

The power of synthesis: literature reviews in entrepreneurship research

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Entrepreneurship research continues to grow and bring valuable insights for aspiring entrepreneurs, new ventures and small business managers. This outstanding progress leads to a diversity of constructs, theories, industries, business models, types of firms and other topics of investigation in the entrepreneurship literature (Lee *et al.*, 2024). As the entrepreneurship field progresses, there is an increasingly important need to bring order to this variety of emerging topics of interest, take stock of this rising knowledge and highlight valuable opportunities for entrepreneurship scholars to continue the progress on these diverse topics. This high demand for a consolidation of extant knowledge is particularly important for rising research topics in which publications are relatively low (e.g. Cortes and Lee, 2021; Javadian *et al.*, 2023). Thorough critical reviews of the literature will spark not only future research but also provide clear directions for meaningful contributions.

This special issue aimed to encourage authors to develop concise literature reviews that focus on synthesizing specific and emerging topics in entrepreneurship and providing clear guidance for future research. We solicited reviews on a diverse range of subjects, including emerging or established constructs, theories, contexts, research methodologies, themes and frameworks and received 36 submissions, from which we carefully selected 3 exemplary papers. The following section underscores the significance of literature reviews in entrepreneurship and provides valuable guidance for authors aspiring to contribute to the field.

Importance of concise literature reviews in entrepreneurship

Consolidation of emerging knowledge. Literature reviews serve as an essential tool for consolidating existing knowledge within any field of research. As a field of research grows larger, however, we normally see the emergence of increasingly specific topics. At this stage, we argue that insightful consolidation can be best achieved when literature reviews focus on synthesizing narrow topics. Such efforts are essential considering the growth of entrepreneurship research in the past few decades, which has expanded rapidly and diversified into numerous areas (Ahlstrom and Lee, 2024; Lee *et al.*, 2023). For example, as we further explain below, the three published studies in this special issue concentrated on relatively narrow topics within entrepreneurship: resourcefulness, immigration and harmful implications. Focusing on such specific topics allows the authors to fully synthesize existing theories, build clear theoretical frameworks, provide an overview of established findings and offer a clear picture of the state of knowledge.

While emerging topics may have a smaller body of literature, this presents a valuable opportunity for authors to establish their voice and contribute meaningfully to the field. At *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship*, we recognize that the contribution of a review is not determined by the quantity of studies analyzed but rather by the authors' ability to motivate the need for and value of consolidation within a specific topic.



Future research directions. A concise literature review must provide a comprehensive overview of established findings and highlight areas where research is limited or where new insights are needed. By synthesizing multiple studies, authors can develop a clear mental structure of the state of a field of research. From this established structure, authors can identify the main areas of focus and raise pertinent research questions that have yet to be answered. By paying close attention to untested assumptions and underdeveloped theories, authors demonstrate a solid understanding of the literature and can offer clear explanations behind their suggestions for future research. By examining underlying premises, questioning theoretical steps, and considering context applicability, authors can move toward specific suggestions around contexts, methods or variables that address established limitations.

Practical advice on conducting review research

Clear definition of scope. Clearly define the scope and objectives of the literature review from the outset. This includes specifying the constructs, theories, contexts and methodologies to be covered. A well-defined scope ensures that the review remains focused and relevant and prevents the common pitfall of becoming overly broad or diffuse.

Systematic search strategy. Develop and follow a systematic search strategy (Hiebl, 2023; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) to identify all relevant literature. This should involve multiple databases to ensure comprehensive coverage and may include specific criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Transparency in the search process allows for the reproducibility of the review and enhances its credibility.

Data reduction versus data expansion through new technologies. One of the common features of systematic reviews is data reduction. This is where filtering criteria are applied to make large numbers of studies more manageable for processing by a human being – this is a problem new technology, such as machine learning, might help to solve (Robledo *et al.*, 2023). Robledo *et al.* (2023) showed how machine learning could replicate some elements of human-conducted systemic literature reviews but relies on large volumes of data to do so. They concluded that while not a replacement for scholars' agency, machine learning tools can help verify the structures and conclusions of their systematic reviews by being able to analyze considerably more volumes of data across a complex, multidisciplinary field such as entrepreneurship.

Bibliometric tools. Utilize bibliometric analysis to provide a quantitative overview of trends in the literature, such as key authors, influential papers and emerging themes. This can complement the qualitative insights from the narrative review and offer a more rounded understanding of the field's trajectory. Go beyond merely describing the landscape of the field. A deficiency in far too many bibliometric-driven literature reviews is describing the growth trend, describing which journals publish the largest number of works, how many studies are qualitative or quantitative and so on, without extracting or providing any real knowledge from what such "insights" are meant to tell the reader. In any literature review, words are scarce: do not waste them on mundane descriptions.

Critical analysis and synthesis. Rather than merely summarizing existing studies, emphasize critical analysis and synthesis of the literature. This involves comparing and contrasting findings, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and integrating results to draw coherent conclusions about the field. Literature should not descend into a state of bullet points converted into prose, where papers, studies or findings are discussed individually with no synthesis or critical analysis within or across themes.

Find your voice, talk to the interested reader. Literature reviews are meant to inform the reader, fast-tracking their knowledge and understanding of the subject under review in the context of the field. The best literature reviews provide a synthesis of how knowledge has developed and progressed in a field in relation to the phenomenon or subject of interest in your review. For this reason, mundane descriptions and summaries add little value to the interested reader. Provide your voice by giving meaning, drawing out implications, bringing to the fore

problems, puzzles and deficits in existing knowledge and providing insights (tangible steps if you will) on what interested readers can or should do next.

Implications and future directions, with clear ways forward. Ensure that each review concludes with clear implications for theory and practice and detailed suggestions for future research. Be generous: a good review should spark interest in the phenomenon and galvanize efforts to address its problems, puzzles and deficits; a bad review is generic, offering suggestions that could apply to almost any field (e.g. calling for new contexts, new research methods or new variables) and leaving the reader somewhat informed but feeling helpless or doubtful about what to do next. Such generic suggestions may signal to readers that the review and synthesis were performed superficially. Instead, provide specific and meaningful directions by delving deeper into untested assumptions and underdeveloped theories. These steps not only add value to the review but also guide upcoming studies in a constructive manner, helping readers understand what actions they can take next.

Special issue: concise literature reviews in entrepreneurship

Having highlighted the importance of concise literature reviews in entrepreneurship and provided practical advice for authors, we now present a summary of the three accepted papers that exemplify these principles.

First, [Lange et al. \(2024\)](#) present a comprehensive and valuable systematic literature review on entrepreneurial resourcefulness (ER), which refers to how entrepreneurs generate and deploy resources to pursue opportunities under resource-constrained environments and conditions. The review synthesizes findings from 31 peer-reviewed studies, offering us a categorization of ER at four levels: individual, organizational, contextual and effectual. The study discusses that ER is often conceptualized through various lenses, such as entrepreneurial resilience, bootstrapping, bricolage and resource-stretching. The thematic analysis also highlights the fragmentation of ER research, addressing the need for greater cohesion in the topic. [Lange et al. \(2024\)](#) also propose seven promising research avenues, including investigating causal relationships of ER, examining its distinct characteristics and exploring its interplay with personality traits, social capital, organizational culture and societal conditions. Importantly, the paper emphasizes both the positive impacts of ER (e.g. increased venture success) and the potential negative outcomes (e.g. ethical dilemmas). This review significantly contributes to the growing body of ER research and sets a well-structured foundation for future studies.

Second, [Chen et al. \(2024\)](#) perform a literature review on transnational diaspora entrepreneurship (TDE), the phenomenon in which individuals emigrate from their home country and start new businesses while maintaining business connections with their home country. Utilizing both traditional literature search methods and innovative topic modeling techniques, the authors analyze 81 peer-reviewed articles to synthesize TDE research. Key findings include the lack of a widely agreed-upon definition for TDE, an over-reliance on qualitative case studies and a need for more quantitative research. The paper also identifies four major themes in existing literature, such as the use of different terminologies to describe similar phenomena and the role of diaspora entrepreneurs in creating socioeconomic links between nations. Additionally, the authors propose a typology for categorizing different forms of TDE based on the location and nature of entrepreneurial activities. This review adds new insights into the complexities of TDE and provides important recommendations on interdisciplinary research efforts.

Lastly, [Pérez-Morón et al. \(2024\)](#) explore the “dark side” of entrepreneurship by synthesizing research on destructive, unethical and unproductive aspects of entrepreneurial behavior. Through an exploratory literature review using co-citation bibliographic analysis as well as thematic analysis, the study introduces the “dark entrepreneurship trinity,” consisting of three main themes: ethical complexity, institutional navigation and conflict entrepreneurship. The review finds that institutional navigation, which refers to

entrepreneurs' ability to maneuver through complex and ambiguous regulatory frameworks, plays a central role in dark entrepreneurship. The authors also highlight the interconnectedness of ethical dilemmas, institutional strategies and the challenges of entrepreneurship in conflict zones. By synthesizing insights from 86 peer-reviewed studies, the paper offers a comprehensive view of how dark entrepreneurship manifests across industries and regions. Finally, the authors propose a future research agenda focused on empirical studies to better understand the drivers of destructive entrepreneurship, with particular emphasis on individual personality traits, socio-economic conditions and institutional weaknesses.

Summary

In this special issue of the *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship*, we explored the crucial role of literature reviews in entrepreneurship research. Recognizing the field's rapid expansion and the increasing complexity of its research topics, we emphasized literature reviews as a means to consolidate knowledge, identify research gaps and provide actionable guidance for both theory and practice. By focusing on concise systematic reviews, this issue not only enhances our understanding of the current status of various entrepreneurship topics but also shapes future directions in entrepreneurship studies. Through a rigorous selection process, we chose three papers that best represent our call for clear, insightful syntheses of diverse research topics.

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