Enhancing the impact of literature reviews: guidelines for making meaningful contributions

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Abstract

Purpose – Most papers and books on conducting literature reviews primarily emphasize achieving technical quality, ensuring reproducibility and validating results. Notwithstanding the need for technical excellence, there is also a need for relevance. The purpose of this study is to address that need and offer practical and constructive suggestions for enhancing the meaningful contribution of a literature review, thereby increasing its impact and relevance for publication.

Design/methodology/approach – In this conceptual paper, the authors explore strategies to enhance the relevance and contribution of a literature review. By clarifying the needs of diverse audiences and the principles of generating new insights, the authors provide a broad range of options without being prescriptive. Recognizing that every literature review is unique, this paper contrasts various approaches to offer flexible and adaptable guidance.

Findings – Literature reviews can be enjoyable to read and write, offering a wide range of substantial contributions that meet the expectations of readers and journal editors. This paper offers practical suggestions for prospective authors to make their reviews more relevant, invaluable and engaging, and summarizes these suggestions in a comprehensive checklist.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is not exhaustive but rather complements prevalent literature review methodologies.

Originality/value – Existing literature offers limited guidance on enhancing a review's contribution to science, academic inquiry and society. This paper fills that gap by providing both academic considerations and practical recommendations, drawing on the author's extensive experience in reviewing and conducting literature reviews.

Keywords Literature reviews, SLR, Bibliometric, Academic, Theoretical, Managerial, Meta-analysis, Research contribution

Paper type Research paper

Claves para mejorar el impacto de las revisiones de literatura: directrices para realizar contribuciones significativas

Resumen

Objetivo – La mayoría de los artículos y libros sobre la realización de revisiones de literatura enfatizan principalmente la obtención de calidad técnica, asegurando la reproducibilidad y validando resultados. A pesar

de la necesidad de excelencia técnica, también existe la necesidad de la relevancia. El presente artículo aborda esa necesidad y tiene como objetivo ofrecer sugerencias prácticas y constructivas para mejorar la contribución significativa de una revisión de literatura, aumentando así su impacto y relevancia para su publicación.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque – En este artículo conceptual, los autores exploran estrategias para mejorar la relevancia y la contribución de una revisión de literatura. Al clarificar las necesidades de audiencias diversas y los principios para generar nuevos conocimientos, los autores proporcionan una amplia gama de opciones sin ser prescriptivos. Reconociendo que cada revisión de literatura es única, este artículo contrasta varios enfoques para ofrecer orientación flexible y adaptable.

Resultados – Las revisiones de literatura pueden ser placenteras de leer y escribir, ofreciendo una amplia gama de contribuciones sustanciales que satisfacen las expectativas de los lectores y editores de revistas. Este artículo ofrece sugerencias prácticas para que los autores potenciales hagan que sus revisiones sean más relevantes, valiosas y atractivas, y resume estas sugerencias en una lista de verificación integral.

Originalidad – La literatura existente ofrece una orientación limitada sobre cómo mejorar la contribución de una revisión a la ciencia, la investigación académica y la sociedad. Este artículo cubre ese vacío proporcionando consideraciones académicas y recomendaciones prácticas, basadas en la extensa experiencia de los autores en la revisión y realización de revisiones de literatura.

Limitaciones/implicaciones de la investigación – El artículo no es exhaustivo, sino que complementa las metodologías prevalentes de revisión de literatura.

Palabras clave Revisiones de literatura, SLR (Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura), bibliométrico, académico, teórico, gerencial, meta-análisis, contribución a la investigación

Tipo de artículo Trabajo de investigación

提升文献综述影响力：提出有意义贡献的指南

摘要

目的 – 大多数关于如何进行文献综述的文章和书籍主要强调实现技术质量、确保可重复性和验证结果。尽管技术卓越性至关重要，但同样需要注重相关性。本文正是为了满足这一需求，旨在提供实用且建设性的建议，以增强文献综述的有意义贡献，从而增加其发表的影响力和相关性。

设计/方法论/途径 – 在这篇概念性文章中，作者探讨了增强文献综述相关性和贡献的策略。通过阐明多样化受众的需求和生成新见解的原则，作者提供了广泛的选项，而不是一味地指示。认识到每篇文献综述都是独一无二的，本文对比了各种方法，以提供灵活和适应性的指导。

研究结果 – 文献综述可以既有趣味性又富有实质性贡献，满足读者和期刊编辑的期望。本文为潜在作者提供了实用的建议，使他们的综述更具相关性、不可或缺且引人入胜，并将这些建议总结在一个全面的清单中。

独创性 – 现有文献对如何增强综述对科学、学术研究和社会的贡献提供的指导有限。本文通过结合学术考虑和实际建议，弥补了这一空白，基于作者在审阅和进行文献综述方面的丰富经验，提供了独特的见解。

研究限制/启示 – 该文章并非详尽无遗，而是对现有文献综述方法的补充。

关键词 文献综述，、系统性文献综述，、文献计量学，、学术，、理论，、管理，、元分析，、研究贡献

文章类型 研究型论文

1. Introduction

Conducting a literature review as a research method has become more relevant and popular than ever as knowledge production is becoming ever more fragmented and the number of journals and published academic articles is exploding. For researchers and policymakers alike, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the state of the art in their own area of expertise, let alone in neighboring domains. A well-designed and conducted literature review article – a so-called structured or systematic literature review, or systematic literature review – can play an instrumental role in rapidly getting an overview of relevant studies and identifying trends and challenges in a specific domain, as it allows the reader to integrate a scattered body of research. It can also help identify current and fundamental research gaps and

thus help authors deviate from the beaten tracks and explore new avenues. It can help develop better and more precise research questions and hypotheses for empirical studies and, thus, increase the quality of research in a community. So, in theory, at least, conducting a literature review is a great way to organize, summarize and synthesize extant knowledge, provide a solid foundation for creating guidelines for policy and practice, provide evidence of and validate an effect, identify and highlight the need for more research in understudied areas and stimulate and inspire new research questions and future research directions for a field of research. It may also, for example, in the case of a bibliometric review, provide information for research managers or policymakers, about impact or research organization in a field.

1.1 Gap in the literature

In academic writing in general, but in writing a literature review in particular, we need to make a crucial distinction between technical perfection and meaningful relevance. A literature review that is technically perfect adheres rigorously to methodological standards. It ensures the reproducibility, validity and reliability of its results, meticulously documenting and justifying sources, methods and research processes. Such a review is comprehensive, systematic and free of errors. Many exceptional books and articles have been written to assist authors of literature reviews with design choices, methodological choices and achieving technical excellence. We, therefore, gladly refer to the works by Webster and Watson (2002), Tranfield *et al.* (2003), Torraco (2005), Denyer and Tranfield (2009), Paul and Criado (2020), Snyder (2019) and Booth *et al.* (2021) for methodological suggestions and guidelines.

However, technical excellence alone does not guarantee that the review addresses an issue – or issues – of substantial importance. A literature review that wants to make a meaningful contribution must go beyond methodological precision and technical excellence. It must identify and explore topics that have significant implications for the field, advance understanding and address pressing questions or gaps in the existing body of knowledge.

In reality, however, literature review articles do not always provide a clear and valuable contribution to the field. Regardless of their technical rigor, reviews that lack relevance, novelty and significance are unlikely to be appreciated or cited. In the authors' experience, literature reviews often focus on vague or overly broad topics on the one extreme or on one single construct on the other extreme, rendering them marginally relevant or even irrelevant for researchers or practitioners. As a consequence, they end up as descriptive summaries of vaguely related research from certain periods, just listing bibliographic details such as the number of articles, topics, citations and (top-cited) authors, without addressing fundamental questions such as "how?" and "why?" or conducting any deeper analysis.

So, while it is essential that literature reviews are technically flawless, their true value lies in their ability to engage with and address the needs of the academic community and society at large. A meaningful literature review combines methodological rigor with insightful analysis and relevance, ensuring that it not only meets high technical standards but also contributes to the advancement of science, academic inquiry and societal understanding.

Alas, in extant literature, a structured approach to making more relevant contributions in literature review articles seems absent. The aim of this article is, therefore, to address the above gap, and help authors of literature reviews to let their reviews live up to expectations by presenting ways to move beyond "simply" summarizing the literature and truly developing something new and invaluable and thus create a substantial contribution to the field in question. In Figure 1, we have visualized the process of conducting a literature review in three consecutive stages. Each stage has equal importance in this process, but our

recommendation is that starting Stage 2 should only be considered when Stage 1 has been achieved and starting Stage 3 only when Stages 1 and 2 are accomplished.

1.2 Approach

In sum, the current article presents a practical and stepwise approach that helps aspiring authors of a literature review article to make more meaningful and impactful contributions to a research field (see Stages 1 and 3 in Figure 1). This implies that we do not focus, in this article, on the research design and technical execution of the review (Stage 2 in Figure 1) or advocate any specific review approach or method. For guidelines and reflections on these important subjects, we refer to the excellent available literature mentioned above. Instead, this article zooms in on how to make a contribution, and discusses what a substantial contribution of a literature review is or could be and discusses fundamental types of contributions, explains how to establish relevance, explains how to make a substantial contribution by giving examples of useful topics and research questions that could be used when conducting different types of literature reviews, discusses different types of contributions for different audiences provides suggestions on how to select an appropriate journal to publish the review in and discusses which skills and experience are indispensable in making a contribution in a literature review article. We then summarize the results in a range of practical do's and don'ts for authors of a literature review article.

2. What is a contribution when it comes to a literature review article?

A well-executed literature review serves as a fundamental tool for advancing knowledge and science by offering a comprehensive and cohesive understanding of existing research within a specific subject or domain (Moher *et al.*, 2009; Snyder, 2019). Various perspectives exist on what qualifies as a sufficient contribution for such a review to warrant publication as a stand-alone article. Bartunek *et al.* (2006) propose, for example, that a contribution can be evaluated based on its level of interest, originality and utility. In the following paragraphs, we analyze this proposition further.
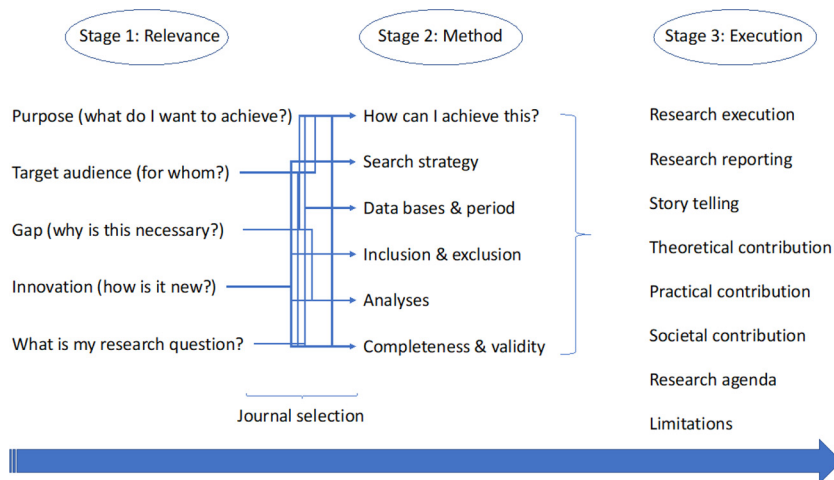

Figure 1.
Stages in the literature review process

First, we observe that contributions can be made in several dimensions, and indeed, to varying degrees (see Table 1). For example, an important dimension in which academic contributions can be made is "theory." Bergh (2003) suggests that a theoretical contribution is interesting, because it involves enhancing the understanding or explanation of phenomena, offering new perspectives on researching these phenomena or refining existing theories, e.g. by resolving contradictions or by extending these theories within or beyond a particular area of study. While minor contributions generally enhance our understanding by better organizing existing insights, or clarifying issues, a major theoretical contribution would be one that radically changes our view on – and understanding of – the world, creating new insight as a result of the exposure and reanalysis of existing insights or proposing an extension of a theory that helps us understand phenomena so far not or only poorly understood. A deep-dive review of the literature can help here and prepare the way for such a theoretical contribution.

Another dimension in which a contribution can be made is "practice." Corley and Gioia (2011) stress that a true contribution must also include practical relevance, engagement with real-world issues and anticipation of future challenges. In particular, they emphasize the importance of aligning theoretical efforts more closely with the practical needs of individuals, organizations and society. In marketing, a true contribution could, for example, help understand emerging trends in consumer behavior, help marketers avoid methodological pitfalls, identify different ways in which organizations deal with the challenge of information overload in consumers, or systematically investigate the different forms of the potential value of using AI in marketing analytics. Nicholson et al. (2018) also assert that a contribution is compelling because it provides utility, usefulness or value to at least one audience whose understanding is enriched by considering an argument or study findings. They also stress the attribute of magnitude, suggesting that not all contributions are equally significant; a single work may introduce a substantial breakthrough (a major contribution), while sometimes a collection of works may collectively offer a lesser, or minor contribution. In essence, a true contribution of a literature review potentially involves advancing our understanding of a phenomenon, offering new perspectives, refining or expanding or extending existing theories, addressing real-world business problems and providing utility or value to relevant audiences in a particular field of domain of study. It encompasses both the originality and the practical relevance of the insights presented.

Just as empirical studies adhere to methodological standards, a literature review demands both a careful *research design* and a meticulous *research execution* to ensure

Level	Theoretical	Managerial/Practical/Societal
High contribution	Identifying and resolving conceptual issues and contradictions Identifying new patterns Providing evidence	Deriving new actionable recommendations by combining literature
Moderate contribution	Structuring the field. Identifying existing patterns	Synthesizing recommendations
Low contribution	Summarizing research in the field	Summarizing recommendations from the literature
Very low contribution	Pointing out which theories or methods have been used	Listing and ranking recommendations from the literature

Table 1.
Review purpose and level of contribution

its contribution on the one hand, and its accuracy, precision and trustworthiness on the other hand. Furthermore, the contribution of a literature review should be evaluated based upon standards that carry equal significance to those of empirical research (Snyder, 2023).

A contribution is thus made when the review is theoretically and practically relevant, but what does that mean, and how do we make that happen? In the following paragraphs, we investigate the different ways we can make the literature review relevant, and how addressing an explicit research question is an indispensable tool to make a contribution.

3. How to make a literature review article relevant

3.1 How relevant a review is depends on the selection of an appropriate "topic" or "object"
Although this may seem obvious, when deciding about an object or topic for the review, it is worth asking yourself a few questions: 1) did I identify a topic of sufficient interest, i.e. is it problematic enough to deserve a review? Are there aspects that remain unresolved in the literature, or ambiguous? Is there any uncertainty? Sometimes topics chosen are "unproblematic," as there is consensus about the issue, and problems have been resolved "long ago." Or they are dealing with inconsequential issues, perceived by reviewers as quibbling, or pettifoggery. In such a case, the need for a literature review may simply not exist. In other cases, a topic is seemingly chosen simply because it appears interesting (or hot), or because no one else has written a review about the topic (yet). This is obviously not a sufficient reason to justify the immense effort needed for doing a structured literature review. 2) Is the selected topic a genuine and complete, while demarcated, research topic? Is it not too simple? Can and did researchers *engage* specifically with this research topic? A good example of a review article that selected an appropriate, and sufficiently complex, topic that had indeed puzzled many researchers is the review by Baker and Cameron (1996). 3) Is the "scope" of the topic not too broad or too narrow? In the first case, it may be impossible to synthesize literature in a meaningful way (e.g. all the literature on "product advertising" or "branding"), and in the second case, there may not be sufficient literature available to synthesize.

3.2 The relevance of a literature review depends on the potential readership
Before designing and conducting any study, it is crucial to be crystal clear about the target audience(s) for whom it is written. This is true for any article, of course, but it needs to be explicitly repeated that this also applies to literature reviews. Any reflection about the purpose of the review should go hand-in-hand with a detailed reflection on the intended audience: for whom is this issue problematic? I.e. who needs this review and what are their needs? Who should benefit from the study? In what way should they benefit? Which of their needs are addressed? This purpose should be made explicit upfront, i.e. in the introduction of the article. Potential target audiences could, for example, be undergraduate students, or doctoral candidates in a specific domain or multidisciplinary researchers, policy makers or research managers, users of the knowledge developed in the field, etc. These audiences may have diverging and different needs and expectations from a review. Their needs could vary from, e.g. obtaining a clear overview of a field, an understanding of which methods have or have not been used in a field, or an idea of which effects have been validated.

Especially when a literature review is considered for publication in an academic journal, it is imperative to estimate the degree of interest in the specific readership of

that journal. Several questions should be asked – and preferably answered explicitly in the introduction –:

Q1. How problematic, important and relevant is the topic of my review for (at least a substantial part of) the readership of this journal, and why would they consider it relevant [1]?

Q2. What exactly are the needs of this (part of the) readership?

Q3. What type(s) of impact do I want to achieve with my review?

Q4. What is the impact the review could have on that readership?

Q5. Will the review change the quality of their research and their thinking?

3.3 The comparative relevance of different types of literature reviews depends on the state of progress of the field

Importantly, the nature and value of the contribution of a literature review must be evaluated in view of the specific scholarly context (Snyder, 2023). This means recognizing that the readership's expectations in terms of novelty, depth and analytical approach may vary based on the specific characteristics of the field and the stage of research maturity, acknowledging that different topics, disciplines and stages of research maturity require different approaches, types of contributions and levels of analysis. That is, what might be a valuable contribution on one subject, may not be one for another subject [2].

For example, when conducting a review in a mature or extensively studied field, the readership's expectations of a literature review are not necessarily to identify something totally new but rather to provide a critical (see, for example, the review by Zaheer *et al.*, 2019), comprehensive and nuanced synthesis of existing knowledge (see, for example, the review by Laursen and Svejvig, 2016), evidence on a specific question or an analysis of established theories, methodologies and debates. In addition, while not taking away the value of these types of reviews, it is important to recognize the inherent challenges of making novel contributions in well-explored areas (as it is for empirical research). On the other hand, in emerging or less-explored domains, literature reviews have the potential for other types of contributions. Here, the emphasis shifts to identifying gaps (see, for example, the review by Pandey *et al.*, 2020), proposing novel frameworks or challenging existing paradigms. However, a challenge when doing a literature review in an emerging area might be that there simply is not enough research published yet on the topic to be able to conduct a meaningful review.

The discussion above also bears meaning for the analytical methods used in literature reviews. The selected method needs to be tailored/aligned to the specific characteristics of the topic of the review, its stage of maturity and the aims of the reviewer. For mature topics, a comprehensive analysis may involve synthesizing a wide array of existing studies and identifying overarching trends. In contrast, for emerging topics, a more exploratory and forward-looking analysis may be required.

4. Is an interesting, novel research question answered in the review?

Crucial aspect in any literature review that wants to make a contribution to theory or practice, is that one or more research questions guide the review. The literature review should then address and preferably answer that question or these questions. Crucial here is an analytical approach, i.e. trying to ask questions that have not been (adequately) answered in the literature so far.

Research questions asking descriptive questions, such as "*Which* articles have addressed topic A from an ABC perspective" or "*What* research methods have been used in this domain" and "*Who* has been contributing to this domain" limit the researcher to almost intrinsically to a descriptive study that only makes an inventory, and then presents that research in a specific order. So, what characterizes truly analytical questions?

4.1 Time and historical (past and future) aspects
From this perspective, research questions could address an evolution or trends in research and thinking about a specific theme, for example, with the intention to map a theoretical development, with the purpose of predicting or discussing options for the future (see, for example, Latapí Agudelo *et al.*, 2019). How did the concept, the technique, the seminal insight originate? How did it develop? Are multiple streams originating from the same source, and why? Where are we (or where should we be) going? This kind of question leads to a deeper insight in the history of research in a domain, and can be very useful in relatively mature fields that stagnate.

4.2 Nomological network-related questions
Questions may also attempt to map the nomological network surrounding a concept, for example, by asking for antecedents and consequences of the core construct. This can be useful especially when the field is empirically young and research is scattered over multiple disciplines. What is known about antecedents, how can they be categorized, what kind of theory or mechanisms could link them with the core construct?

4.3 Questions related to an observed contradiction in the field
As time passes, often observations are made that conflict with extant views in a field. By reviewing what is known, researchers can identify possible solutions.

5. Different types of contributions associated with various audiences of a literature review
In this section, we outline paths along which reviews can make meaningful contributions for different audiences. Our aim is to offer a first understanding and overview of the diverse types of contributions that literature reviews can offer across academic fields. It is important to recognize that different contributions are not mutually exclusive, that a contribution in one domain can enhance a contribution in another domain and that a single literature review can encompass several types of contributions depending on its scope, objectives and methodology.

5.1 Contributions of literature reviews for academics and researchers
There are several valuable contributions from literature reviews that are aimed at advancing theory and research. For example, one of the primary contributions of literature reviews can be a synthesis of fragmented research (Snyder, 2023), i.e. research on a topic that has been conducted from different disciplinary perspectives. As fields expand, the volume of literature often grows exponentially and may become scattered across various disciplines, subdisciplines and journals. By collecting and synthesizing disparate research, a literature review can provide a comprehensive overview that can assimilate different vocabularies and potentially reveal consensus, or highlight contradictions and suggest the integration of competing theories. This can be really valuable for researchers aiming to build on solid ground, ensuring that their theoretical proposals or empirical studies are informed by a comprehensive understanding of all relevant findings and theoretical discussions to date. Furthermore, a review that critically

assesses the state of knowledge on a particular topic, makes it possible to identify gaps in our current understanding (Paré *et al.*, 2023). By systematically evaluating the existing body of work, authors can pinpoint areas that are under-researched or overlooked, thereby suggesting new research directions and new methodological approaches, which could potentially create substantial theoretical contributions.

In addition, a review is often an excellent way to develop new conceptual frameworks or typologies (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016). By comparing and contrasting different theoretical perspectives, reviewers can propose more comprehensive models that incorporate diverse viewpoints or resolve theoretical discrepancies. This not only strengthens the theoretical base of a field but also enhances the precision and applicability of these theories in diverse practical and empirical contexts.

Literature reviews can also provide a platform for establishing and generalizing empirical evidence of theoretical relationships. Through meta-analytical techniques (e.g. Gremler *et al.*, 2020; Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2014) or systematic qualitative synthesis, reviews can assess the strength and consistency of reported relationships, offering robust conclusions that can be used as a basis for theoretical propositions (Borenstein *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly important in fields where empirical evidence is diverse or contradictory, as a well-conducted literature review can clarify the conditions under which certain relationships hold, thus refining theoretical assumptions and predictions. In addition, literature reviews play a crucial role in the validation and refinement of existing theories. By aggregating and analyzing a broad range of empirical studies, literature reviews can contribute by testing the durability and applicability of theoretical constructs across different contexts and populations. Finally, another way of contributing to theory can be by incorporating interdisciplinary insights. Depending on the complexity of the research problem, it can often require multifaceted approaches. Reviews that integrate multiple disciplines can introduce novel theoretical perspectives and challenge conventional knowledge (e.g. McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2017). By doing this, they have the potential to lead to the development of groundbreaking theoretical insights that would not be possible with research from just one particular discipline.

5.2 Contributions of literature reviews for managers, organizations and institutions

Literature reviews can hold significant value not only for academic researchers but also for managers, organizations and institutions. The synthesis of existing knowledge, identification of best practices and insights into industry trends provided by systematic literature reviews can guide managerial actions and organizational policy, as well as policy makers' actions. If done correctly, literature reviews can hold a vast amount of academic and practical information and turn it into coherent summaries. For managers, this synthesized knowledge is often crucial for informed decision-making. By understanding the current state of research in areas relevant to their business, managers can make strategic decisions that are backed by empirical evidence and expert analyses. This reduces the risk associated with decisions and ensures that organizational strategies are aligned with proven methods and industry standards. In addition, literature reviews can help in identifying best practices that can be adopted by organizations to improve efficiency, innovation and competitiveness. Managers can use these insights to benchmark their operations against industry leaders and to implement practices that have been demonstrated to be effective in similar contexts. Furthermore, literature reviews can also serve as educational tools within organizations, enhancing the knowledge base of employees and executives. By exposing managers and employees to a wide range of studies and outcomes across different industries and disciplines, literature reviews can spark innovation and creative problem-solving. Finally,

literature reviews can contribute to organizational risk management by identifying potential challenges and emerging trends that could impact the business. Furthermore, reviews can help in forecasting future trends, allowing organizations to prepare and adapt to changes in the marketplace or regulatory environment effectively. Another potential contribution from literature reviews for organizations can be to provide a foundation of knowledge that can assist in developing policies or adapting and enhancing governance structures. For example, this could include ethical guidelines, compliance policies or sustainability initiatives.

5.3 Literature reviews to develop a research agenda

A commonly cited purpose of literature reviews is the development of a research agenda. While this is a perfectly legitimate goal, many reviews simply end with a list of potential research questions – often rather detached from the reviewed literature. While such a list could stimulate future research, especially when the questions follow demonstrably from the reviewed literature, a well-developed research agenda is considered a stronger contribution than a simple list of questions. A comprehensive research agenda, or directions for future research, define broader themes or areas of interest that are (or will be) highly relevant to the field, but as yet under researched (see, for example, Kannan and Li, 2017). Whereas research questions may be limited to isolated research projects, a research agenda may propose a framework encompassing multiple interrelated research questions or themes and help organize future research over a longer period. A literature review with the purpose of formulating a research agenda can make a substantial impact, by changing the course of research and research funding.

6. Selecting an appropriate journal to publish in

When prospective authors are making a meaningful contribution beyond a purely bibliographic or descriptive review, choosing an appropriate academic journal to publish their literature review in is key, as it directly influences the reach, impact and reception of their review as well as their success in publishing in that specific journal in the future. Selecting the right journal for a literature review includes a careful examination of the journal's scope, impact and publishing practices. By carefully and upfront selecting a journal that has a readership interested in their review, while aligning their review with the aims of the journal, prospective authors can enhance their chances of getting published and making a significant impact in their field of research. Specifically, these are some of the aspects to consider when choosing a journal to publish in:

6.1 Alignment with journal scope and readership

It is important to ensure that the journal's scope is aligned with the specific topic and purpose of your literature review. Examine the journal's aims and scope statement, and review recent issues to understand the topics and methodologies that are typically published. This step ensures that your review is relevant to the journal's audience, and adheres to its reviewers' standards, increasing the likelihood of acceptance.

6.2 Consideration of journal impact and audience

Assess the journal's impact factor and other metrics like h-index and SCImago Journal Rank to investigate its influence in the field and quality. However, do not solely rely on these metrics. Consider the audience (academics, practitioners and policymakers) and geographical reach. Some journals, while not having the highest impact factors, may offer a more targeted audience or specific scholarly community that may find your review highly relevant.

6.3 Submission and review process

Familiarize yourself with the journal's submission and peer review process. Look for information about the typical review times, the rigor of the review process and the feedback provided. Journals with high standards and a constructive, rigorous review process can contribute significantly to enhancing the quality of your literature review.

6.4 Past literature reviews published in the journal

Review previous issues of the journal to see if it regularly publishes literature reviews. A journal that is receptive to reviews and has a history of publishing them is more likely to accept your publication. However, be careful to seek out other recently published reviews on the same topic in the journal you are considering and make sure yours is significantly different from that. When submitting your review, make an effort to explain how and why your review is different from recent reviews in the same domain or field.

7. Skills that are useful or indispensable for conducting a literature review

Below, some challenges are identified in designing more meaningful literature reviews and avoiding a rejection decision when a literature review is submitted to a journal. For each challenge important academic skills are discussed while showing how they help deal with the challenges.

7.1 Creativity and analytical and critical thinking

A major challenge is the fact that the contribution of the review should be novel and distinctive and not a repetition or slight modification of what other reviews have accomplished unless – of course – if it is intended as a follow-up review, adding or including new research on the topic to an existing review. It should also be written up in a smart and interesting way, implying that writing a review is not only about technical skill but also about art and storytelling (Short, 2009).

Therefore, it can be argued that creativity is an indispensable skill required for designing and writing a contribution-rich literature review. This may seem strange at first sight, as conducting a literature review is often viewed as an almost "mechanical" procedure, according to a recipe that needs to be strictly followed and that does not allow any irreproducible deviations, or critical questions. Nonetheless, "creative exploration" is required to identify and formulate adequate problem statements, research questions and the search string(s), and to identify the appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria. This is to avoid that the researcher ending up with a data set containing thousands of articles when the search strategy is too broad – or in case the search string is too narrowly defined, that only a few articles are found. Creativity and much skill are required to "fine-tune" the research question and topic of the literature review, to make it fit to purpose, to "get it right." This implies that the researcher creatively develops and explores multiple options and evaluates their results – to find the best option for the purpose the authors of a review are trying to accomplish.

Part of the use for a creative approach may lie in the visualization of research findings. Whereas many studies and especially literature reviews boast visualizations, it is not always clear how they contribute. Making visuals that actually help the author in conveying a clear message is an art.

7.2 Analytical skills

Another challenge encountered by those who wish to create a meaningful contribution, is that it is not always clear at first sight whether any specific article should or should not be included in the review. Most search strings end up with identifying more articles that are not relevant than articles that are. Next to creativity in designing the search string, the researcher should, therefore, also dispose of strong analytical skills, allowing them to grasp the positioning and contribution of complex academic articles.

7.3 Critical thinking skills

It is important to avoid taking research results for granted and erroneously concluding that different articles find the same results when this is not the case, and vice versa. This potential pitfall requires that the authors of a review article continuously question and assess the validity and the scope of research findings presented in the literature. Critical thinking, comparing and questioning the methodologies used and results obtained in the included articles, is required to develop an understanding of the relative contribution of articles and their positions with respect to one another. It involves checking the methods, assumptions and limitations related to sampling, etc., of articles. Critical thinking also helps to see findings in a broader perspective, i.e. in the (sectorial, geographical, cultural or temporary) context in which they were produced. It is required to relatively position research, to see developments, to not take the findings presented in articles "absolutely," i.e. as absolute truths.

7.4 Broad and deep understanding of the field

More often than not, identifying an appropriate research question or research questions and really relevant articles also requires a broad and deep understanding of (developments in) the field. This implies that – although doing a literature review is often assigned to junior researchers – a deep understanding of the field – and often even of neighboring fields – is required to get it right for a demanding audience of academics or practitioners. The implication hereof is, of course, that – whenever possible – a senior researcher or practitioner, experienced in the domain, should be included on the team to validate the research questions, the approach and the findings. Identifying the relevant articles thus requires strong analytical skills, and substantial conceptual understanding of the field that is reviewed.

7.5 Academic reading skills

Because a good literature review does not only review and summarize articles, but analyzes them based on a set of research questions and/or objectives, academic reading skills are fundamental. Being critical, being able to rapidly and holistically understand the purpose and findings of an article; being able to understand in which tradition an article is written, in which discipline [. . .].

8. Do's and don'ts: a checklist

Based on the above, we can now summarize the practical recommendations developed in this article in a set of do's and don'ts that together form a checklist. These recommendations are summarized in Table 2.

Theme	Do's	Don'ts
Purpose	Did the authors explicitly and clearly state the purpose and target audience of the literature review and indicate how it may affect theory and practice or how it may support decision-making?	Did the authors not leave it open or leave it up to the reader to identify a purpose? Doing so for any research is a bad research practice, and this holds equally well for literature reviews
TOPIC	Did the authors properly problematize the topic of the literature review, i.e. show which aspects of it are unresolved, or ambiguous and are creating uncertainty and confusion?	Choosing a topic that is unproblematic to most or all readers, may not be helpful in making a contribution
AI-Tools	Did the authors use intelligent tools in intelligent ways? AI-tools may support researchers in executing and reporting the review, because they can execute many tasks faster and better than humans	The role of AI in autonomously designing research and goal-setting is still limited at the time of writing this article
Expertise	Did the authors involve an engaged scholar, knowledgeable in the field, to orchestrate and guide the review activities, keeping in mind the intended audience and purpose of the review?	Conducting and writing a literature review should not be considered a mechanical activity, that can be fully automated, not even by intelligent tools
Approach	Did the authors adapt the review method and choice of required steps to review the literature in a specific domain to the purpose, audience and state of research in that domain?	Not every research approach is equally helpful to make a contribution in any given domain or situation
Novelty and originality	Are the authors doing something new, because it addresses a real (or emerging, or latent) need? This will increase your chances of success and acceptance for publication	Avoid doing something that has not been done before – such as investigating a specific topic, or applying a specific method – exclusively based on the observation that it has not been done before
Skill	Are the authors consciously considering that writing a literature review is a complex task? Be aware that multiple skills need to be present in the author team	Without substantial creativity, it is difficult to make a novel contribution

Table 2.
Do's and don'ts: a
checklist for writing
a meaningful
literature review
article

9. Conclusion

9.1 Summary

In this article – based on their experience in reviewing and conducting articles presenting structured and systematic literature reviews – the authors address a number of issues that, when overlooked by aspiring authors of a literature review, could lead to a lack of contribution and a "reject" decision from reviewers or editors of academic journals.

9.2 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contribution of the present article consists of the consequent application of the conceptual distinction between technical quality and substantive contribution of literature reviews. Whereas the technical quality relates to the conceptual and

methodological rigor, and the replicability of the review, the contribution refers to the extent to which the aims of a review are achieved and value is created for a target audience.

9.3 Practical contributions

The practical contribution of this article is multifaceted. First, we outline how to structure and conduct a literature review with a clear focus on generating insights that are directly applicable to practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders. We stress the importance of formulating relevant research questions and review strategies that align with the needs of these audiences, thereby ensuring that the outcomes of the review are not only theoretically sound but also practically invaluable.

Second, in this article we introduce a set of criteria for *a priori* evaluating the practical impact of literature reviews, guiding authors in assessing how and to which extent their work can contribute to the implementation of evidence-based practices, the development and formulation of policies, and the improvement of organizational processes. This aspect is crucial in bridging the gap between academic research and its application in real-world settings.

Moreover, the present article may serve as a resource for enhancing the methodological rigor of literature reviews, especially the coherence between the methods used and the intended contributions, ensuring that they are not only academically credible but also relevant and useful for practical applications. We provide examples of how to synthesize and interpret research findings in ways that can inform practice, offering a clear path from academic inquiry to genuinely actionable recommendations.

10. Limitations

This article does not discuss using machine learning or other AI implementations for conducting research in general and for literature reviews in particular. We do believe that such advanced tools can undoubtedly enhance researchers, and assist both in technically executing the research and in better reporting research. However, the point we try to make is, to a certain extent, independent of the depth and width and reporting of such a review. The intended contribution is independent of the execution of the research, more of a promise than the delivery of that promise.

In conclusion, the practical contribution of the present article lies in its ability to guide the creation of literature reviews that are not just passive repositories of knowledge, but that can act as catalysts for change in various domains of practice. Through our detailed guidance and examples, we aim to inspire authors of literature reviews to produce work that is impactful, relevant and beneficial to a broad spectrum of societal and professional audiences, and thus fulfilling the ultimate goal of research to serve society.

Notes

1. This is crucial to avoid a "So what?" reaction from editors and reviewers.

2. Simply copying or replicating a successful approach in another domain is, therefore, not recommended.

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