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## **From Theory to Practice: Understanding Literature Reviews in Qualitative Research**

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### **Abstract**

Qualitative research aims to understand and interpret language, language learning or use in specific contexts, as well as social phenomena, within natural settings like social and school environments. This study explores the practices of doing literature reviews in qualitative research and also provides practical insights for fellow researchers in qualitative research fields. This study explores the practices of doing literature reviews in qualitative research and provides insights for practically conducting researches for fellow researchers in qualitative fields. The article analyzes ten different articles from *Scopus-indexed* journals, *The Qualitative Report (TQR)*, and the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods (IJQM)*, published between 2010 and 2023. I followed *Braun & Clarke's* framework of thematic analysis to analyze the secondary data in the selected articles. Based on the articles, I analyze the approaches, practices, and challenges in conducting qualitative literature reviews. The study educates that the qualitative literature reviews show methodological diversity, including thematic analysis, context-specific frameworks, and innovative practices like narrative construction and alternative data management strategies. Trustworthiness and rigor are emphasized through credibility, dependability, and confirmability to ensure ethical and methodological integrity. Pedagogical applications further demonstrate the educational relevance of these approaches. Qualitative literature reviews exhibit theoretical richness, methodological rigor, narrative depth, and practical innovation, making them valuable tools for bridging theory and practice in the growing field of qualitative research.

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### **Introduction**

A literature review is an important as well as unavoidable aspect while doing any sort of academic research. The literatures that we deal with in our concerned studies function as a foundation upon which we build, refine, and also contextualize our research inquiries. Similarly, the reviews give us knowledge and information on the previous studies. “The primary aim of conducting a literature review is to identify and assess the existing body of knowledge relevant to a researcher’s specific issue, thereby avoiding the replication of prior studies and situating the research within a coherent framework” (Pandey, 2024, p.1). Moreover, we as the researchers need to balance a structured and critical synthesis so that we can deliver clear, relevant, and meaningfully useful research outcomes to our prospective readers. According to Dhobi (2024, p. 110), “In writing the literature review, the purpose is to convey to readers what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, and what their strengths and weaknesses are.”

Furthermore, the role of literature reviews in qualitative research is not merely a mechanical task of summarizing past studies. Rather, the literature reviews strongly serve the researchers to outline the research problems by situating the respective study within existing knowledge and identifying gaps that necessitate further exploration. According to Xu and Zammit (2020), literature reviews are helpful in guiding the researcher’s interpretive lens by enabling them to understand even the difficult phenomena meaningfully. Our job as the researchers requires us to conduct the literature reviews systematically. Due to which, we can also regard literature review as the cornerstone of any academic effort. The reviews help us build a connection between theoretical foundations and empirical inquiries. Similarly, Avenali et. al (2023) remarked that a systematic literature review is a research method that aims to identify, evaluate, and synthesize all available evidence on a particular research question or topic. Moreover, the literature also helps us describe the boundaries of what is known, identify gaps, and find insights and opportunities for new research. Therefore, the role of literature reviews also carries particular importance in qualitative research. Especially, the depth and richness of inquiry rely on slight differences we need to figure out in meaning and size of contextual understanding in doing any literature reviews in qualitative studies.

Going further, there is also a common belief that a literature review is the summary of the past studies. Additionally, I believe that reviews are a critical and analytical process that shapes the route of our research as well. This is a strong belief

I hold regarding the literature reviews. According to Shah & Patel (2024), a literature review is crucial in research as it familiarizes the researcher with prior studies related to the subject. They further remarked that the review provides in-depth insights into earlier investigations conducted in the chosen area, aiding in identifying the gaps between existing research and the upcoming study” (p, 312). It is in the sense that we have to go through the processes like synthesizing existing theories, identifying patterns, recognizing confusions, or even contradictions in the literature we deal with as per our necessities. Therefore, the literature reviews in qualitative research happen to be a bit unique too. We do not often seek to test hypotheses or theories; rather, qualitative literature reviews are exploratory in nature. As the qualitative researcher, our selected research also aims to understand phenomena in their natural settings, making it different than quantitative ones. As a result, qualitative literature reviews take on a more interpretative role. That means we as the qualitative researchers need to engage with the literature to construct a coherent narrative that frames our study.

In addition to the aforementioned, once we concretize the main points of our literature review, we can also position where we stand in our study as the researcher. This further helps us to advocate the relevance and significance of our study to the readers. ‘‘A lack of necessary knowledge for conducting literature reviews may lead to the presentation of incorrect, false or biased inferences’’ (Chigbu et al., 2023, p. 2). Therefore, the reviews need researchers’ proper time and engagement. As the researchers, when we deal with them deeply, literature also benefits us with conceptual clarity and methodological intuitions to systematically design, conduct, and execute our respective qualitative studies. Similarly, another function of reviews is to bridge the gap between abstract theoretical constructs and practical research applications. Here, in terms of the review process, the qualitative researchers need to examine how theories have been operationalized in previous studies and also detect their relevance to the present research setting. That is why this bridge is important, as subjectivity and context play a central role in qualitative research. The qualitative researchers need to eliminate the possible difficulties of lining up theoretical paradigms with the lived experiences of their subjects, ensuring that their inquiry remains both rigorous and grounded.

Meanwhile, the literature reviews in qualitative research are also challenging to some extent. Because the vastness of academic literature is likely to trouble the researchers in selecting and synthesizing relevant studies while also maintaining a critical lens in their particular studies. Likewise, if the researchers are unable to observe the contexts from critical or different perspectives, they can also lose the essence in the study. As per Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza (2022), qualitative research is a dynamic process and unpredictable events can occur; thus, it is crucial that the researcher is able to foresee possible hindrances and prevent them from happening

(p. 1). Qualitative reviews often require a multi-disciplinary approach, as social phenomena are rarely confined to a single field of study. In the same way, addressing the inherent subjectivity of qualitative research can be another big challenge. This already shows that we as the qualitative researchers must be aware of such possible hurdles to meaningfully conclude our study. Otherwise, the process of interpreting and synthesizing literature gets affected by the researcher's positionality. Therefore, it is the major concern that the researchers remain uninfluenced by their academic backgrounds, personal experiences, and cultural perspectives. Thus, qualitative reviews require the researchers to acknowledge and critically reflect on such subjectivity. In this way, the present article also proposes to educate its readers with different realities of doing literature reviews in qualitative studies. For this, the article includes a thoroughly analyzed observation of ten different articles. Here, we need to benefit from a thorough understanding of existing knowledge and perspectives. However, all the aforementioned thoughts remain irrelevant until we practice writing literature reviews for our research ourselves.

### **Literature Review**

Since a literature review serves as a way to link theoretical ideas with empirical data, this section provides analysis to help understand how, in qualitative research literature reviews, moving from theory to practice involves combining challenges and data types while keeping methodological rigor. This review critically examines ten scholarly articles, exploring diverse approaches to conducting literature reviews in qualitative research and highlighting their theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

### **Thematic Analysis as a Core Methodology**

As I went through ten different articles, I discovered one of the major priorities was given to the thematic analysis. In a way, qualitative researchers are almost paralyzed if thematic analysis is excluded from this genre. Braun and Clarke (2006) regard thematic analysis (TA) as a commonly used qualitative data analysis approach in psychology, health care (Braun & Clarke, 2014), sport and exercise (Braun et al., 2017), and many other fields (Boyatzis, 1998). These statements convince us to understand thematic analysis as a predominant method for synthesizing qualitative data within literature reviews. Similarly, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) have also emphasized thematic analysis, which they say involves tactics like “making comparisons among different sources, clustering information into groups, or building a logical chain of evidence (as cited in Kalpokaite & Radivojevic 2021, p. 1557). In the same way, Nowell et al. (2017) further strengthen the above discussion, shedding light upon trustworthiness in thematic analysis. They argue that achieving credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is essential for producing a robust literature review (p. 3). Another scholar,

Yanto (2023), also shares the similar thought and extends the message for a detailed, systematic approach to thematic analysis to improve reliability and depth (p. 3122). Thus, together with each other, these studies emphasize thematic analysis as an essential means for conducting meticulous and informative literature reviews.

### **Bridging Visual and Textual Data**

When I was reading the article of Trombeta and Cox (2022), it helped me to broaden my perspectives on the importance as well as making a meaningful connection between visual and textual data in qualitative studies. Trombeta and Cox (2022) propose the textual-visual thematic analysis framework to analyze the relationship between textual and visual data (p. 1562). This approach is particularly relevant for studies that incorporate visual elements such as diagrams, photographs, or infographics. Merging textual and visual data will afford the researcher an increasingly subtle synthesis. This framework broadens the horizons of literature reviews to allow and include various types of data that add depth to the interpretation.

### **Systematic Approaches to Literature Reviews**

For many of us, the term ‘systematic’ may not be peculiar. Here, the same word, as I was doing my literature review for this article, happens to standardize and increase the depth of literature reviews in qualitative research. To put it in simple words, I found some of the articles advocating for a systematic approach to literature reviews, which makes the review easily understandable and methodologically sound as well. Kalpokas and Radivojevic (2021) introduce a practical framework for conducting literature reviews that prioritizes coherence and narrative flow (p. 1551). Similarly, another scholar, Yang (2023), focuses on the importance of reflexivity and iterative processes in systematically reviewing qualitative data (p. 982). Regarding this, Yang strongly advocates for the perspective in his article by offering lessons from conducting photovoice systematic reviews. According to both the scholars, we can learn that the qualitative researchers need to adapt practices from qualitative research to produce convincing and well-structured reviews so that our literature reviews meet the systematicity as a means to enhance the credibility and utility of our literature reviews.

### **Enhancing Appraisal and Trustworthiness**

Out of ten articles, the article by Willgens et al. (2016) stressed methodological congruence as a key aspect in qualitative research. This gives us the understanding that among different ways of doing literature reviews in qualitative research, methodological congruence offers a structured approach to assessing the methodological rigor of literature reviews. Willgens et al. (2016) developed the Methodological Congruence Instrument (MCI) to evaluate the alignment between research objectives, questions, and methods (p. 2382). The elements of the Methodological Congruence Instrument (MCI) are: method

characteristics, research question, sampling procedures, philosophical perspectives and seminal authors, data analysis, and findings (Willgens et al., 2016, p. 2382). By focusing the above components, the authors in their article justify the necessity of MCI. According to the article, the MCI adds an additional layer of transparency that creates scholarly discussion and furthers ethical writing, production, and publication, especially in qualitative researches. Similarly, Chenail (2010) article further explores qualitative appraisal, emphasizing the need to read and review literature with an interpretive lens. In the gist, both the articles advocate the importance of critical evaluation in enhancing the quality and trustworthiness of literature reviews in qualitative studies.

### **Practical Considerations in Data Collection and Analysis**

Apart from the aforementioned considerations in qualitative literature reviews, alternative data collection and analysis methods also play pivotal roles. Eaton et al. (2019) discuss the use of scribes as an alternative to traditional transcription methods (p. 590). This article extends the message that using scribes advances data collection and also ensures the trustworthiness of participants' narratives. Particularly, this method, according to the authors, is effective in managing and synthesizing large volumes of qualitative data. However, regarding the use of scribes, the article also educates that further testing is required to establish the utility of scribing over longer durations (Eaton, Stritzke, & Ohan, 2019, p. 17). To my existing knowledge, this article was a new learning. When I finished reading the article, I realized that such a practical consideration is necessary for ensuring that literature reviews remain flexible to the growing demands of qualitative research.

### **Synthesizing Theory and Practice**

Based on ten article's review, this theme informs that a recurring theme is the synthesis of theory and practice. According to Kalpokas and Radivojevic (2021), the importance of grounding literature reviews in theoretical frameworks while maintaining a practical orientation is quite needed (p. 1554). Besides, Xu and Zammit (2020) convey a synonymous observation that the use of a hybrid approach balances theoretical rigor with practical applicability (p. 7). This helps us concretize our understanding that such a synthesis ensures that literature reviews enrich academic discourse and further guide in doing real-world related studies practically in qualitative research.

### **Challenges and Future Directions**

Doing literature reviews has always been a great concern for every researcher, irrespective of their field. However, conducting effective and relative reviews in qualitative research is difficult. Without demotivating the readers, I mean we face challenges, especially in managing large volumes of data along with ensuring methodological rigor. In this regard, Yang (2023) identifies reflexivity as a crucial strategy for addressing such challenges. Especially, he expresses the ability of concerned

researchers is inevitable to critically evaluate their own biases and assumptions. Moreover, Trombetta and Cox (2022) suggest integrating visual data requires additional training and methodological adaptation. All such information gives us the knowledge that future research should be concerned about and explore more innovative tools and frameworks to address such and even possible challenges. Only then can we further enhance the utility and accessibility of qualitative literature reviews in establishing new knowledge and also set trends in academia.

In this way, the ten referenced articles above discuss more or less similar ways of doing literature reviews in qualitative studies. The aforementioned themes were drawn after going through those articles, which collectively illustrate the different nature of literature reviews. From thematic analysis to methodological appraisal, narrative construction, and practical innovations, these works brighten the path from theory to practice. With this understanding, I believe the above discussion will offer some valuable information to apply in practice for qualitative researchers. In doing so, I trust that the qualitative researchers will contribute to the ongoing development of qualitative research, confirming the importance of literature reviews as both a scholarly attempt and a practical tool for inquiry. At last, we as qualitative researchers also need to bear in mind that the transformative potential of literature reviews in bridging the gap between theory and practice should always be considered and taken openly.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis to systematically analyze and interpret the ten peer-reviewed articles from *Scopus*-indexed journals, *The Qualitative Report* (TQR), and the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (IJQM), published between 2010 and 2023. As the researcher in the present secondary data-based desktop research, I purposively selected only those articles for their relevance to thematic analysis in qualitative research and diverse perspectives on literature review practices (Xu & Zammit, 2020; Lochmiller, 2021), which were identified through a meticulous online search process akin to Gupta and Poudel (2024, p. 73). The first step involved *familiarization*. This first stage guided me in achieving it by thoroughly reading and annotating each article multiple times to grasp its context, objectives, and methodologies. Then, the *Initial codes* were generated by categorizing key ideas and recurring themes within each article. Similarly, I gained insights from Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework, which focused on methodological accuracy, theme development, and the integration of qualitative understanding into reviews. Similarly, further theoretical coding was achieved on qualitative practices for narratives (Kalpokas and Radivojevic, 2021), who advocated for convincing qualitative narratives, and (Yanto, 2023) emphasized methodological congruence in thematic analysis.

In the third stage, *related codes* were grouped to identify broader themes such as “methodological frameworks,” “innovative practices,” and “trustworthiness in thematic analysis.” These were shaped through comparative analysis of the ten articles, drawing from Nowell et al. (2017), who detailed trustworthiness criteria, and Trombeta and Cox (2022), who introduced textual-visual interaction to extend the scope of analysis. Then, the identified themes were *carefully reviewed* to ensure alignment with the research purpose by confirming coherence, unity, distinctiveness, and refinement. For example, the themes such as “methodological innovation” were refined through Chenail’s (2010) work on qualitative reading and Eaton et al.’s (2019) ideas on transcription alternatives, while “narratives in literature reviews” was supported through understandings from Kalpokas and Radivojevic (2021) and Yang (2023). In the fifth stage, *defining and naming themes* involved creating clear definitions and concise labels that captured the essence of each refined theme. For example, “Methodological diversity” emphasized trustworthiness and congruence (Willgens et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017), and “Innovative data management” reflected creative methodologies (Kalpokas & Radivojevic, 2021; Trombeta & Cox, 2022), adhering to Braun & Clarke’s (2006) emphasis on clarity. Finally, in the sixth stage, the *findings were synthesized into a cohesive narrative* demonstrating how thematic analysis can enrich literature review practices in qualitative inquiry. Works such as Xu and Zammit (2020) and Yanto (2023) helped integrate contrasting yet complementary perspectives, emphasizing the methodological versatility and practical utility of thematic analysis in bridging theory and practice in qualitative research.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The present desk research proposes exploring the practices of doing literature reviews in qualitative research and thus provides practical insights for fellow researchers in qualitative fields. This section presents findings and a discussion of this study. In order to arrive at this phase, first of all, I purposively collected ten different articles that were published in Scopus-indexed journals, the International Journal of Qualitative Methods (IJQM) and The Qualitative Report (TQR), related to qualitative research only. Similarly, I selected the articles that only talked about the ways of doing literature reviews in qualitative research, mainly focused on the thematic analysis. Then, I followed the framework of the six-step approach of Braun & Clarke (2006) to thematic analysis to systematically analyze and interpret the selected articles. However, before following the framework to make the comparative analysis of the selected articles and arrive at this stage, first of all, I studied each article thoroughly. In this way, the following five themes have been developed based on the most frequent themes synthesized from the ten articles’ discussions to get the findings below:

## **Methodological Diversity**

As I went through ten different articles, I found that the articles carried particular methodological processes. That means conducting literature reviews in qualitative research possesses the article's issue-based, different, unique, and also specifically relevant frameworks. In simple words, while doing literature reviews in qualitative research, there is a practice of rich methodological diversity, allowing qualitative reviews and data analysis to follow different and innovative frameworks. Regarding this, the article by Xu and Zammit (2020) made use of deductive and inductive thematic analysis, which educates us to focus on a hybrid approach to explore education-related phenomena. This methodological diversity in doing qualitative reviews got further supported when I read the article of Lochmiller (2021), which also advocated similar practice through it. Lochmiller's article makes use of a thematic analysis that emphasizes the adaptability of qualitative literature reviews across dissimilar datasets. Similarly, Willgens et al. (2016) utilized methodological congruence, proposing an instrument to ensure alignment between research questions, methods, and findings. Besides, Yanto (2023) also discusses the essential steps in thematic analysis to provide a clear roadmap for researchers. In this way, such a trend of methodological diversity reflects qualitative research's flexibility in addressing different and even complex research questions.

## **Narrative Construction**

The present study extends another finding of narrative construction in doing literature reviews in qualitative research. After a synthesized analysis of all ten different articles, narrative construction emerged as a main strength in qualitative reviews. While going through the articles and their comparative analysis afterwards, the narrative constructions in qualitative literatures appeared to be an unavoidable practice. Because the articles I had selected for this study seem to be practicing a kind of storytelling in qualitative literature reviews that shaped meaningful interpretations of data. For example, in the study of Kalpokas and Radivojevic (2021), they followed narrative techniques. This educates us that adapting the narrative techniques in literature reviews is also practiced to craft or create a cohesive synthesis of findings in qualitative research studies. Moreover, Chenail (2010) draws our attention to the importance of "reading like a qualitative researcher." Regarding this, Chenail extends the message that the qualitative researchers need a deep engagement with texts, i.e., as the reviews to construct narratives that align with research objectives. Similarly, Trombetta and Cox (2022) further helped me strengthen the theme of narrative construction. Because their study also followed a synonymous approach that integrated visual and textual data into thematic analysis and thus enhanced the narrative richness and multimodal storytelling in the study. In this way, narrative construction is another important practice in qualitative literature reviews.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

The third theme teaches us about the trustworthiness and rigor we need to maintain in the qualitative reviews. The review of ten articles in terms of doing qualitative reviews showed the necessity of establishing trustworthiness and rigor. Regarding this, Nowell et al. (2017) followed particular strategies for meeting trustworthiness criteria for their study. This informs us of a new practice of doing literature reviews in qualitative studies. Specifically, they followed the criteria such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Through their study, the role of systematic and transparent processes is understood as the important means in achieving methodological rigor while conducting qualitative literature reviews. In a similar vein, Yang (2023), through his article, enlightens us with the photovoice systematic reviews. Yang's study presents the challenges of balancing rigor with creativity in literature and thus educates us about the practice and possibility of this trend in conducting qualitative reviews. Such an approach focused on the importance of participant voices while also ensuring analytical strength. Therefore, the practices of maintaining trustworthiness and rigor show the commitment of qualitative researchers to sustain ethical and methodological integrity as well.

### **Innovative Data Management**

The fourth finding of the present study is the innovative data management techniques applied while doing qualitative reviews. The origination approaches for qualitative data are important, as Eaton, Stritzke, and Ohan (2019) used scribes as an alternative to transcription in their qualitative study. Based on their article, as they utilized scribes to address challenges related to time and resource constraints, their study proceeded further with ease. As practiced, the usage of scribes by Eaton et al. (2019) in the qualitative study, this approach, as discussed in the article, enhanced the efficiency as well as preserved the implications of live data collection. Likewise, Trombeta and Cox's (2022) framework analyzed the relationship of textual and visual data. Their framework utilized practical strategies. Now, this, on behalf of the qualitative researchers, gives the understandings of handling multimodal datasets in doing qualitative literature reviews, going beyond what has usually been practiced in qualitative studies. In this way, the practice, as found in these reviewed articles, educates us about using innovative data management strategies during qualitative literature reviews. Therefore, this finding clarifies for us the progressing nature of qualitative research tools and techniques for more effective qualitative data analysis.

### **Pedagogical Application**

Last but not least, pedagogical application is the final finding of the present study. The reviewed articles clearly show how qualitative research can be evident for knowing their ways of doing qualitative reviews, having known their implications in the research

field. In this regard, Xu and Zammit (2020) integrated thematic analysis into practitioner research. This shows the importance of bridging gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Therefore, the application from the discussion and practice of different approaches to conducting qualitative literature reviews needs their implications in upcoming research as well. According to Kalpokas and Radivojevic (2021), the importance of narrative construction in education is valuable. They further support this as the construction of narrative helps the learners/researchers in developing their critical reading and synthesis skills for learning or research, respectively. Similarly, Willgens et al. (2016) also justify the pedagogical utility of methodological congruence instruments through a discussion in their article. Consequently, they can also serve as teaching tools for developing research designs. Thus, the qualitative research methodologies also show how they can be used contextually in their respective educational contexts.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present write-up studied and analyzed ten different qualitative articles that discussed and also utilized the practices of methodological diversity in doing qualitative literature reviews. Specifically, the reviewed articles prioritized thematic analysis along with some additional practices that go beyond the common methods for qualitative reviews. The practices of qualitative literature review displayed methodological diversity, showing the practices of issue-based and specific frameworks personalized to concerned research contexts. Similarly, the selected articles also demonstrated narrative construction trends, utilizing storytelling to create meaningful interpretations of data. Besides, establishing trustworthiness and rigor is another fundamental in qualitative reviews, which included the strategies like credibility, dependability, and confirmability to ensure ethical and methodological integrity. Likewise, qualitative reviews are also utilizing increasingly new and different data management strategies. For example, Eaton et al. (2019) used scribes as an alternative to transcription. In this way, the synthesized analysis of the selected articles also suggests to us a pedagogical relevance of qualitative literature review practices in the field of increasing research trends. With this, the present study concludes that conducting qualitative literature reviews shows the practices of theoretical richness, methodological rigor, narrative depth, increased new practices, and educational relevance.

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