LITERATURE REVIEW TYPES IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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Abstract:

Literature reviews constitute foundational components of scholarly inquiry, yet persistent taxonomic ambiguity regarding their typology, terminology, and methodological specifications impedes rigorous research design and compromises the epistemological coherence of knowledge synthesis efforts. This study systematically identifies, defines, categorises, and critically compares twenty major literature review types employed in contemporary academic research, developing a comprehensive decision framework to guide methodologically sound review selection and implementation. Employing a qualitative comparative analysis combined with systematic thematic synthesis of methodological literature, we analysed peer-reviewed articles, methodological guidelines from established repositories, and taxonomy frameworks. The analysis yielded four principal contributions. First, definitional clarification established precise, operationalizable definitions for twenty review types, including systematic, meta-analysis, scoping, mapping, narrative, critical, rapid, integrative, umbrella, qualitative evidence synthesis, realist, mixed methods, state-of-the-art, systematised, bibliometric, historical, conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and living reviews. Second, taxonomic organisation developed a hierarchical classification system structured around four epistemological orientations: positivist-aggregative, interpretivist-constructivist, critical-transformative, and pragmatic-mixed. Third, comparative analysis examined each review type across two dimensions: core selection drivers (research purpose, question characteristics, evidence type, resource constraints, epistemological stance, common frameworks, intended audience) and operational design choices (search comprehensiveness, appraisal requirements, synthesis approach, reporting standards, typical outcomes). Fourth, an evidence-based decision framework comprising six sequential decision points was developed to guide researchers from research context to appropriate methodology selection. Findings demonstrate that literature review types represent more than procedural variations; they embody distinct epistemological commitments and serve fundamentally different knowledge-building

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functions. Quality criteria must therefore be orientation-specific rather than universal. The proposed taxonomy reveals legitimate methodological diversity that cannot be reduced to hierarchical quality rankings. This framework provides researchers, educators, journal editors, and peer reviewers with systematic guidance for review type selection based on research purpose, epistemological stance, resource constraints, and disciplinary conventions, ultimately strengthening evidence synthesis quality and methodological transparency across academic disciplines.

Keywords: literature review, research methodology, knowledge synthesis, epistemology, systematic review taxonomy

1. Introduction

This research is concerned with how scholars classify, compare, and select among the proliferating types of literature reviews and evidence syntheses. It sits at the intersection of evidence-based practice, research methods, and meta-research. The shared problem across the references is that reviews are no longer adequately described as merely narrative or systematic. Instead, there is a large and growing repertoire of review approaches (systematic, bibliometric, scoping, mapping, narrative, rapid, meta-analysis, qualitative, realist, critical, umbrella, integrative, state-of-the-art and mixed-methods reviews, among others), each with its own epistemological commitments, methodological expectations, and appropriate use cases (Grant & Booth, 2009; Schick-Makaroff et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2019).

Literature reviews are foundational to scholarly research, serving to synthesise existing knowledge on a topic. In recent decades, the expansion of evidence-based practice and interdisciplinary research has given rise to a proliferation of review types, each with its own methodology and nomenclature (Grant & Booth, 2009). The underlying stakes are high. Reviews are used in crucial steps and decisions, to build and critique theory, to map emerging fields, and to synthesise methodological debates. When the review method is poorly chosen, mislabelled, or unclearly described, downstream users can be misled about the robustness, scope or meaning of the synthesised evidence (Aguinis et al., 2020; Haddaway et al., 2023). Much of the work represented in this research, therefore, aims not only to name different review types but to tie those types to specific purposes, question formats, epistemic logics, and levels of methodological rigour.

The current landscape presents an opportunity to clarify and classify these literature review types within a coherent framework. Critically comparing the objectives and processes of each review genre can assist researchers in making informed decisions about which review method best fits their research questions and goals. This is especially important as new hybrid forms emerge and as expectations for transparency in review methodology increase across disciplines. Developing a clear taxonomy and decision guide can improve the quality of literature reviews and ensure that each is used in a

context-sensitive manner, ultimately strengthening evidence synthesis in all fields (Price, 2022).

Our analysis covers major review types found in the literature from 1990 to the present, drawing examples and guidelines from the health sciences, social sciences, education, and other domains. We focus on widely recognised categories and note additional variants or related approaches where relevant. We exclude informal or unvalidated review formats and emphasise sources that are peer-reviewed or widely endorsed in methodology literature, such as PRISMA guidelines, Joanna Briggs Institute manuals, Cochrane and Campbell Collaboration resources.

Clarifying literature review types has practical significance for the research community. A well-chosen review methodology enhances the rigour of knowledge synthesis and ensures that the review's findings are trustworthy and relevant. Educators can use this typology to teach research methods, helping students understand why a given review approach is appropriate for a given question. Moreover, journal editors and peer reviewers may use a standardised taxonomy to set expectations for manuscript submissions. In the long term, wider adoption of clear review type definitions could reduce instances of incomplete or biased reviews and encourage the development of protocols and reporting standards tailored to each review type.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of review types over the past three decades reflects both methodological innovation and disciplinary fragmentation. While early distinctions between narrative and systematic reviews provided initial clarity (Cronin et al., 2008), subsequent developments have led to numerous other variants. These types are not merely procedural alternatives; they embody distinct epistemological assumptions, pursue different research objectives, and generate qualitatively different forms of knowledge (Gough et al., 2012).

Furthermore, current comparative frameworks for literature review types suffer from three primary limitations. First, existing typologies frequently emphasise procedural characteristics while neglecting underlying epistemological assumptions and theoretical foundations (Booth et al., 2022). Second, disciplinary silos have generated field-specific review traditions that obscure common methodological principles and create redundant terminology (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). Third, the rapid evolution of review methodologies has outpaced efforts to develop coherent, comprehensive classification systems, resulting in taxonomic lag (Munn et al., 2018). No universally accepted framework currently exists for systematically distinguishing review types across dimensions of philosophical orientation, methodological rigour, synthesis approach, and appropriate application context. This gap impedes effective research training, compromises methodological transparency, and limits opportunities for meaningful meta-methodological evaluation.

This study addresses these gaps through four primary objectives: 1) Definitional Clarification: Establish precise, operationalizable definitions for major literature review types based on systematic analysis of methodological literature; 2) Taxonomic Organization: Develop a hierarchical classification system that organizes review types according to epistemological orientation, methodological structure, and functional

purpose; 3) Comparative Analysis: Conduct systematic comparison across key dimensions including research question types, search strategies, quality assessment procedures, synthesis methods, and knowledge claims; 4) Decision Framework Development: Create an evidence-based decision tool to guide researchers in selecting appropriate review types based on research context, objectives, and constraints.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of literature review types is grounded in the premise that each type embodies a distinct epistemological stance and methodological logic, which must align with the research question and purpose. Literature reviews serve as a methodological synthesis, mapping the existing research domain and evaluating future research directions, and their design is closely tied to the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying the research endeavour (Paré et al., 2015). Despite their ubiquity across academic disciplines, considerable confusion persists regarding the typology, terminology, and methodological specifications of different review formats (Grant & Booth, 2009). This taxonomic ambiguity generates several scholarly challenges. Novice researchers struggle to select appropriate review types for their research questions; experienced scholars employ inconsistent terminology when describing their synthesis methods; journal editors and reviewers apply variable standards when evaluating review quality; and meta-researchers encounter difficulties when attempting to classify and compare existing reviews.

The proliferation of review types over the past three decades reflects both methodological innovation and disciplinary fragmentation. While early distinctions between narrative and systematic reviews provided initial clarity (Cronin et al., 2008), subsequent developments have introduced scoping reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), integrative reviews (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), realist reviews (Pawson et al., 2005), umbrella reviews (Aromataris et al., 2015), rapid reviews (Ganann et al., 2010), and numerous other variants. These types are not merely procedural alternatives; they embody distinct epistemological assumptions, pursue different research objectives, and generate qualitatively different forms of knowledge (Gough et al., 2017).

A literature review may also aim to evolve a new theory, appraise existing theories, describe materials and thoughts on a theme, or explore inconsistencies and gaps in a subject area. Each of these purposes reflects a different epistemological orientation. For instance, reviews that seek to develop or structure theory crystallise the theoretical context and illuminate the epistemological and ontological foundations of the new or existing theory. In contrast, descriptive or inductive reviews aggregate and present basic ideas about a theme without necessarily introducing novel theoretical insights, while exploratory reviews focus on identifying inconsistencies and research gaps, often provoking new research questions (Alajami, 2021). The methodological logic of a literature review is also determined by its alignment with the research question and the underlying epistemological stance. For example, systematic reviews are typically associated with a positivist paradigm, aiming to synthesise and compare evidence

quantitatively and provide a comprehensive, unbiased overview of literature related to a specific theme, theory, or method. These reviews follow explicit, reproducible methods to minimise bias and are often used to answer clearly formulated research questions or hypotheses (Hirata et al., 2025; Kadi et al., 2017; Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2021). In contrast, narrative or descriptive reviews may be more interpretive, relying on the researcher's selection of literature and thus potentially introducing bias, but allowing for a broader, more flexible synthesis of ideas (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2021). Integrative or critical reviews, on the other hand, are often employed to critique previous studies and build new theoretical frameworks, reflecting a more constructivist or interpretivist epistemology. These reviews synthesise and critically evaluate empirical evidence and can be used to present new frameworks or concepts that advance a given field (Hirata et al., 2025; Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2021). The choice of review type should therefore be guided by the research question, the purpose of the review, and the epistemological stance of the researcher (Downie et al., 2023). Furthermore, the literature review process itself is iterative and should be conducted in parallel with the development of research questions and methodologies. The review not only provides a theoretical foundation for the proposed study but also substantiates the research problem, justifies the study's contribution to knowledge, and frames the appropriate methodologies and research questions (Paré et al., 2015; Williamson & Johanson, 2018). Theoretical frameworks developed through literature reviews consist of concepts, constructs, and propositions, which together drive all research activities, including the formulation of research questions and the interpretation of findings (Kohda, 2022).

2.1. Importance of Clearly Defining Purpose, Scope, and Application

The alignment of a research question with the appropriate review type fundamentally begins with a clear definition of the study's purpose, scope, and intended application of findings. A well-defined research question is essential, as it sets the boundaries and focus of the investigation, ensuring that the review remains rigourous and relevant to its aims (Schwarze et al., 2025). The purpose statement should explicitly identify the goal of the study, including the variables and population of interest, which can often be reworded as a research question to clarify what will be sought in the review process (Bibb & Wanzer, 2008). This clarity is crucial for guiding the selection of data, analytical approaches, and the overall design of the review, as the research question should drive all subsequent methodological choices rather than being retrofitted to available data or techniques (Bush & Amechi, 2019; Grunewald et al., 2025).

2.2. Structuring the Research Question for Review Alignment

The process of aligning a research question with the review type involves formulating a question that is clear, focused, and specific, as this will guide the entire review process and inform the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria (Mannan et al., 2025; Mueller et al., 2018). Frameworks such as PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) or its variants (e.g., PICOC, PICOT) are widely recognised tools for structuring research questions, particularly in systematic reviews, as they help delineate the

boundaries of the inquiry and ensure that all relevant aspects are considered (Conde & Rodríguez-Sedano, 2024; Freedland et al., 2019; Neely et al., 2010; Unal et al., 2018). The choice of framework and the specificity of the question may vary depending on the review's objectives and the type of evidence being synthesised, with some recommendations emphasising the need for scientific precision, while others allow for broader or more general questions depending on the intended relevance and application (Mueller et al., 2018).

2.3. Determining Scope and Review Type

Defining the scope of the research question is imperative for ensuring alignment with the chosen review type, whether it be systematic, scoping, or integrative (Conde & Rodríguez-Sedano, 2024; Sharma et al., 2022). The scope should be justified, and its limitations acknowledged, as it determines the breadth and comprehensiveness of the literature search, the types of studies to be included, and the methodological approach to be employed (Kim & Kim, 2024). For example, scoping reviews are particularly suited for mapping the literature across a wide range of study designs and identifying research gaps, while systematic reviews require narrowly defined questions and strict inclusion criteria to synthesise evidence on specific interventions or outcomes (Mueller et al., 2018). The intended application of the findings (whether to inform practice, policy, or further research) should also be considered when defining the scope and selecting the review type (Darke & Shanks, 2002).

2.4. Application and Iterative Refinement

The alignment process is iterative, often involving preliminary literature searches to refine the research question and scope based on the extent of existing research and the feasibility of the review (Rosário & Dias, 2023). The research question serves as a benchmark throughout the review, orienting the analysis and ensuring that the findings are contextually aligned with the original aims (Schwarze et al., 2025). The selection of outcome measures, study designs, and analytical methods should all be dictated by the research question and the intended application of the findings, ensuring that the review produces meaningful and actionable results (Freedland et al., 2019). Ultimately, the effectiveness of aligning a research question with the appropriate review type depends on the rigour with which the purpose, scope, and application are defined and maintained throughout the review process (Conde & Rodríguez-Sedano, 2024).

2.5. Types of Literature Review

A wide range of literature review types exists, each with distinct methodologies, purposes, and applications. Table 1 presents a comprehensive list of the main types of literature reviews.

Table 1: Typology of major literature review types with key characteristics

Review Type	Main Purpose/Methodology
Systematic Review	Comprehensive, unbiased synthesis of evidence
Meta-Analysis Review	Statistical aggregation of study results
Scoping Review	Mapping the breadth of research, identifying gaps
Mapping Review	Categorising and visualising research activity
Narrative Review	Summarising literature based on expertise
Critical Review	Critical evaluation, proposing new perspectives
Rapid Review	Accelerated systematic review for timely evidence
Integrative Review	Holistic synthesis of diverse methodologies
Umbrella Review	Synthesis of systematic reviews
Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (Qualitative Systematic Review)	Synthesis of qualitative evidence
Realist Review	Theory-driven synthesis (not detailed in text)
Mixed Methods Review	Integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence within a single synthesis framework
State-of-the-Art Review	Highlighting latest advances, setting future directions
Systematised Review	Conducted by individuals with partial adherence to systematic review methods but lacking a full protocol
Bibliometric Review	Quantitative analysis of publication trends
Historical Review	Examines literature over time to trace the development, evolution, and turning points in scholarly discourse
Conceptual Review	Focuses on the development and refinement of concepts or theories across literature
Theoretical Review	Analyses and compares theoretical frameworks to construct new interpretations or frameworks
Methodological Review	Assesses the methodological approaches used in a body of research, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps
Living Review	Continuously updated review incorporating new evidence in real-time or periodically

Literature reviews operate at the intersection of epistemology and methodology, reflecting fundamental assumptions about the nature of knowledge, evidence, and truth (Gough et al., 2012). Drawing on established epistemological paradigms, we identify four primary orientations that underpin different review types. The Positivist-Aggregative Orientation assumes an objective reality that can be systematically measured and aggregated. Reviews in this tradition prioritise statistical synthesis, effect size quantification, and causal inference. Knowledge accumulates through additive integration of empirical findings, with explicit protocols designed to minimise bias and maximise reproducibility (Higgins et al., 2019). As for the Interpretivist-Constructivist Orientation, it views knowledge as socially constructed and context-dependent. Reviews emphasise understanding diverse perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and interpretive meanings. Synthesis proceeds through thematic or narrative integration rather than statistical aggregation, acknowledging the situated nature of all knowledge claims (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The Critical-Transformative Orientation positions research within power structures and social justice frameworks. Reviews explicitly examine how knowledge production reflects and perpetuates inequalities, critically

evaluating whose voices are represented and what assumptions remain unquestioned. Synthesis aims toward social transformation rather than neutral description (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Lastly, the Pragmatic-Mixed Orientation adopts methodological pluralism based on practical problem-solving. Reviews integrate diverse evidence types and synthesis methods according to research question requirements rather than epistemological purity. Knowledge value derives from utility and actionability (Heyvaert et al., 2013). Therefore, we posit that each major literature review type represents a distinct configuration of epistemological stance, methodological protocol, and knowledge synthesis approach that can be systematically aligned with specific research purposes, question types, and disciplinary contexts. Considering the preceding statements, the subsequent discussion will proceed to outline the principal types of literature review.

2.6. Descriptive Analysis of the Types of Literature Review

The following section provides a comprehensive description of the principal types of literature review identified in contemporary academic research. Each type embodies distinct epistemological assumptions, methodological protocols, and synthesis approaches that can be systematically aligned with specific research purposes, question types, and disciplinary contexts (Grant & Booth, 2009). The literature review in this research will provide a definitional clarification and precise, operationalizable definitions for major literature review types.

2.6.1. Systematic Review

A systematic review represents the gold standard methodology for evidence synthesis, employing comprehensive, pre-specified search strategies to identify all relevant studies addressing a focused research question, typically concerning intervention effectiveness, diagnostic accuracy, or prognosis (Higgins et al., 2019). This review type follows explicit, reproducible methods designed to minimise bias and maximise transparency through the use of established protocols such as those provided by PRISMA guidelines and the Cochrane Collaboration. The systematic review process involves clearly formulated questions, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, critical appraisal of included studies using standardised tools, and synthesis of findings through either narrative summary or statistical meta-analysis (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). Systematic reviews are particularly valued in health sciences, education, and social policy research, where they inform clinical guidelines, policy development, and evidence-based practice initiatives (Gough et al., 2017).

2.6.2. Meta-Analysis Review

A meta-analysis constitutes a quantitative variant of systematic review that employs statistical techniques to aggregate numerical data across multiple studies, calculating pooled effect sizes with confidence intervals (Borenstein et al., 2009). This approach enables researchers to examine heterogeneity among study findings, assess publication bias, and investigate moderator effects that may explain variation in outcomes across

different contexts or populations. Meta-analysis generates cumulative evidence regarding the magnitude and consistency of effects, providing more precise estimates than individual studies alone can offer. The methodology requires careful consideration of statistical models, including fixed-effect and random-effects approaches, depending on assumptions about underlying population parameters and the sources of variation among included studies (Higgins et al., 2019).

2.6.3. Scoping Review

A scoping review provides an opportunity to map the breadth of existing and emerging evidence on a broad topic, serving primarily exploratory purposes rather than answering specific effectiveness questions (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews employ broader inclusion criteria and typically do not conduct a formal quality appraisal of included studies. The methodology follows a structured framework that includes identifying the research question, searching for relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarising, and reporting results. Scoping reviews are particularly useful for identifying key characteristics within the evidence base, clarifying conceptual boundaries of a topic area, and identifying research gaps that may inform future systematic reviews or primary research (Levac et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2020).

2.6.4. Mapping Review

A mapping review, also termed a systematic map or evidence map, creates a structured categorisation of research evidence across multiple dimensions, presenting findings through visual representations such as evidence maps, gap maps, or bubble charts rather than synthesising substantive conclusions (James et al., 2016). This approach highlights patterns in the distribution of research across populations, settings, interventions, outcomes, or study designs, making it particularly valuable for identifying where evidence is concentrated and where significant gaps exist. Mapping reviews serve primarily to inform research prioritisation and funding decisions by providing stakeholders with a comprehensive visual overview of the research landscape in a given field (Miake-Lye et al., 2016).

2.6.5. Narrative Review

A narrative review provides a qualitative, interpretive synthesis of literature addressing broad topics without employing systematic search protocols or explicit quality appraisal procedures (Green et al., 2006). This review type emphasises expert interpretation, theoretical development, and conceptual understanding, relying substantially on the author's knowledge and judgment in selecting and synthesising relevant sources. While methodologically flexible, rigorous narrative reviews employ transparent selection rationale and critical analysis. Narrative reviews are particularly valuable for exploring complex or under-researched areas, identifying trends and research gaps that may not emerge through more structured approaches, and providing theoretical framing for subsequent empirical investigation (Grant & Booth, 2009).

2.6.6. Critical Review

A critical review evaluates literature from an explicit theoretical or methodological stance, analysing underlying assumptions, contradictions, and gaps within existing scholarship (Grant & Booth, 2009). This approach extends beyond description to challenge prevailing interpretations and propose new conceptual frameworks, employing systematic yet purposive sampling focused on conceptually relevant works. Critical reviews are distinguished by their evaluative stance, seeking not merely to summarise existing knowledge but to identify weaknesses in prior research, highlight overlooked perspectives, and stimulate new directions for theoretical development. This review type is particularly prevalent in the humanities and social sciences, where critical engagement with existing scholarship constitutes a fundamental scholarly practice.

2.6.7. Rapid Review

A rapid review, sometimes termed a rapid evidence assessment, employs streamlined systematic review methods to produce evidence synthesis within constrained timeframes, typically ranging from five to twelve weeks (Ganann et al., 2010; Tricco et al., 2015). This approach applies methodological shortcuts such as limiting database searches, using single-reviewer screening, restricting language or date parameters, or excluding grey literature while maintaining the fundamental principles of systematic methodology. Rapid reviews are particularly valuable when timely evidence is needed for urgent policy decisions, public health emergencies, or clinical guideline development, accepting some trade-offs in comprehensiveness for the benefit of timeliness and practical utility.

2.6.8. Integrative Review

An integrative review synthesises diverse evidence types, including quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical sources, to address multifaceted research questions requiring a comprehensive understanding (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). This methodology represents the only review approach that allows for the combination of diverse methodologies, including experimental and non-experimental research, and has particular potential for evidence-based practice in nursing and allied health disciplines. The integrative review process involves specifying the review purpose, conducting comprehensive literature searches, evaluating data quality, analysing data through methods adapted from qualitative research, and presenting results in ways that integrate findings across methodological traditions. This approach is especially valuable for emerging topics requiring conceptual framework development or for synthesising practice-relevant evidence from multiple research paradigms.

2.6.9. Umbrella Review

An umbrella review, also known as an overview of reviews, provides a systematic compilation and assessment of existing systematic reviews and meta-analyses addressing related research questions, representing the highest level of evidence aggregation (Aromataris et al., 2015). This approach synthesises evidence at the review level,

examining consistency across multiple systematic reviews and identifying areas where evidence may conflict or require further investigation. Umbrella reviews employ quality assessment tools specifically designed for evaluating reviews rather than primary studies, such as AMSTAR or ROBIS instruments. This methodology is particularly valuable for informing clinical guidelines and policy development where multiple systematic reviews exist on related topics, providing decision-makers with a comprehensive synthesis of the available synthesised evidence.

2.6.10. Qualitative Evidence Synthesis

Qualitative evidence synthesis, also termed qualitative systematic review or meta-synthesis, employs interpretive approaches to integrate findings from qualitative research studies, generating new theoretical understanding that transcends the contributions of original individual studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This methodology employs techniques such as meta-ethnography, thematic synthesis, or framework synthesis to preserve contextual richness and interpretive depth while identifying cross-cutting themes across studies. Qualitative evidence synthesis is particularly valuable for exploring participant experiences, beliefs, and behaviours, as well as for understanding barriers and facilitators to intervention implementation. The approach requires systematic searching and quality appraisal using tools appropriate for qualitative research, such as those developed by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme or the Joanna Briggs Institute (Noyes et al., 2018).

2.6.11. Realist Review

A realist review constitutes a theory-driven approach to evidence synthesis that examines what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why, through the systematic investigation of context-mechanism-outcome configurations (Pawson et al., 2005). This methodology focuses on understanding the underlying theories or programme theories that explain how complex social interventions produce their effects in different contexts. Rather than seeking to establish whether an intervention works in aggregate terms, realist reviews aim to refine and test explanatory theories about the causal mechanisms through which interventions achieve outcomes. The approach involves iterative searching, purposive sampling of literature, and synthesis that combines theoretical understanding with empirical evidence, making it particularly valuable for evaluating complex policy interventions, public health programmes, and organisational change initiatives where context significantly influences outcomes (Wong et al., 2013).

2.6.12. Mixed Methods Review

A mixed methods review integrates findings from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods primary studies using segregated, integrated, or contingent synthesis approaches (Heyvaert et al., 2013). This methodology addresses complex research questions that require understanding both the effectiveness of interventions and the contextual factors, experiences, and processes that influence outcomes. Mixed methods reviews may employ various designs, including convergent approaches where

quantitative and qualitative evidence are synthesised separately and then integrated, sequential approaches where one type of evidence informs questions for synthesising another, or embedded approaches where one type serves a supplementary role. This review type is particularly valuable when research questions require multiple evidence types to provide comprehensive answers relevant to policy and practice.

2.6.13. State-of-the-Art Review

A state-of-the-art review addresses the current state of knowledge in rapidly evolving fields, combining systematic searching with expert interpretation to identify trends, controversies, and future research directions (Grant & Booth, 2009). This review type is often commissioned by journals or funding bodies seeking authoritative overviews of emerging areas, and balances comprehensiveness with currency by focusing on the most recent and influential contributions to a field. State-of-the-art reviews typically highlight cutting-edge research, emerging methodologies, and promising avenues for future investigation, serving to orient researchers entering new fields and inform strategic decisions about research priorities (Price, 2022).

2.6.14. Systematised Review

A systematised review attempts to include elements of the systematic review process while acknowledging constraints that prevent full adherence to systematic review standards, typically conducted by individual researchers or as postgraduate student assignments (Grant & Booth, 2009). This review type may involve systematic searching of one or more databases, explicit inclusion criteria, and structured synthesis, but lacks the resources for dual screening, comprehensive grey literature searching, or formal quality appraisal that characterise full systematic reviews. Systematised reviews represent a pragmatic approach for situations where systematic methodology is desirable, but resource constraints require abbreviated procedures, with authors explicitly acknowledging the limitations this introduces (Premji & Cabugos, 2023).

2.6.15. Bibliometric Review

A bibliometric review systematically analyses patterns and trends within a body of literature using quantitative methods applied to publication metadata rather than study content (Donthu et al., 2021). This approach focuses on characteristics of publications such as trends in publication volume, citation patterns and networks, keyword co-occurrence, and institutional or geographical distribution. By applying bibliometric techniques through specialised software such as VOSviewer, CiteSpace, or Bibliometrix, researchers can map the intellectual structure of a field, identify influential works and authors, detect emerging research topics, and visualise collaboration networks. Bibliometric reviews are particularly valuable for providing objective, high-level overviews of research domains and tracking the evolution of scholarly fields over time (Carter-Templeton et al., 2023).

2.6.16. Historical Review

A historical review examines literature over extended time periods to trace the development, evolution, and turning points in scholarly discourse on a particular topic or discipline (Rowlinson et al., 2014). This approach provides a chronological analysis of how concepts, theories, methodologies, or practices have emerged, transformed, and been contested over time. Historical reviews contextualise current knowledge within its developmental trajectory, identifying seminal works, paradigm shifts, and the intellectual lineage of contemporary ideas. This review type is particularly valuable in fields where understanding the historical development of thought is essential for appreciating current debates and anticipating future directions (Durai, 2021).

2.6.17. Conceptual Review

A conceptual review focuses on the development, refinement, and clarification of concepts or theoretical constructs across a body of literature (Jaakkola, 2020). This approach systematically examines how key concepts have been defined, operationalised, and applied in different research contexts, identifying areas of conceptual ambiguity, inconsistency, or evolution. Conceptual reviews contribute to theoretical development by proposing refined definitions, identifying dimensions or typologies, clarifying relationships between related concepts, and suggesting directions for more rigorous conceptualisation in future research (Welch et al., 2022). This review type is particularly valuable in emerging fields where foundational concepts remain contested or underdeveloped.

2.6.18. Theoretical Review

A theoretical review analyses and compares theoretical frameworks to construct new interpretations, identify theoretical gaps, or propose theoretical integration (Paré et al., 2015). This approach examines how theories have been applied across different studies, assesses their explanatory power and limitations, and may propose novel theoretical perspectives or frameworks that synthesise insights from multiple theoretical traditions. Theoretical reviews contribute to knowledge development by evaluating the adequacy of existing theories, identifying competing or complementary theoretical perspectives, and advancing theoretical understanding through critical analysis and synthesis (Durai, 2021). This review type is particularly important in social sciences, where theoretical pluralism often characterises research on complex phenomena.

2.6.19. Methodological Review

A methodological review assesses the research methods and methodological approaches employed across a body of research, identifying strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and opportunities for methodological advancement (Palmatier et al., 2017). This approach systematically examines how phenomena have been studied, including research designs, sampling strategies, measurement approaches, and analytical techniques employed in a field. Methodological reviews contribute to research quality by highlighting common methodological limitations, identifying best practices, and proposing directions for

methodological innovation (Aromataris et al., 2015). This review type is particularly valuable for guiding methodological decisions in future research and for informing the development of methodological standards within research communities.

2.6.20. Living Review

A living review, also termed a living systematic review, represents a continuously updated synthesis that incorporates new evidence as it becomes available, rather than representing a static snapshot of knowledge at a single point in time (Elliott et al., 2017). This approach establishes protocols for ongoing surveillance of the literature, with predetermined criteria for triggering updates when new evidence emerges. Living reviews are particularly valuable in rapidly evolving fields where evidence accumulates quickly and where decisions depend on current best evidence, such as during public health emergencies or in clinical areas with active research programmes. The methodology requires infrastructure for continuous monitoring, predetermined update triggers, and transparent documentation of how the review evolves over time (Akl et al., 2017).

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a systematic methodological framework for the comparative analysis and taxonomic classification of literature review types. The methodology integrates established evidence synthesis principles with qualitative comparative analysis techniques to develop a comprehensive typology and decision framework for review type selection.

3.1. Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) approach combined with systematic thematic synthesis of methodological literature. The design followed established protocols for meta-methodological research as outlined by Paré et al. (2015) and Booth et al. (2022). The study proceeded through two complementary analytical phases:

1) Descriptive-Analytical Phase: Systematic identification, definition, and categorisation of literature review types based on a comprehensive analysis of methodological literature, review guidelines, and established frameworks.
2) Comparative-Evaluative Phase: Systematic comparison of identified review types across standardised dimensions, leading to the development of a hierarchical taxonomy and evidence-based decision framework.

3.2. Conceptual Framework

The methodological framework proposed in this research conceptualises review type selection as an explicit alignment problem between research requirements and methodological capabilities. The framework comprises two interconnected components:

A. **Core selection drivers** (these determinants identify the appropriate family of review types based on fundamental research characteristics):
1) Research purpose (map, estimate, explain, integrate, critique, summarise prior reviews, profile a field).
2) Research-question characteristics (broad vs focused; descriptive vs causal; theory-building vs theory-testing).
3) Evidence type (quantitative effects; qualitative meaning/experience; mixed; conceptual/theoretical; reviews-only).
4) Resource constraints (time, team size, screening capacity, statistical/qualitative expertise)
5) Epistemological stance (aggregative/objectivist; interpretive/configurative; critical; realist/explanatory).
6) Common framework.
7) Intended audience and application (policy/clinical decisions; curriculum/practice guidance; theory development; research agenda).

B. **Operational design choices** (these parameters specify how the selected review type must be implemented and reported):
1) Scope & search comprehensiveness (exhaustive vs bounded vs purposive).
2) Appraisal of sources (none; descriptive only; formal risk-of-bias; relevance+rigour).
3) Quality-appraisal requirements (mandatory vs optional vs not fit-for-purpose).
4) Synthesis approach (meta-analysis; narrative synthesis; thematic synthesis; framework synthesis; CMO configuration; bibliometric mapping).
5) Common framework/standards (reporting and process standards appropriate to the type; PICO, PEO, PIRT, PCC, SPICE, SPIDER, PICo, CMO, DAE, SALSA).
6) Typical outcome (effect size; evidence map; taxonomy; conceptual model; programme theory; critique/agenda).

3.3. Data Sources and Search Strategy

3.3.1. Information Sources

The literature search encompassed multiple categories of sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of methodological scholarship:
1) Academic Databases: Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, ERIC, LISTA, PsycINFO, and discipline-specific repositories.
2) Methodological Repositories: Cochrane Library, Joanna Briggs Institute Evidence Synthesis, Campbell Collaboration, and PROSPERO.
3) Methodological Guidelines: PRISMA statement and extensions, JBI manuals, Cochrane Handbook, and discipline-specific review guidance documents.

3.3.2. Search Strategy

The search strategy employed a combination of controlled vocabulary and free-text terms. The core search string integrated review type terminology with methodological concepts:

- ("literature review" OR "systematic review" OR "scoping review" OR "integrative review" OR "meta-analysis" OR "rapid review" OR "realist review" OR "umbrella review" OR "critical review" OR "narrative review" OR "state-of-the-art review" OR "meta-synthesis" OR "bibliometric review" OR "mapping review") AND (methodology OR typology OR taxonomy OR classification OR "research methods" OR guidelines OR framework)

3.3.3. Other Methodological Considerations

The literature search covered publications until 2025, encompassing the period of major methodological development in evidence synthesis. Sources were included if they were peer-reviewed articles, book chapters from academic publishers, or methodological guidelines from established review organisations that explicitly defined, compared, or evaluated literature review types. Excluded were publications from predatory journals, non-peer-reviewed sources, student theses without subsequent publication, and conference abstracts lacking full methodological description. Study selection followed a two-stage process: title and abstract screening to identify potentially relevant publications, followed by full-text review against inclusion criteria with independent dual-reviewer assessment and consensus resolution for disagreements. Data extraction employed a standardised framework addressing definitional elements, epistemological orientation, research question types, search characteristics, quality assessment procedures, synthesis methods, reporting standards, disciplinary context, resource requirements, and methodological strengths and limitations.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from the systematic comparative analysis of literature review types, organised according to the study's four primary objectives. First, the definitional clarification establishes precise, operationalizable definitions for twenty major review types identified in contemporary academic research. Second, the taxonomic organisation presents a hierarchical classification system structured around four epistemological orientations: positivist-aggregative, interpretivist-constructivist, critical-transformative, and pragmatic-mixed. Third, the comparative analysis examines each review type across key methodological dimensions, including core selection drivers and operational design choices. Finally, the decision framework development synthesises these findings into an evidence-based tool for guiding review type selection. Throughout this section, results are integrated with discussion to contextualise findings within the broader methodological literature and highlight implications for research practice across disciplines.

4.1 Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis examines twenty literature review types across two dimensions: core selection drivers that determine review type fit, and operational design choices that govern implementation and reporting. Table 2 presents the complete comparative matrix, specifying for each review type the selection drivers indicating appropriateness and the design choices defining execution requirements.

Table 2: Comparative analysis of major literature review types with key characteristics

Review type	A. Core selection drivers (what makes this type fit)	B. Operational design choices (what you must do)
Systematic Review	Purpose: estimate/compare "what works" (or harms/diagnosis/prognosis). RQ: focused; often causal or evaluative; usually theory-testing. Evidence: primarily empirical (often quantitative; can include qualitative variants). Resources: high (team, screening, extraction, methods expertise). Epistemology: aggregative/objectivist. Common framework: PICO/PEO/PIRT variants. Audience: policy/clinical decisions; high-certainty guidance.	Search: exhaustive, reproducible. Appraisal: formal risk-of-bias. QA requirement: typically mandatory. Synthesis: meta-analysis where appropriate + narrative/tabular synthesis. Standards: protocol + PRISMA-family reporting. Outcome: effect estimates, certainty statements, evidence-to-decision implications.
Meta-Analysis Review	Purpose: estimate pooled effect(s) / moderators. RQ: very focused; quantitative, comparable outcomes. Evidence: quantitative effects only (or convertible). Resources: high statistical expertise; careful extraction. Epistemology: aggregative/objectivist. Framework: PICO/PEO typical. Audience: decisions, guidelines, theory testing.	Search: usually systematic/exhaustive (or explicitly bounded). Appraisal: formal RoB required. QA: mandatory. Synthesis: statistical pooling, heterogeneity, bias diagnostics. Standards: PRISMA + meta-analysis conventions. Outcome: pooled effect size(s), heterogeneity, and moderator map.
Scoping Review	Purpose: map breadth, clarify concepts, identify gaps. RQ: broad; descriptive; often theory-building/preparatory. Evidence: mixed (quant + qual + conceptual may appear). Resources: medium–high (large screening volumes). Epistemology: pragmatic/mixed; descriptive mapping. Framework: PCC. Audience: research agenda, curriculum/practice orientation, grant justification.	Search: comprehensive but may be bounded (databases/timeframe). Appraisal: none or descriptive/optional. QA: optional (often not fit-for-purpose if goal is mapping). Synthesis: narrative charting + evidence map/tables. Standards: PRISMA-ScR commonly used. Outcome: evidence map, gap analysis, typologies.
Mapping Review	Purpose: profile field structure and distribution (who/what/where). RQ: broad-to-moderate; descriptive; often "what exists and how is it distributed?". Evidence: empirical corpus metadata + light content coding. Resources: medium–high (screening + coding; visualisation). Epistemology: pragmatic/descriptive. Framework: often	Search: comprehensive and replicable; scope often bounded. Appraisal: typically none. QA: not fit-for-purpose (focus is distribution, not effects). Synthesis: classification + visual evidence maps (heatmaps/bubble charts). Standards: PRISMA-style flow

	PCC-like logic; not strictly required. Audience: research funders, agenda setting, strategic planning.	often adapted. Outcome: evidence atlas, gap matrix.
Narrative Review	Purpose: summarise/integrate and interpret; contextualise debates. RQ: broad; theory-building; descriptive/interpretive. Evidence: mixed but selected purposively (often conceptual + empirical). Resources: low–medium (single author feasible). Epistemology: interpretive/configurative. Framework: none mandatory (may use SALSA loosely). Audience: education, theory development, broad practice guidance.	Search: purposive/bounded; transparency varies. Appraisal: optional; often narrative critique. QA: optional. Synthesis: thematic/narrative integration. Standards: SANRA can structure reporting. Outcome: thematic storyline, conceptual framing, propositions.
Critical Review	Purpose: critique assumptions, expose limitations, reframe theory. RQ: often "what is wrong/missing/biased?". Evidence: conceptual + empirical; emphasis on argumentation. Resources: medium (deep reading, conceptual work). Epistemology: critical/transformative. Framework: DAE commonly fits. Audience: theory development, scholarly debate, research agenda.	Search: purposive to bounded-comprehensive (must justify). Appraisal: relevance + rigour (not only RoB). QA: optional/fit-for-purpose (depends on claim type). Synthesis: critical argument + conceptual model building. Standards: often narrative/critical conventions; method transparency expected. Outcome: critique + agenda + reconstructed framework.
Rapid Review	Purpose: timely evidence for decisions. RQ: focused; evaluative. Evidence: primarily empirical; often quantitative but may mix. Resources: constrained (time/team). Epistemology: aggregative/pragmatic (trade-offs explicit). Framework: PICO/PEO typical. Audience: policy/clinical/programmatic decisions under time pressure.	Search: bounded/streamlined (fewer databases, limits). Appraisal: simplified; may be partial. QA: optional but recommended where feasible. Synthesis: narrative + (optional) meta-analysis if feasible. Standards: PRISMA adapted; document shortcuts explicitly. Outcome: actionable brief, key findings + limits/bias risks.
Integrative Review	Purpose: integrate diverse evidence to build holistic understanding/new frameworks. RQ: moderately focused; often theory-building. Evidence: mixed (quant + qual + conceptual/grey). Resources: high (mixed-method synthesis expertise). Epistemology: pragmatic/mixed; integrative. Framework: often PICo/PEO variants. Audience: practice/curriculum guidance + theory refinement.	Search: comprehensive but may be bounded; include grey literature. Appraisal: relevance + rigour across designs. QA: often recommended (tool matched to design). Synthesis: framework/thematic + narrative integration (meta-analysis optional). Standards: PRISMA elements + qualitative reporting guidance as needed. Outcome: integrative model, taxonomy, multi-evidence conclusions.
Umbrella Review	Purpose: summarise prior reviews; provide top-level synthesis. RQ: broad but structured;	Search: systematic for reviews (databases + registries). Appraisal:

	evaluative at review-level. Evidence: reviews-only (systematic reviews/meta-analyses). Resources: medium–high (search, appraisal of reviews). Epistemology: aggregative (second-order). Framework: PICO/PICOS typical. Audience: guideline/policy stakeholders; strategic decisions.	formal appraisal of included reviews (review RoB). QA: mandatory. Synthesis: narrative comparison; sometimes re-analysis/overlap management. Standards: overview-of-reviews reporting guidance + PRISMA logic. Outcome: consolidated conclusions across reviews, gaps, consistency map.
Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (Qualitative Systematic Review)	Purpose: integrate meanings/experiences; explain barriers/facilitators. RQ: focused but interpretive; theory-building common. Evidence: qualitative studies (or qualitative components). Resources: medium–high (qualitative synthesis expertise). Epistemology: interpretive/configurative. Framework: PICo / SPICE / SPIDER / PEO. Audience: implementation/practice/curriculum; theory development.	Search: comprehensive or iterative (justify). Appraisal: relevance + rigour (qualitative appraisal). QA: usually expected (fit-for-purpose). Synthesis: thematic synthesis/meta-ethnography/framework synthesis. Standards: ENTREQ often used. Outcome: themes, conceptual model, explanatory propositions.
Realist Review	Purpose: explain "what works, for whom, in what contexts, why". RQ: explanatory/causal in generative sense; theory-driven. Evidence: mixed (quant + qual + policy/grey). Resources: high (interpretive + theory refinement). Epistemology: realist/explanatory. Framework: CMO. Audience: policy and implementation; programme design.	Search: purposive + iterative (theory-driven saturation). Appraisal: relevance + rigour (not only RoB). QA: fit-for-purpose; focus on contribution to theory. Synthesis: CMO configuration; programme theory refinement. Standards: RAMESES commonly referenced. Outcome: programme theory + context-sensitive recommendations.
Mixed Methods Review	Purpose: integrate effects + experiences/contexts; explain both "whether" and "how/why". RQ: dual (evaluative + explanatory); theory-building/testing. Evidence: mixed empirical. Resources: high (quant + qual synthesis capability). Epistemology: pragmatic/mixed. Framework: often parallel PICO + PICo (or integrated variant). Audience: policy/practice/curriculum decisions with implementation nuance.	Search: comprehensive; may be staged (quant then qual). Appraisal: design-appropriate tools; integrate at interpretation stage. QA: recommended/expected. Synthesis: convergent integrated synthesis; or segregated then integrated. Standards: PRISMA elements + qualitative standards where relevant. Outcome: integrated model + recommendations balancing efficacy and feasibility.
State-of-the-Art Review	Purpose: profile field frontier; "where we are/where next". RQ: focused on recent advances; future-facing; often theory-building. Evidence: recent high-impact empirical + conceptual. Resources: low–medium (expertise > team size).	Search: bounded (time-window; selective but justified). Appraisal: descriptive/critical; rarely formal RoB. QA: optional. Synthesis: narrative/critical synthesis around innovations and gaps. Standards:

	Epistemology: interpretive/pragmatic. Framework: SALSA often fits. Audience: research agenda, grant positioning, practice foresight.	SANRA can support structure. Outcome: frontier map, priorities, future research directions.
Systematised Review	Purpose: approximate systematic logic under constraints (often student-led). RQ: focused; evaluative. Evidence: empirical (often quantitative). Resources: constrained (single reviewer; limited databases). Epistemology: aggregative intent, but lower rigour. Framework: PICO/PEO typical. Audience: exploratory decision support; dissertation/thesis contexts (with caution).	Search: bounded (explicitly limited). Appraisal: partial or simplified. QA: optional but should be attempted if making evaluative claims. Synthesis: narrative and/or simple pooling (if appropriate). Standards: PRISMA-style reporting recommended; must disclose deviations/limitations. Outcome: provisional conclusions; clear bias/coverage caveats.
Bibliometric Review	Purpose: profile field quantitatively (trends, networks, influence). RQ: "how has the field evolved / what clusters exist?". Evidence: bibliographic metadata (citations, keywords). Resources: medium–high (data cleaning + tools). Epistemology: descriptive/objectivist (measurement of outputs). Framework: none required. Audience: research strategy, positioning, agenda setting.	Search: bounded to databases (Scopus/WoS, etc.), replicable query. Appraisal: none (not about study validity). QA: not fit-for-purpose. Synthesis: bibliometric mapping (co-citation, co-word, networks). Standards: PRISMA-like flow sometimes adapted for transparency. Outcome: maps, clusters, thematic evolution, influential actors.
Historical Review	Purpose: trace evolution, turning points, genealogy of ideas. RQ: broad; developmental; theory-building. Evidence: canonical texts + archival/seminal works. Resources: medium (deep reading; historiographic skill). Epistemology: interpretive (sometimes critical). Framework: often narrative/historiographic; periodisation logic. Audience: theory development; disciplinary self-understanding; curriculum framing.	Search: purposive with transparent rationale (canon + key debates). Appraisal: source criticism (credibility, context) rather than RoB. QA: fit-for-purpose (historical validity/interpretive rigour). Synthesis: narrative synthesis by periods/schools; genealogical mapping. Standards: narrative transparency (methods appendix advisable). Outcome: timeline, intellectual lineage, reinterpretation of "turns".
Conceptual Review	Purpose: refine constructs; clarify definitions; integrate conceptualisations. RQ: theory-building ("what is X? how has it been defined/measured?"). Evidence: conceptual + empirical operationalisations. Resources: medium–high (analytical abstraction). Epistemology: interpretive/configurative. Framework: concept-centric extraction (construct, dimensions, antecedents/outcomes). Audience: theory	Search: bounded-to-comprehensive (depends on construct maturity). Appraisal: relevance + conceptual coherence; empirical quality where measurement claims made. QA: optional but recommended if comparing measures. Synthesis: framework synthesis; construct taxonomy; conceptual model. Standards: transparent search +

	development; measurement and model building.	coding scheme. Outcome: refined definition(s), dimensionality, propositions, nomological network.
Theoretical Review	Purpose: compare theories; reconcile tensions; propose new theoretical integration. RQ: focused on explanation and theoretical adequacy. Evidence: theoretical frameworks + empirical tests as supporting material. Resources: medium–high (theory expertise). Epistemology: interpretive (sometimes realist/critical). Framework: theory-comparison matrix; mechanism logic. Audience: theory development; research agenda; advanced scholarship.	Search: purposive/comprehensive for key theoretical streams. Appraisal: theoretical coherence + explanatory power; evidence support. QA: fit-for-purpose (not RoB-centric unless claiming empirical dominance). Synthesis: configurative/theory synthesis; mechanism mapping. Standards: explicit inclusion logic; analytic transparency. Outcome: integrative framework, boundary conditions, propositions/hypotheses.
Methodological Review	Purpose: assess methods used in a field; diagnose strengths/weaknesses; recommend improvements. RQ: descriptive + evaluative ("how is X studied?"). Evidence: methods sections + design features across studies. Resources: medium–high (method expertise; coding). Epistemology: pragmatic/critical (quality improvement orientation). Framework: coding scheme for designs, measures, biases. Audience: research standards, doctoral training, editorial guidance.	Search: comprehensive or bounded but representative. Appraisal: relevance + rigour (focus on method quality). QA: central (but at method-feature level). Synthesis: methodological taxonomy + critique; frequency tables. Standards: transparent protocol desirable. Outcome: methodological gap map + best-practice recommendations.
Living Review	Purpose: keep an up-to-date synthesis as evidence changes. RQ: focused; decision-relevant; stable question with evolving evidence. Evidence: typically empirical (often trials/quant). Resources: sustained team/process; automation helpful. Epistemology: aggregative/objectivist. Framework: PICO/variants. Audience: guidelines/policy needing currency.	Search: exhaustive initial + scheduled updates. Appraisal: formal RoB maintained over time. QA: mandatory. Synthesis: updated meta-analysis/narrative as new studies arrive. Standards: PRISMA-LSR-type logic; versioning and transparency. Outcome: continuously updated effect estimates and conclusions; change logs.

4.2. Taxonomic Organisation

The hierarchical classification system organises twenty literature review types according to three interdependent dimensions: epistemological orientation, methodological structure, and functional purpose. This taxonomy recognises that review types are not merely procedural variants but embody distinct philosophical commitments regarding the nature of knowledge, evidence, and synthesis.

4.2.1 Classification Framework

The taxonomy employs epistemological orientation as the primary classification criterion, recognising four foundational stances toward knowledge synthesis. Within each epistemological cluster, review types are further differentiated by methodological structure (protocols, search strategies, appraisal requirements, synthesis techniques) and functional purpose (the knowledge-building objectives each type serves). Table 3 presents the complete taxonomic framework.

Table 3: Hierarchical taxonomy of literature review types

Epistemological Orientation	Review Types	Methodological Structure	Functional Purpose
Positivist-Aggregative	Systematic Review; Meta-Analysis; Rapid Review; Umbrella Review; Living Review	Pre-specified protocols; exhaustive systematic searching; formal risk-of-bias assessment; statistical or structured narrative synthesis; standardised reporting (PRISMA)	Effect estimation; causal inference; evidence aggregation; certainty assessment; clinical and policy decision support
Interpretivist-Constructivist	Narrative Review; Qualitative Evidence Synthesis; Integrative Review; Conceptual Review; Theoretical Review; Historical Review	Flexible or iterative protocols; purposive or comprehensive searching; relevance and rigour appraisal; thematic, narrative, or framework synthesis; interpretive reporting (ENTREQ, SANRA)	Meaning interpretation; theory generation; conceptual clarification; construct refinement; contextual understanding; intellectual genealogy
Critical-Transformative	Critical Review; Methodological Review	Purposive sampling of conceptually relevant works; explicit theoretical or methodological stance; critical appraisal of assumptions; argumentative synthesis	Assumption interrogation; paradigm critique; methodological evaluation; gap identification; framework reconceptualisation; research agenda transformation
Pragmatic-Mixed	Scoping Review; Mapping Review; Realist Review; Mixed Methods Review; State-of-the-Art Review; Bibliometric Review; Systematised Review	Adaptive protocols; comprehensive or bounded searching; optional or fit-for-purpose appraisal; diverse synthesis approaches (charting, CMO configuration, bibliometric mapping, convergent integration)	Evidence mapping; gap identification; mechanism explanation; field profiling; research prioritisation; actionable knowledge generation

4.2.2. Epistemological Clusters

The Positivist-Aggregative Orientation cluster assumes an objective reality amenable to systematic measurement and cumulative aggregation. Reviews within this orientation

prioritise reproducibility through pre-specified protocols, comprehensive searching to minimise selection bias, formal risk-of-bias assessment using standardised tools, and statistical synthesis where appropriate. The systematic review represents the methodological archetype, with meta-analysis providing quantitative precision, rapid reviews offering accelerated synthesis under time constraints, umbrella reviews aggregating review-level evidence, and living reviews maintaining currency through continuous updating. These types serve evaluative functions requiring high-certainty evidence for clinical guidelines, policy decisions, and practice recommendations.

As for the Interpretivist-Constructivist Orientation cluster, it views knowledge as socially constructed, context-dependent, and irreducible to numerical aggregation. Reviews emphasise interpretive depth, thematic integration, and theoretical development over statistical precision. Narrative reviews provide expert synthesis of broad literatures; qualitative evidence syntheses employ meta-ethnography, thematic synthesis, or framework approaches to integrate experiential findings; integrative reviews combine diverse evidence types for holistic understanding; conceptual and theoretical reviews refine constructs and frameworks; historical reviews trace intellectual genealogies. Methodological flexibility permits iterative, responsive engagement with literature, acknowledging the situated nature of knowledge claims.

The Critical-Transformative Orientation cluster views review practice within evaluative frameworks that interrogate underlying assumptions, expose limitations, and propose reconceptualization's. Critical reviews adopt explicit theoretical stances to challenge prevailing interpretations and identify overlooked perspectives. Methodological reviews systematically assess research practices within fields, diagnosing strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for advancement. Both types employ purposive sampling focused on conceptually significant works rather than exhaustive coverage, with synthesis oriented toward scholarly debate and research agenda transformation rather than neutral description.

The Pragmatic-Mixed Orientation cluster adopts methodological pluralism in service of practical problem-solving, selecting synthesis approaches based on research question requirements rather than epistemological purity. Scoping reviews map evidence breadth and identify gaps; mapping reviews create visual categorisations of research landscapes; realist reviews examine context-mechanism-outcome configurations to explain intervention variability; mixed methods reviews integrate quantitative and qualitative findings through convergent, sequential, or embedded designs; state-of-the-art reviews profile field frontiers; bibliometric reviews quantify publication patterns and intellectual structures; systematised reviews approximate systematic methods under resource constraints. Knowledge value derives from utility and actionability across diverse stakeholder contexts.

4.2.3. Taxonomic Implications

This hierarchical taxonomy carries three implications for review practice. First, review type selection constitutes an epistemological commitment that shapes permissible knowledge claims; misalignment between epistemological orientation and research

objectives compromises synthesis coherence. Second, quality criteria must be orientation-specific: reproducibility and bias minimisation for positivist-aggregative reviews; interpretive depth and theoretical contribution for interpretivist-constructivist reviews; critical rigour and transformative potential for critical reviews; and pragmatic utility for mixed-orientation reviews. Third, the taxonomy reveals legitimate methodological diversity rather than a hierarchy of evidence; each orientation serves distinct knowledge-building functions that cannot be reduced to a single quality standard.

4.3. Decision Framework Development

The decision framework operationalises the taxonomic classification into a systematic tool for review type selection. The framework guides researchers through sequential decision points, aligning research context, objectives, and constraints with appropriate review methodologies. This section presents the framework structure, decision criteria, and application procedures.

4.3.1. Framework Structure

The decision framework comprises six sequential decision points (see Table 4), each addressing a critical dimension of review type selection. The framework operates through progressive refinement: initial decision points narrow the range of appropriate review types based on fundamental research characteristics, while subsequent points differentiate among remaining candidates based on methodological and contextual factors.

Table 4: Decision framework structure and sequencing

Decision Point	Dimension	Guiding Question
1	Research Purpose	What is the primary objective of the synthesis?
2	Research Question Characteristics	What is the nature, scope, and structure of the inquiry?
3	Evidence Type	What types of primary sources will be synthesised?
4	Resource Constraints	What time, expertise, and infrastructure are available?
5	Epistemological Stance	What assumptions about knowledge guide the inquiry?
6	Intended Audience and Application	Who will use the findings and for what purpose?

4.3.2. Decision Criteria

Each decision point employs specific criteria that map research characteristics to appropriate review types. Table 5 presents the complete decision matrix.

Table 5: Decision criteria and review type alignment.

Decision Point	Criterion	Indicated Review Types
1. Research Purpose	Estimate effects or effectiveness	Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis
	Map evidence breadth and gaps	Scoping Review, Mapping Review
	Explain mechanisms and context	Realist Review
	Integrate diverse evidence types	Integrative Review, Mixed Methods Review
	Critique assumptions and methods	Critical Review, Methodological Review
	Synthesise prior reviews	Umbrella Review
	Profile field structure and trends	Bibliometric Review, State-of-the-Art Review
2. Research Question	Focused, specific (PICO structure)	Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis, Rapid Review
	Broad, exploratory (PCC structure)	Scoping Review, Narrative Review
	Theory-driven explanatory (CMO)	Realist Review
	Interpretive, meaning-focused	Qualitative Evidence Synthesis, Narrative Review
	Concept clarification or theory building	Conceptual Review, Theoretical Review
3. Evidence Type	Quantitative studies only	Meta-Analysis, Systematic Review
	Qualitative studies only	Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
	Mixed quantitative and qualitative	Mixed Methods Review, Integrative Review, Realist Review
	Systematic reviews only	Umbrella Review
	Publication metadata	Bibliometric Review
4. Resource Constraints	Limited time (< 3 months)	Rapid Review, Narrative Review, Systematised Review
	Moderate time (3–9 months)	Scoping Review, Integrative Review, Critical Review
	Substantial time (> 9 months)	Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis, Realist Review
5. Epistemological Stance	Positivist (objective truth)	Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis, Umbrella Review
	Interpretivist (constructed meaning)	Qualitative Evidence Synthesis, Narrative Review, Integrative Review
	Critical (transformative)	Critical Review, Methodological Review
	Pragmatic (utility-focused)	Scoping Review, Realist Review, Mixed Methods Review
6. Intended Audience	Clinical or policy decision-makers	Systematic Review, Rapid Review, Umbrella Review
	Research community (agenda setting)	Scoping Review, Mapping Review, Critical Review
	Theory development	Integrative Review, Conceptual Review, Theoretical Review
	Programme implementation	Realist Review, Mixed Methods Review

4.3.3. Application Procedure

The framework is applied through the following systematic procedure:

1) Initial Screening: Assess research purpose (Decision Point 1) to identify the primary cluster of appropriate review types.
2) Question Analysis: Evaluate research question characteristics (Decision Point 2) to refine the candidate set based on question scope and structure.
3) Evidence Assessment: Determine evidence type (Decision Point 3) to further narrow candidates based on source material compatibility.
4) Feasibility Evaluation: Assess resource constraints (Decision Point 4) to eliminate review types exceeding available capacity.
5) Epistemological Alignment: Confirm epistemological stance (Decision Point 5) to ensure philosophical coherence between assumptions and methods.
6) Audience Consideration: Evaluate intended audience requirements (Decision Point 6) to select the review type best suited to stakeholder needs.
7) Final Selection: Select the review type appearing consistently across all applicable decision points or prioritise based on the most critical constraints.

4.3.4. Application Examples

The following three cases demonstrate systematic application of the decision framework across diverse research contexts, illustrating how progression through the six decision points yields methodologically appropriate review type recommendations.

Case 1: A health researcher investigating whether cognitive behavioural therapy reduces depression symptoms in adolescents.
- Purpose: Estimate effectiveness → Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis
- Question: Focused, PICO-structured → Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis
- Evidence: Quantitative RCTs → Meta-Analysis
- Resources: Substantial (12 months, team) → Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis
- Epistemology: Positivist → Systematic Review, Meta-Analysis
- Audience: Clinical decision-makers → Systematic Review
  Recommendation: Systematic review with meta-analysis.

Case 2: An education scholar exploring how teachers experience the implementation of technology-enhanced learning.
- Purpose: Understand meaning and experience → Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
- Question: Interpretive, phenomenological → Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
- Evidence: Qualitative studies → Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
- Resources: Moderate (6 months) → Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
- Epistemology: Interpretivist → Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
- Audience: Theory development → Integrative Review, Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
  Recommendation: Qualitative evidence synthesis using thematic synthesis or meta-ethnography.

Case 3: A policy analyst examining what contextual factors influence the success of community health worker programmes.

- Purpose: Explain mechanisms and context → Realist Review
- Question: Theory-driven, CMO-structured → Realist Review
- Evidence: Mixed quantitative and qualitative → Realist Review, Mixed Methods Review
- Resources: Substantial (10 months) → Realist Review
- Epistemology: Pragmatic/realist → Realist Review
- Audience: Programme implementation → Realist Review
  Recommendation: Realist review following RAMESES guidelines.

4.3.5. Framework Limitations and Adaptations

The decision framework provides systematic guidance but does not preclude methodological adaptation. Three limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, research contexts may require hybrid approaches combining elements from multiple review types; in such cases, the framework identifies the primary methodological orientation while permitting justified modifications. Second, disciplinary conventions may favour specific review types regardless of framework recommendations; researchers should balance framework guidance with field-specific expectations. Third, emerging review methodologies may not yet be fully captured within the framework; periodic updating ensures continued relevance as evidence synthesis methods evolve.

5. Conclusions

This study systematically addressed the persistent taxonomic ambiguity surrounding literature review types through four interconnected contributions. First, the definitional clarification established precise, operationalizable definitions for twenty major literature review types, providing researchers with clear conceptual boundaries that distinguish each approach based on epistemological assumptions, methodological protocols, and synthesis strategies. Second, the taxonomic organisation presented a hierarchical classification system structured around four epistemological orientations (positivist-aggregative, interpretivist-constructivist, critical-transformative, and pragmatic-mixed) enabling researchers to align their philosophical commitments with methodologically coherent review approaches.

Third, the comparative analysis systematically examined each review type across two fundamental dimensions: core selection drivers that determine review type fit (research purpose, question characteristics, evidence type, resource constraints, epistemological stance, common frameworks, and intended audience) and operational design choices that govern implementation (search comprehensiveness, appraisal requirements, quality assessment, synthesis approach, reporting standards, and typical outcomes). This dual-dimensional framework provides actionable guidance for both review selection and execution. Fourth, the evidence-based decision framework operationalises these findings through six sequential decision points, enabling

researchers to systematically navigate from research context to appropriate methodology selection.

The findings carry three principal implications. Methodologically, review type selection constitutes an epistemological commitment that fundamentally shapes permissible knowledge claims; misalignment between epistemological orientation and research objectives compromises synthesis coherence. Evaluatively, quality criteria must be orientation-specific rather than universal; reproducibility and bias minimisation for positivist-aggregative reviews, interpretive depth and theoretical contribution for interpretivist-constructivist reviews, critical rigour for transformative reviews, and pragmatic utility for mixed-orientation approaches. Conceptually, the taxonomy reveals legitimate methodological diversity serving distinct knowledge-building functions that cannot be reduced to hierarchical quality rankings.

Future research should empirically validate the decision framework across disciplinary contexts, examine how emerging technologies influence review conduct across epistemological traditions, and periodically update the taxonomy as methodological innovation continues. The framework limitations, including the inherent tension between comprehensive classification and disciplinary adaptation, and the challenge of hybrid approaches that combine elements from multiple review types, warrant acknowledgement without undermining the framework's practical utility.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that literature review types embody fundamentally different approaches to knowledge synthesis, distinguished not merely by procedural variations but by underlying epistemological commitments. The proposed taxonomy and decision framework provide systematic guidance for aligning research questions, philosophical orientations, methodological choices, and knowledge claims, ultimately strengthening evidence synthesis quality across academic disciplines.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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