, 2011).

Organising the literature thematically supports this process by allowing researchers to identify inconsistencies, underlying biases, and taken-for-granted assumptions, insights crucial for constructing a well-grounded and persuasive argument (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). Such analytical engagement demonstrates scholarly maturity and strengthens the foundation of a research study. While seminal works retain their value, academic rigour increasingly demands the inclusion of recent, peer-reviewed literature, particularly in dynamic fields such as healthcare, technology, and social policy. Snyder (2019) emphasises that when conducted systematically and with methodological clarity, literature reviews can synthesise fragmented knowledge and function as rigorous, standalone contributions to theory development. This highlights the importance of strategic and critical source selection to ensure relevance and scholarly impact. However, students often neglect to critically assess their sources' quality and appropriateness.

Although grey literature and opinion-based materials may provide contextual or policy-related insights, they should be used sparingly and balanced with robust, empirical evidence to uphold academic standards (Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton, 2016; Okoli & Schabram, 2010). A carefully chosen collection of high-quality scholarly sources strengthens the literature review's credibility and reflects the student's thorough engagement with the field and awareness of current academic discussions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

An effective literature review should culminate in a well-justified rationale for the proposed research, highlighting unresolved issues, conceptual gaps, or methodological limitations that the current study seeks to address. Yet, many reviews fail to link these insights explicitly to the study's research questions or conceptual framework, weakening coherence across chapters. A rigorous literature review maintains a clear line of sight to the study's aims, using critical

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: m.willie@medicalschemes.co.za

engagement with existing research to inform and refine its focus (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

Literature review

The literature review is vital to any research study by thoroughly examining existing knowledge and pinpointing gaps that warrant further investigation (Boote & Beile, 2005). Rather than simply summarising prior work, an effective review synthesises findings around key themes and critically evaluates methodologies, outcomes, and theoretical approaches (Snyder, 2019). This analytical process enables researchers to position their study within ongoing scholarly conversations and establish its relevance.

Organising the literature thematically rather than by individual authors enhances coherence and allows for the deeper synthesis of related studies (Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012). Thematic grouping reveals patterns, contradictions, and gaps less visible in descriptive reviews, facilitating the development of clear research questions and conceptual frameworks (Torraco, 2016). This approach promotes scholarly rigour and demonstrates a thorough understanding of the field. A literature review’s credibility hinges on its sources’ quality and recency, with contemporary peer-reviewed studies forming the essential foundation. However, as Paez (2017) critically highlights, incorporating authoritative gray literature is equally important to reduce publication bias and access diverse, often unpublished data, enhancing the review’s comprehensiveness and reliability, particularly in rapidly evolving or specialised fields.

While identifying specific knowledge gaps, be they theoretical, methodological, or contextual, strengthens a study’s justification and highlights its contribution (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016), many literature reviews fall short by overlooking these critical deficiencies. There is a pressing need to raise awareness of common blind spots, such as citation padding, lack of reflexivity, and insufficient transparency regarding the researcher’s perspective, all of which undermine academic rigour and depth (Cronin, 2011; Berger, 2015). Purposeful, critical engagement with sources beyond mere summary builds coherent, well-argued narratives that firmly situate the study within ongoing scholarly debates. Addressing these shortcomings is essential for advancing literature reviews from descriptive overviews to insightful, ethically grounded analyses that genuinely contribute to academic excellence.

Methods

This investigation employed a qualitative content analysis research methodology to investigate the most prevalent obstacles and effective approaches in postgraduate literature reviews. The primary data sources comprised scholarly articles, academic guides, and institutional research manuals published between 2000 and 2023, focusing on postgraduate research writing and literature review methodologies (Cronin, 2011; Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). Key databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, and institutional repositories—were systematically searched using keywords such as “postgraduate literature review,” “research writing challenges,” “thematic literature review,” and “critical synthesis in literature reviews” (Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012).

Selected documents were screened for relevance and quality, prioritising peer-reviewed sources and authoritative texts within education, social sciences, and health sciences (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). Non-peer-reviewed grey literature was included only when it provided significant contextual insights or guidelines from reputable institutions such as the World Health Organization and UNESCO (World Health Organization, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

Table 1 presents a total of 26 studies included in the review, spanning a publication period from 2002 to 2023. This range highlights the progression and shifting scholarly perspectives on literature reviews and research methodologies considered in this study over the past two decades. The majority of sources (69.2%) are peer-reviewed journal articles, underscoring a strong reliance on rigorous academic research within the field.

Books account for about 19.2% of the sources, serving as comprehensive guides and theoretical frameworks often used by postgraduate students. Additionally, reports and policy documents (11.5%) contribute valuable grey literature insights, though they are typically not peer-reviewed. This mix illustrates the balance between formal peer-reviewed scholarship and practical or policy-oriented resources in understanding literature review practices. The distribution suggests that while academic journals dominate the discourse, there is still significant value placed on accessible, authoritative texts and official guidelines. The recent surge in publications from 2010 onwards signals growing scholarly engagement with the challenges and best practices in conducting effective literature reviews.

Table 1: Overview of Source Types, Peer-Review Status, and Publication Years

Category	Count	Percentage (%)
Number of studies included	26	100
Type of Study/Publication		
- Journal Articles	18	69.2
- Books	5	19.2
- Reports/Policy Documents	3	11.5
Peer Review Status		
- Peer Reviewed	18	69.2
- Not Peer Reviewed	8	30.8

Key Principles and Common Challenges in Conducting a Rigorous Literature Review

Misunderstanding the Purpose of a Literature Review

A prevalent misconception among postgraduate researchers is the tendency to approach the literature review as either a descriptive summary or a chronological listing of prior studies, resembling an extended annotated bibliography. This reductive method overlooks the essential function of the literature review: to engage critically with existing scholarship by identifying patterns, synthesising findings, exposing conceptual tensions, and uncovering theoretical and methodological limitations (Torraco, 2016).

A robust review does not merely report on past research but weaves insights into a coherent analytical narrative that justifies the relevance and originality of the proposed study. In their influential work, Grant and Booth (2009) introduced a typology of fourteen review types using the SALSA framework, Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis to delineate methodological variations. While this framework enhances clarity around review design, their findings also underscore a persistent issue: many reviews lack methodological transparency and consistency, which can undermine their interpretive value and scholarly rigour. This highlights the need for researchers to be methodologically reflective and purposeful in constructing reviews beyond description to offer meaningful critique and direction.

When executed poorly, the review becomes a disconnected series of summaries that fail to identify underlying assumptions or gaps in the field. This weakens the chapter’s scholarly value and makes it difficult to justify the research questions or theoretical framework. For example, recent studies in research methodology caution against overlooking the “so what?” question—a test of whether the

review clearly articulates why the new study matters and what it hopes to add (Snyder, 2019).

Furthermore, students often neglect to compare methodological choices across studies, a critical omission since the credibility and applicability of findings often hinge on methodological soundness. Wulff et al. (2023) identify three primary categories of methodological mistakes: study design and data collection, data analysis, and diagnostics/inferences/reporting that consistently undermine the reliability and informativeness of research in management and applied psychology. They also reveal a widespread lack of methodological transparency and open science practices, recommending clear, reproducible frameworks to enhance the validity and impact of empirical studies.

A well-executed literature review is foundational in shaping a clear and compelling research agenda by critically mapping the existing body of knowledge and exposing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological limitations (Boote & Beile, 2005; Hart, 2018). It must go beyond mere summarisation to highlight areas of scholarly consensus, unresolved debates, and outdated or underexplored domains. By doing so, the review delineates the intellectual and empirical space that justifies the proposed study, ensuring that the research is relevant and responsive to existing gaps. Without this analytical clarity and purpose, the literature review falls short of its primary function as a springboard for meaningful scholarly inquiry.

Snyder (2019) reinforces this view by arguing that literature reviews, when employed as structured and systematic research methodologies rather than informal overviews, offer a credible pathway to theory development, particularly in complex, interdisciplinary fields like business research. Her study presents a critical typology of review approaches and provides clear methodological and publishing guidance while exposing the weaknesses of unsystematic reviews lacking academic rigour. This underscores the need for intentional design and critical engagement in review writing, where the goal is to report on what is known and strategically position new research within ongoing academic conversations.

Structuring Around Themes, Not Authors

One of the most persistent weaknesses in student literature reviews is the tendency to organise content around individual authors rather than conceptual themes. This approach leads to fragmented writing that reads like a sequence of isolated summaries, failing to demonstrate a cohesive understanding of the field (Hart, 2018). A thematic structure, by contrast, allows the literature to be grouped around key debates, methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, or emerging issues, creating a more integrative and analytical narrative. As Ridley (2012) and Machi & McEvoy (2012) emphasise, the thematic organisation encourages deeper engagement by forcing the researcher to compare, contrast, and synthesise findings from multiple sources. For example, grouping studies that examine digital health interventions by their outcomes (e.g., accessibility, user satisfaction, clinical effectiveness) rather than by author highlights the strengths and gaps more clearly.

Moreover, thematic structuring reflects a higher-order cognitive skill: the ability to interpret complex and sometimes conflicting data in a way that aligns with the research question. Recent guidance from academic writing experts also suggests that thematic reviews are more effective at identifying knowledge gaps and research trends, enabling the literature review to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly conversation (Cronin, 2011; Snyder, 2019). Thematic organisation signals to examiners and readers that the writer has moved beyond descriptive reporting toward critical

engagement, a core requirement of postgraduate-level research.

Over-Reliance on Outdated or Non-Scholarly Sources

A frequent shortcoming in literature reviews is the disproportionate reliance on outdated or non-scholarly sources, which can significantly undermine a study's credibility and academic rigour. While foundational or classic texts provide important theoretical grounding and historical context, their dominance is problematic in rapidly evolving fields such as healthcare, education, and digital innovation, where current knowledge and debates evolve quickly (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

Leading academic institutions and examiners typically expect most citations to be drawn from the most recent 5 to 10 years, ensuring that the review reflects contemporary scholarship and ongoing discussions (Cronin, 2011; Okoli, 2015). Unless such sources are well-justified and sourced from authoritative organisations such as the World Health Organization, the World Bank, or national statistical agencies like Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), the introduction of bias or unverifiable claims is a risk associated with an over-reliance on grey literature, including blogs, commercial websites, or opinion pieces. Moreover, the use of non-peer-reviewed content to underpin key arguments jeopardises the scholarly value of the review, particularly given that examiners are trained to critically assess methodological rigour and epistemological soundness (Snyder, 2019).

Ensuring academic rigour in literature reviews parallels the critical importance of robustness in peer review processes. Peer review guarantees medical research manuscripts' clarity, accuracy, and scientific integrity, ultimately benefiting authors, journals, and the wider academic community through its collaborative and systematic nature (Patricios et al., 2021). However, Tennant and Ross-Hellauer (2020) highlight that despite peer review's centrality in research evaluation, there remain significant gaps in understanding its accountability, susceptibility to reviewer bias, editorial decision-making, and broader social and epistemic impacts. These deficiencies highlight the critical need for standardised protocols and rigorous empirical research to improve the transparency and efficacy of peer review systems while concurrently addressing the prevalent issue of over-reliance on outdated or non-scholarly sources that can compromise academic rigour and the integrity of scholarly work.

Overlooking Knowledge Gaps

A well-crafted literature review does more than synthesise prior research; and it lays the foundation for the new study by clearly articulating where knowledge is missing, inconsistent, or biased. However, many postgraduate researchers fail to go beyond vague acknowledgements of these gaps, offering broad statements like "few studies exist" without detailing what is missing or why it matters (Randolph, 2009; Torraco, 2016). Identifying gaps should be evidence-based and precise, grounded in a critical analysis of previous methodologies, target populations, theoretical perspectives, or geographic contexts.

For instance, if prior studies have primarily focused on high-income countries, a gap may exist in low- and middle-income settings that warrant attention. According to Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016), articulating such gaps not only justifies the relevance of the research but also contributes to shaping future scholarly agendas. Leading institutions now encourage researchers to include a dedicated sub-section, often titled "Identified Gaps" or "Research Justification", to ensure the literature review directly supports the research questions and objectives (Cronin, 2011). Addressing gaps systematically demonstrates critical insight and positions the researcher as an

active participant in academic discourse rather than a passive reporter of existing knowledge.

Losing Sight of the Research Questions

A common but often underappreciated weakness in literature reviews is the inclusion of tangential or loosely related studies that do not directly support the central research questions. While engaging with a wide range of sources may appear thorough, unfocused literature reviews risk diluting the argument and obscuring the study's academic contribution (Boote & Beile, 2005; Snyder, 2019). Examiners and reviewers often assess the breadth of the reviewed literature and its precision about the study's aims and theoretical orientation.

Every source should serve a deliberate role, either contextualising the problem, supporting the conceptual framework, or illustrating the limitations of previous research. Effective reviews repeatedly anchor discussions in the guiding research questions, using them as a filter for relevance and depth (Cronin, 2011). This strategic alignment also allows researchers to avoid "literature dumping," where interesting but unrelated studies are included without analytical justification. Torraco (2016) argues that the literature review should function as a logical map that leads to the research problem, not a disconnected summary of what has been written. Maintaining a laser focus on the research questions ensures that the literature review is purposeful, cohesive, and primed to support the rationale for the study's methodology and contribution.

Neglecting Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

A frequently neglected aspect of literature reviews is incorporating a conceptual or theoretical framework to direct the analysis. These frameworks are not merely academic formalities. They serve as the intellectual scaffolding of a study, shaping how the research problem is interpreted, how variables are defined, and how findings are explained (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Without this guiding structure, researchers struggle to justify their methodological decisions or effectively position their study within the broader scholarly discourse when they are not grounded in a clear theoretical framework.

Importantly, a robust theoretical framework should arise naturally from the literature rather than be imposed retrospectively, illustrating how the study builds upon, challenges, or expands existing theories. Consistent application of this framework throughout the literature review, data analysis, and discussion is crucial for maintaining analytical rigour. Collins and Stockton (2018) emphasise that a well-integrated and balanced theoretical framework is vital in qualitative research, as it shapes epistemological stances, directs methodological choices, and facilitates data coding and interpretation while also cautioning against overreliance on theory, which may hinder the discovery of new insights.

Complementing this perspective, Grant (2014) highlights that despite its centrality, the theoretical framework is often misunderstood or misapplied by doctoral candidates, underscoring the necessity for clearer guidance on its selection and integration. A well-defined conceptual or theoretical lens enhances the review's analytical depth and empowers the researcher to contribute substantively to ongoing academic debates.

Overuse of Citation Padding

Citation padding, the practice of citing multiple sources without meaningful engagement, fundamentally undermines the critical purpose of the literature review and often reflects superficial scholarship. Rather than strengthening the argument, this tactic is frequently employed to artificially

inflate the reference list or create an illusion of academic breadth without delivering analytical depth (Cronin, 2011). When paragraphs become overloaded with loosely connected or redundant citations, the narrative becomes cluttered and fragmented, diminishing the overall coherence and clarity of the review.

In contrast, high-quality literature reviews demonstrate selectivity and strategic citation use, where references build nuanced insights, reconcile conflicting findings, or emphasise significant advances within the field (Snyder, 2019). Such purposeful integration helps maintain a clear and focused argument, which examiners scrutinise closely, particularly where citations lack contextualisation or critical discussion. This highlights that the strength of a literature review is not determined by the sheer number of citations but by how effectively these sources are woven into a well-reasoned, analytical framework.

Supporting this perspective, Chigbu et al. (2023) emphasise that a rigorous literature review hinges on systematic searching, careful identification, selection, and synthesis of relevant sources, ensuring comprehensive coverage and critical engagement with existing knowledge. This process ultimately enhances both the credibility and depth of the research. Similarly, Machi and McEvoy (2012) argue that thoughtfully curated citations should align with the logic of the review, illuminate research gaps, justify the study's objectives, and inform methodological choices.

Despite these clear guidelines, Badenhorst (2018) found that postgraduate students often struggle with inconsistent and superficial citation practices. Their literature reviews tend to prioritise quantity over critical engagement, reflecting a tendency to cite sources superficially rather than engage deeply with them. This approach significantly weakens the depth and scholarly credibility of their academic writing, underscoring the need for greater emphasis on precision and critical analysis over mere volume.

Inadequate Synthesis Across Studies

An often overlooked yet essential element of high-quality literature reviews is the capacity to synthesise research findings rather than simply summarising individual studies. Effective synthesis requires integrating diverse methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and empirical results to uncover overarching patterns, contradictions, and emerging themes within the scholarly conversation (Cronin, 2011; Torraco, 2016).

This critical analytical engagement reflects a researcher's deep comprehension of the academic landscape and situates their work meaningfully within ongoing debates. When synthesis is absent or insufficient, literature reviews tend to become fragmented collections of isolated studies, diminishing their coherence and reducing the review to a superficial summary list.

By contrast, thorough synthesis allows researchers to reveal significant connections across studies, evaluate the strength and consistency of existing evidence, and precisely identify areas where further research is needed. This integrative process provides a robust foundation for new investigations, offering a clear and original rationale while informing methodological choices that enhance the study's rigour and relevance.

Moreover, synthesis signals scholarly maturity, elevating the literature review beyond descriptive reporting into a persuasive, theory-driven argument that actively advances academic discourse (Kraus et al., 2022). Through such integration, the review transforms into a coherent narrative that strengthens the research's intellectual framework and methodological grounding, ultimately contributing to greater originality and impact.

Lack of Reflexivity and Researcher Positioning

A frequently overlooked yet essential aspect of a rigorous literature review is reflexivity, the researcher's critical awareness of their assumptions, positionality, and potential biases in engaging with the literature. Reflexivity is vital in qualitative and interpretive research, where the researcher actively participates in knowledge construction rather than a detached observer (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). By explicitly acknowledging their standpoint, researchers provide transparency that enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the review.

Literature reviews risk presenting knowledge as neutral and objective without reflexivity, obscuring how theoretical perspectives, disciplinary backgrounds, or cultural contexts may shape interpretation (Berger, 2015). Incorporating reflexivity demonstrates scholarly maturity and ethical rigour, signalling to examiners that the researcher has thoughtfully positioned themselves within the academic discourse. This practice encourages ongoing critical self-reflection throughout the research process, fostering a dynamic interplay between the literature and the researcher's evolving understanding.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine common pitfalls in literature reviews critically and offer effective strategies to support postgraduate researchers. The literature review reveals pervasive misconceptions and methodological shortcomings commonly observed in postgraduate research, particularly by reducing the review to a descriptive summary rather than a rigorous critical synthesis. This tendency reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the literature review's purpose, which should extend beyond mere summarisation to actively interrogate, compare, and integrate existing knowledge (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016; Snyder, 2019).

Critical engagement is essential for situating new research within broader academic conversations and articulating a compelling justification for the study. Without it, literature reviews risk devolving into fragmented narratives that fail to coherently support research questions or advance theoretical understanding (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016; Hart, 2018).

A thematic organisational structure emerges as a superior methodological approach, facilitating a holistic and analytical integration of related studies. This contrasts with the prevalent author-centric approach that fragments the discourse and obscures connections among studies (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). By grouping literature thematically, researchers can identify emergent patterns, conflicting findings, and areas of consensus more effectively, thereby positioning their work within ongoing scholarly debates and enhancing the coherence and depth of their analysis (Cronin, 2011; Ridley, 2012). This aligns with contemporary academic writing standards, prioritising synthesis and critical reflection as hallmarks of scholarly maturity.

The imperative to prioritise recent, peer-reviewed, and credible scholarly sources is also underscored, given the rapid evolution of many fields and the need to accurately reflect the current state of knowledge (Okoli, 2015). Overreliance on outdated or grey literature weakens the review's scholarly rigour and risks perpetuating obsolete or biased perspectives. Thus, meticulously curating sources is foundational to maintaining academic integrity and enhancing the review's authority.

Moreover, the explicit identification of knowledge gaps coupled with a steadfast alignment to research questions is vital for maintaining focus and justifying the research design. Such strategic coherence ensures that the literature review does not merely catalogue prior studies but actively

constructs a rationale for the new inquiry (Boote & Beile, 2005; Cronin, 2011). Integrating reflexivity and theoretical frameworks further enriches the review by enabling researchers to position themselves critically within the academic discourse and illuminate how their study extends or challenges existing paradigms (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Berger, 2015). These insights offer a robust framework for enhancing the quality and impact of literature reviews in postgraduate research, emphasising analytical rigour, coherence, and scholarly contribution.

Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data from published literature, which may have excluded relevant unpublished or emerging research, potentially narrowing the scope of insights. The lack of primary data collecting, like interviews or surveys, limits the incorporating of personal perspectives that could enhance contextual comprehension. Additionally, the focus on recent literature means some rapidly evolving developments might not be fully captured. While aiding coherence, the thematic organisation may have omitted valuable studies that did not align directly with identified themes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The literature review is not simply a procedural requirement but a rigorous academic exercise that frames, supports, and justifies the research study. Central to this is the thematic organisation of the review. Rather than summarising the study's author by author, structuring the literature around key themes or ideas allows for a more coherent and insightful analysis. This approach enables the researcher to bring multiple perspectives into conversation, highlighting agreements, contradictions, and emerging trends relevant to the study.

Equally important is the prioritisation of recent, high-quality sources. While foundational studies provide valuable context, most references should be current and drawn from peer-reviewed literature to ensure the review reflects the latest knowledge and maintains academic credibility. This focus on up-to-date research strengthens the relevance of the review and demonstrates engagement with ongoing scholarly debates.

Another critical component is the clear identification and justification of knowledge gaps. A strong literature review explicitly outlines areas where research is lacking, inconsistent, or biased, establishing the rationale for the new study. These gaps provide the foundation for the research questions, reinforcing the study's significance and guiding its direction.

Maintaining consistent alignment with the research questions throughout the review is essential to preserve focus and relevance. Every piece of literature included should serve a clear purpose for the study's aims. This coherence is further enhanced by the meaningful integration of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which provide the intellectual scaffolding needed to interpret findings and position the research within broader academic discussions.

To ensure analytical rigour, researchers must avoid citation padding, including excessive or irrelevant references intended to inflate the bibliography. Instead, citations should be used selectively and critically, promoting synthesis over mere summarisation. Finally, incorporating reflexivity and researcher positioning adds transparency and depth to the review when appropriate.

Acknowledgements and Use of AI

While preparing this manuscript, the author employed AI-assisted tools, including Grammarly and QuillBot, to support language refinement, editing, and plagiarism checking.

All outputs generated by these tools were carefully reviewed and revised by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final content presented in this publication.

Data Availability

This study exclusively used data obtained from secondary sources through a comprehensive literature review. All referenced data are publicly accessible and have been appropriately cited within the manuscript.

References

- Anfara, V. A., & Mertz, N. T. (2015). *Theoretical frameworks in qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- Badenhorst, C. (2018). Citation practices of postgraduate students writing literature reviews. *Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED590932.pdf>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Booth, A., Sutton, A., & Papaioannou, D. (2016). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Boote, D. N., & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: On the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X034006003>
- Chigbu, U. E., Atiku, S. O., & du Plessis, C. (2023). The science of literature reviews: Searching, identifying, selecting, and synthesising. *Publications*, 11(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/publications11010002>
- Collins, C. S., & Stockton, C. M. (2018). The central role of theory in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918797475>
- Cronin, C. (2011). Doing your literature review: Traditional and systematic techniques. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 24(3), 219–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500790.2011.581509>
- Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205>
- Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “house.” *Administrative Issues Journal*, 4(2), 12–26.
- Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, 26, 91–108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>
- Kraus, S., Breier, M., Lim, W. M., Ferreira, J. J. M., & et al. (2022). Literature reviews as independent studies: Guidelines for academic practice. *Review of Managerial Science*, 16(3), 779–811. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-022-00588-8>
- Machi, L. A., & McEvoy, B. T. (2012). *The literature review: Six steps to success* (2nd ed.). Corwin.
- Okoli, C. (2015). A guide to conducting a standalone systematic literature review. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 37, Article 43. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.03743>
- Okoli, C., & Schabram, K. (2010). A guide to conducting a systematic literature review of information systems research. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1954824>
- Paez, A. (2017). Gray literature: An important resource in systematic reviews. *Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine*, 10(3), 233–240. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jebm.12266>
- Patricios, J., Kemp, J., Thornton, J. S., & Drezner, J. (2021). Nuisance or necessity? Why robust peer review is critical for medical science. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 55(19), 1063. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2021-104126>
- Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470754887>
- Randolph, J. (2009). A guide to writing the dissertation literature review. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation*, 14. <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=14&n=13>
- Ridley, D. (2012). *The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Tennant, J. P., & Ross-Hellauer, T. (2020). The limitations to our understanding of peer review. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, 5(6). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-020-00092-1>
- Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(4), 404–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606>
- UNESCO. (2020). *Education for sustainable development: A roadmap*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf000037480_2
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Global strategy on digital health 2020–2025*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240020924>
- Wulff, J. N., Sajons, G. B., Pogrebna, G., Lonati, S., Bastardoz, N., Banks, G. C., & Antonakis, J. (2023). Common methodological mistakes. *Leadership Quarterly*, 34(1), Article 101677.