



## Designing the literature review for a strong contribution

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To cite this article: Hannah Snyder (31 Mar 2023): Designing the literature review for a strong contribution, Journal of Decision Systems, DOI: [10.1080/12460125.2023.2197704](https://doi.org/10.1080/12460125.2023.2197704)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/12460125.2023.2197704>



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Published online: 31 Mar 2023.



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# Designing the literature review for a strong contribution

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## ABSTRACT

A literature review is an excellent research methodology. For example, a review can synthesise research findings and identify areas where more research is needed, thus providing the basis for a conceptual model, and informing policy and practice. However, despite their potential, the contribution and knowledge development of literature reviews are often weak. Time and again, literature reviews provide only a summary of descriptive statistics that does not facilitate knowledge development or inform policy and practice. This short paper examines common dilemmas and problems when it comes to the contribution of literature reviews. Different approaches are suggested and discussed, with the aim of helping researchers develop more meaningful contributions and thereby facilitate the advancement of research fields and knowledge development. The suggestions may be used by researchers, supporting them in moving from writing summary descriptions towards a more efficient approach to analysis and, therefore, stronger contributions.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 October 2022  
Accepted 28 March 2023

## KEYWORDS

Literature review;  
contribution; viewpoint;  
methodology

## 1. Introduction

Keeping up with current state-of-the-art research and assessing the collective knowledge in a field or even on a specific research question is often challenging due to the speed at which new knowledge is created (Palmatier et al., 2018; Snyder, 2019). Therefore, conducting a literature review is often the start of any new research project and is a relevant research method on its own (Snyder, 2019). A literature review can be described as a more or less systematic way of collecting and synthesising previous research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield et al., 2003). A well-conducted literature review can create a firm platform for advancing theory development, practice, or policy (Webster & Watson, 2002). In theory, by synthesising findings and perspectives from a collection of studies, a literature review can address research questions with a power unavailable to any single study. A review can also help provide structure and order in fields or areas where the research is disparate and interdisciplinary. In addition, a literature review is an excellent way of synthesising research findings to show evidence at a meta-level and to uncover

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areas in which more research is needed, which is a critical component of creating theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models.

Despite the tremendous potential the idea of a literature review holds, the contributions of these types of papers are often much less than their promise. Being someone who evaluate and review numerous of manuscript each year, I have noticed a particular problems authors face when submitting their literature review paper. Even when the methodology of a review is valid and well-executed, there are often issues with what constitutes a good or even sufficient contribution. This paper addresses an often overlooked but crucial aspect of any research paper, namely its contribution and value to the field to which it seeks to contribute. By discussing different types of contributions made by a well-executed literature review, this paper aims to help scholars generate more substantial knowledge and thereby contribute in a meaningful way to advancing their field in both theory and practice. Its suggestions may be used by researchers, supporting them in moving from merely summarising descriptions to a more efficient approach to analysis for higher quality literature reviews.

## 2. The problem with contribution in literature reviews

For many research questions, a well-conducted literature review might be just the right tool to deliver answers. For a literature review to be efficient, as with any other research, it needs to be designed and executed in line with current methodological standards to ensure it is accurate, precise, and trustworthy (Moher et al., 2009; Snyder, 2019). However, researchers often start by designing the data collection (often a sample of journal articles) but without knowing what to do with the articles and without a clear plan for analysing the data. Often, this is due to an unclear research question or review aim. This is problematic, as no matter how excellent and rigorous a review article, if it does not provide a sufficient contribution, it should be rejected.

Even if one is not aiming to get published but instead conducting a review for one's dissertation, focusing on trivial statistics makes all the effort put into the review unusable.

Too often, authors submit literature reviews (to journals or parts of their dissertations) containing merely descriptive summaries of research – and not the contents or results of the research but instead facts such as number of articles published, citations analysis, types of methods used, topics covered, and journals represented, without including any form of deeper analysis or further discussion. Often, this is supported by several unreadable figures and word clouds. In addition, conducting a literature review on a topic on which ten reviews have already been published and only adding a year or two of research is often meaningless. While there are some unique situations where these types of findings could be valuable, more often they are not, and the authors will not be successful in publishing them in any decent journal. And if they indeed get published, they are not of use to anyone and do not facilitate knowledge production nor advance the field. This is problematic and can easily be avoided if one is smart when the literature review is designed. Often, researchers make a serious effort to collect their sample of articles, but without thinking carefully about what they want to do with them or coming up with a solid plan for a meaningful analysis. Therefore, they often fail to make a substantial contribution and struggle to get their review published.

While this is not a paper discussing different types of analysis methods for review papers, it is important to note that method of analysis and contribution are strongly related. Frequently (and understandably), researchers want to make shortcuts by using computer-based textual analysis and machine learning to analyse their (often large) datasets. While these types of methods for analysis can be excellent and truly valuable and can provide great insights, just simply *using* them does not warrant a contribution. As with all methods of analysis, they need to be used with a clear purpose in mind and have the capacity to answer the research question of the paper. Not uncommonly, researchers simply enter all the data and see what comes out; therefore, these methods often end up being merely descriptive summaries, only providing an overview of topics, themes, or networks and not generating any deeper analysis. There are of course times where this approach could be valid, but it often seems that even researchers themselves do not really know what to do with their results, which results in confusing and unreadable figures and very brief discussions in the text. Again, this is not to say that computer-based textual analysis and machine learning are always inappropriate – they are excellent, for the right research question.

### 3. What constitutes a contribution when it comes to literature reviews?

Providing a clear definition of what a strong or sufficient contribution of a review article is challenging. Often, we associate it with a ‘high-quality review’ or a ‘well-executed review’, however, a review article can be well-executed without providing a sufficient contribution. However, whether a review article has a sufficient contribution must always be evaluated in relation to the field it wishes to contribute to. There are several ways to provide a meaningful contribution using literature review as a research methodology. Of course, there are examples of excellent articles in all research fields, published in highly ranked journals, with solid contributions that are literature reviews. However, depending on the topic at hand for the review and the research field that is covered, what constitutes a contribution likely varies (MacInnis, 2011). For example, in a mature field of research or research question, what would be considered valuable knowledge is likely to differ from that in a new or immature field. It will also vary depending on the research tradition; a solid contribution in medicine will differ from a meaningful contribution in accounting, management, or marketing. Furthermore, the contribution depends on the question covered. For example, a narrow question such as ‘What is the effect on X on Y’ will have a different contribution than ‘What themes are covered in recent research’. Therefore, the researcher must always do a thorough job knowing their research tradition, the discipline, and the state of knowledge on the research question they want to investigate. They should also consider and acknowledge other literature reviews published on the topic. This should then guide the rest of the design and the conduct of the review, the choice of method for analysis, and the presentation and discussion of the findings.

*Questions to ask before designing a literature review:*

- (1) Why and for whom would this review be useful? Is this review needed?
- (2) What other review articles (if any) are published on this topic? How does my review article extend the knowledge generated by these already published reviews?

**Table 1.** Illustrative examples of different contributions.

Type of contribution	Example of research questions and aims	Example of reviews *
<i>Evidence of effect</i>	What is the effect of X on Y? What are the antecedents of X? What are the moderators influencing the relationship between X and Y?	Blut et al. (2021) Hogreve et al. (2017) Peng et al., (2023) Storey et al. (2016)
<i>Mapping out the state of knowledge</i>	How has research on Y developed during the last 20 years? How is X defined in different research traditions?	Boon et al. (2019) Carlborg et al. (2014) Campion et al. (2020) Holzmann and Gregori (2023)
<i>Developing theory</i>	Using previous research to build a conceptual/empirical model Combining knowledge from two different research fields to build and extend theory	Kanger et al. (2020) Khamitov et al., (2020) Mead and Bower (2000) Rotolo et al., (2022)
<i>Guiding future research</i>	Assessing the state of knowledge to identify where more research is needed Setting an agenda for further research in the area	Lamberton and Stephen (2016). McColl-Kennedy et al. (2017) Mikalef et al. (2018) Maestrini et al. (2017)

\* Note that these are only examples and that contributions must always be assessed in relation to the research field they want to contribute to.

- (3) What constitutes a theoretical/managerial contribution to my field?
- (4) What is the nature of my topic? Mature/immature? Narrow/broad?
- (5) What will be the actual outcomes of this research?

### 3.1. Examples of different contributions

Even though making a meaningful contribution with a literature review is often hard work, there are several ways to move forward. Here, I discuss four broad avenues that might inspire high quality literature reviews with stronger contributions to theory and practice. Hopefully, this will save scholars some time and effort and help to be more successful with publishing these types of papers. Important to note, that many review articles have more than one contribution and these broad categories are often combined. Examples of review article with the different type of contributions are provided in [Table 1](#).

### 3.2. Providing evidence of effect

A literature review is often quite useful when one needs to assess evidence or theory on a particular research question or area of research (Davies et al., 2014). It is also valuable when investigating the validity of a certain theory or a competing theory. While high-quality meta-analysis is somewhat scarce in social sciences, this approach can potentially allow a strong and useful contribution not only to enhance theory development, but also to guide future research and inform practice and policy. The approach can be narrow, such as investigating the effect of or relationship between two specific variables or hypothesis testing, or it can be

broader, such as exploring the collective evidence in a certain research area. One way is to conduct a systematic literature review and combine it with a meta-analysis. However, there are also more qualitative methods for analysing and summarising evidence (Levitt, 2018).

### **3.3. Mapping out the state of knowledge**

Depending on the situation, there might be value in mapping out or providing an overview of a particular field (Tranfield et al., 2003). This should not be mistaken for summarising statistics but rather as a way of evaluating the current state of knowledge on a topic. This is typically useful for topics that are too broad for meta-analysis. For example, a review can be an overview of different research traditions that have studied a particular topic (such as decision making), a historical overview on how a topic or research field has developed or been discussed over time, or the identification of missing areas or knowledge gaps in a current research tradition. Another way of using this approach is, for example, to collect, compare, and discuss the various ways in which a concept has been defined or how a concept has been operationalised in different studies.

### **3.4. Developing theory**

Although challenging, a well-conducted literature review that provides new theory in the form of a conceptual model or theoretical framework can be an excellent contribution to a specific field of research (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore & Knaf, 2005). By using a systematic review approach, researchers have solid ground to build on to truly advance theory by synthesising findings/results and theory used in previous studies. Making this kind of contribution is often time-consuming and requires strong analytical skills from researchers, but, if successful, has a high chance of making a large impact that other researchers can expand on.

### **3.5. Guiding further research**

Perhaps the most common contribution of a literature review is a research agenda. Providing a substantial research agenda to help guide future research in a field is valuable and should be included in all types of reviews in some form. Including one can aid other researchers in guiding their research and inform research funders of areas/topics/research questions where more research is needed (Webster & Watson, 2002). This has the potential to make a useful contribution to the field in question. The research agenda could be specific, such as in providing specific research questions or propositions, but it can also be broader, mapping out different areas of research or highlighting areas where research is missing. However, only providing a research agenda is usually insufficient (but this can vary depending on the topic); too often, the research agenda is ad hoc – simply covering areas that the authors find interesting in general and not truly connected to the analysis of the literature review. Importantly, a research agenda must be well grounded in the actual results of the literature review; otherwise, it is not a true contribution of the paper.

It is also important to note what *does not* constitute a contribution of a literature review. This, as mentioned, depends on the context, but a review paper that only focuses on descriptive statistics (such as number of articles, citation counts, journals represented, authors represented, and so on) without any further analysis or deeper purpose is rarely useful. While there are some examples where a thorough citations analysis or bibliometrics are interesting, more often than not, they do not tell us much, and what new knowledge comes from them is unclear. In addition, conducting a literature review (with just a few years added) in a field where several other reviews have already been published typically does not generate significant new knowledge. There are also examples of review papers where the authors have designed the review process in such a way that their own articles are favoured, and therefore, the contribution is limited. With this said, all these pitfalls can easily be avoided if one thinks carefully about contributions when designing one's study.

#### 4. Summary and conclusion

Using literature review as a methodology has a high potential to make a substantial contribution to theory, practice, or policy. This type of paper can efficiently contribute knowledge development, assess state-of-the-art, inform guidelines for policy and practice, evaluate the evidence on important questions, and, significantly, inspire and guide future research in a field. As the speed at which research is produced is accelerating, literature reviews are needed more than ever and, if well conducted, they provide grounds for future research and enable vital advancements in research. However, too often, the contributions coming out of a literature review are much weaker than they should be. Taking a step back and thinking about contributions before starting the process of conducting the review can save researchers numerous problems later when they are trying to get their research published. This paper offers some simple suggestions on how to make a stronger contribution to research and practice by suggesting different avenues researchers can take when designing a literature review. Hopefully, they will inspire researchers to design literature reviews with higher quality and thus advance knowledge and provide value to the research community and practice.

#### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

#### Notes on contributor

*Hannah Snyder* is an Associate Professor at the Department of Marketing, BI - Norwegian School of Business, Oslo, Norway. Her research interest relates to literature review methodology service innovation, customer creativity, business model innovation and service encounters. She has published in the *Journal of Service Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Service Management* and *European Journal of Marketing*.

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