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# **Looking back, Going forward: the role and nature of systematic literature reviews in social media marketing: a meta-analysis**

## **Abstract**

Systematic literature reviews adopt a specified and transparent approach and hence have particular value in scoping the literature in a field or sub-field. However, there has been little critical comment on their purpose and processes. This paper seeks to address this gap, by undertaking a meta-analysis of systematic literature reviews in the field of social media marketing. Social media marketing has spawned a number of recent literature reviews that act as a useful basis for the meta-analysis. This analysis suggests that the espoused purposes of authors of systematic literature reviews include: making sense (of research in a field), developing a concept matrix/taxonomy, and supporting both research and practice. The systematic literature review process typically commences with research aims or questions, proceeds to the planning and execution of search strategies, before refining the dataset by applying exclusion criteria. Most authors then conduct a bibliographic analysis of this final dataset, prior to developing a concept matrix to support a thematic analysis of the dataset. This is then used to inform an agenda for further research. This article offers a resource to inform practice and acts as a platform for further critical debate regarding the nature and value of systematic literature reviews.

**Keywords:** Literature review; systematic literature review; social media marketing; marketing

## **1. Introduction**

Literature reviews are a familiar aspect of the research process. For example, the type of literature review that is typically part of every research article, referred to in this article as a narrative literature review, is seen to have a number of functions. These include: supporting the identification of a research topics, question or hypothesis; identifying the literature to which the research will make a contribution, and contextualising the research within that literature; building an understanding of theoretical concepts and terminology; facilitating the building of a bibliography or list of the sources that have been consulted; suggesting potentially useful research methods; and, analysing and interpreting results (Rowley and Slack, 2004). The process associated with the creation of these reviews typically has three stages: initial review (at the beginning of the research process), ongoing monitoring of the literature as the research topic and processes evolve, and re-visiting the literature in the writing-up phase. Although there are recognised search strategies associated with such reviews, such as citation pearl growing, briefsearch, building blocks, and successive fractions (Rowley and Slack, 2004), the detail of the processes that lead to narrative literature reviews, including for example, selection and evaluation criteria are rarely reported (Wuff, 2016).

Less familiar than narrative reviews, but being increasingly recognised for their value, are systematic literature reviews or systematic reviews of the literature (SLRs). Such reviews differ from narrative literature reviews in both purpose and process. Importantly, systematic literature reviews are seen to offer a contribution to knowledge in their own right, are whilst they can be presented as part of a research article reporting empirical research, they are often published as a separate article. Their purpose is to identify key contributions in a field, and to identify patterns in the knowledge base (Webster and Watson, 2002). Typically, this involves profiling the research on a specified topic in terms of its bibliographic characteristics (e.g time span, key journals), and developing a concept matrix (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010) of key themes to aid in summarising the current state-of-the-art of the research in a field and to propose a future research agenda for that field. In terms of process, SLR's are characterised by their adoption of a specified replicable, scientific and transparent process to the identification of articles in a field, if necessary, the refinement of any initial dataset, and the sense-making associated with the development of a narrative associated with the field (Tranfield et al., 2003). In other words, SLR's typically have a 'methodology' section, and hence can be regarded as literature-based research projects offering a contribution to knowledge in their own right.

## **2. Contribution and approach**

Despite the increasing numbers of SLRs being published, no comparative or critical evaluation has been conducted into the practice associated with SLR's in the marketing discipline. Hence, the aim of this paper is to undertake a meta-analysis of the purpose and processes associated with SLR's. It achieves this through a combination of a meta-analysis of some recent SLRs in the social media marketing field, and reflection on the authors' experiences in conducting and seeking to publish SLR's. The SLR's included have been identified through a purposive sampling process, taking into account: date of publication (2014 onwards), reputation of the journal in which they are published, and the centrality of their topic to social media marketing research and practice. This should help to refine the practices associated with SLR's, and thereby enhance the rigour with which marketing researchers 'look back to go forward' (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Purpose of SLR's

Table 1 examines the purposes for which the systematic literature reviews in the dataset were compiled. It is based on the authors' statements of their espoused intentions. The most commonly mentioned purposes are: making sense, developing a concept matrix or taxonomy, and helping researchers and practitioners. For example, Lamberton and Stephen (2016) suggest: *'Our contribution lies in helping researchers...and... developing new research directions to advance the literature and offer relevant insights for marketing practice'*, whereas Effing and Spil (2016) aim to *'develop a framework for the analysis of social media strategies'*(p.1). Busalim and Hussin (2016) seek to *'explore the social commerce concept'... and [thereby] to provide a mind map of the s-commerce themes for researchers who want to recognise the topic areas where more research is needed...[and] for practitioners, [their] review brings them up to date on the s-commerce activities and the current state of s-commerce and its historical development'* (p.1076). On audiences, Baethge et al., (2016) seek to inform not only researchers and practitioners, but also editors, and reviewers, by providing them with an account of the current state-of-the art. In their review and synthesis of the literature on online word-of-mouth, King et al., (2014) refer to examining 'what we know' and posing critical research questions as a guide to 'what we need to know', very much in line with *'Looking back, Going forward'*.

Other authors seek to draw together a fragmented research literature. For example, Ketonen-Oksi et al. (2016), in their review of social media based value creation, seek to make sense of a *'research literature ... [that is] still fragmented into case studies of various micro-level study contexts'* (p.2). Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) suggest that in respect of consumer behaviour in social commerce, *'current research is rather fragmented, which makes it difficult to derive meaningful and conclusive implications'* (p.95). In the context of eWOM, King et al. (2014) also highlight that fragmentation may also be encountered as a result of the use of different research methods. Ngai et al (2015), take a slightly different perspective, using a SLR to *'understand the causal relationships among different research constructs'* and identifying theories, conceptual models and frameworks used in social media research.

#### 3.2 Process

On the basis of a review of the phases and their processes adopted by the authors of the SLR's in our dataset, six phases were identified: formulating research objectives and questions; developing search strategies and identifying relevant documents; formulating and applying exclusion criteria; bibliographic analysis of the final dataset; development of a concept matrix and thematic analysis; theory analyses, and the development of a future research agenda(Table 2). Some of these clearly parallel the purposes of an SLR as listed in Table 1. Some SLR's also included other phases such as selecting research questions and applying methodological screening criteria (Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016). More details on the processes and approaches adopted with regard to each of these processes are elaborated below:

***Formulating research objectives and questions.*** Most SLR's identify specific aims and objectives and/or research questions. For example, Effing and Spil (2016) identify their objective as being *'to discover key elements of social media strategies and review existing frameworks, methods, theories and standards for the development of social media strategies'* (p.2), whilst Busalim and Hussin (2016)'s objective is to *'explore the s-commerce'* concept.

**Search strategies and identifying relevant documents.** Virtually all of the articles in the dataset identified the timeframe over which a search was conducted. For example, Lambertson and Stephen (2014) examined articles published between 2000 and 2015, whilst, Baethge et al. (2016), after a careful assessment of the timeline associated with social commerce searched between 2007 and 2014, On the other hand, Effing and Spil (2016) do not identify any specific timespan. Timelines can also be useful in mapping the evolution of a research field (Busalim et al., 2016).

There is a very strong consensus, consistent with the authoritative guidelines on conducting SLR's that there is a need to specify search strategies in terms of sources used and search strategies, although the approaches used and the details provided vary considerably. In terms of sources, most authors used a selection on the following databases: EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Social Sciences Citation Index, Scopus, Web of Science, ABI-Inform, Business Source Premier, Science Direct, Emerald, Wiley Online Library. This wide range of databases is reflective of the inter-disciplinary nature of social media marketing and the need to search across literature in several disciplines (King et al., 2014).

Some authors either supplemented or substituted their search of major databases with direct searching of highly regarded or ranked journals in the field (e.g. Baethge et al., 2016; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016), or through following-up citations of the articles identified through the search process in the databases (e.g. Busalim and Hussin, 2016), otherwise referred to as snowball searching (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Busalim and Hussin (2016) made use of Mendeley to eliminate duplicates.

Search strategies were developed based on key words. Some authors report on a list of typical keywords (e.g King et al., 2014), whereas others, such as Baethge et al. (2016) provide a detailed analysis of the iterative development of their set of keywords and search strategies through identifying initial articles. Most authors report on the development of synonym and word variant lists (e.g. 'social media', Web 2.0, enterprise 2.0. (Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016)). Interestingly, Lambertson and Stephen (2016), when extending their search outside of the academic literature to white papers and industry reports, converted their '*academic search terms into keywords that were more likely to appear in the business press*'. Finally, several authors offer some kind of report on the results from their various research strategies (e.g. Effing and Spil,2016; Lambertson and Stephen, 2014; Baethge et al., 2016).

**Formulating and applying exclusion criteria** Most authors used exclusion criteria. Most common amongst these were: book chapters, reports and conference proceedings '*due to the variability in their respective peer review processes and more restricted availability*' (Alves et al., 2016, p.1030). Refereed journal articles were regarded as representing '*state-of-the-art research outputs*' (Ngai et al. 2015, p.34). Some reviews included only empirical articles (e.g. Ngai et al., 2015) or even more restrictively, articles with a defined sample and empirical methodology (King et al., 2014). Inclusion criteria typically involve: full-text available, published within the selected period of time, relevant to the topic of the review, listed in the selected databases, and written in English (Busalim and Hussin, 2016; Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016). Duplicates are eliminated from the dataset. Finally, authors of most SLR's will need to 'manually analyse each article, examining its title, abstract and, possibly, full text to determine its suitability for inclusion in the final dataset (Baethge et al, 2016; Effing and Spil, 2016), although several of the articles did not report on this stage. It is usual at this stage for authors to report the number of articles remaining in the dataset and being taken forward for further analysis in the next two stages.

***Bibliographic analysis of the final dataset*** Bibliographic analyses of the final dataset are often included to offer a profile of the selected articles. These may show: the number of articles published annually over the period of the reviews (Abed et al, 2015; Busalim and Hussin, 2016; Effing and Spil, 2016; Lamberton and Stephen, 2014; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016); research strategies and methods (Alves et al., 2016; Busalim and Hussin, 2016; Effing and Spil, 2016; Ketonen-Oksi et al., 2016; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016) journals (Baethge et al., 2016; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016); theoretical foundations (Busalim and Hussin, 2016; Ngai et al., 2015 Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016).

In some instances, this is coupled with the identification of key themes (see below), to support the analysis of the profile of the dataset, not just as a whole, but with references to specific themes or topics. For example, Lamberton and Stephen (2014) use this approach to identify three eras of digital, social and mobile marketing, within which they discuss progress under a number of themes, whilst Baethge et al.(2016) couple reporting on date with reporting on disciplines (marketing, electronic commerce, IS conference and IS journals). In addition, some studies (e.g. Alves et al., 2016) conduct a count by theme, to support a subsequent discussion of the literature on a specific theme.

***Development of a concept matrix and thematic analysis*** A key step towards identifying the topics that might merit further attention is the development of a concept matrix of the key themes covered by the literature in the dataset. This enables the identification of important research questions in the field, and an assessment of which questions would benefit from further research. Different authors use different approaches to develop and use this concept matrix. Lamberton and Stephen (2016), for example, used a combination of date of publication and key word analysis, to identify three eras and the key research topics within those eras. The last of these eras they labelled ‘the age of Social Media’, and discussed the following themes within this era: Individual self-expression as a means of amplifying or dulling marketing actions, user-generated content as a marketing tool, capturing marketing intelligence in specific social media platform. In developing their research themes, Baethge et al. (2016) analysed and adapted categories of research themes proposed by other authors writing on social commerce. Their categories were: user behaviour, website design, enterprise strategies, social process, adoption strategy, business model, security and privacy policies, network structure, firm performance, and overview. It is unclear how Busalim and Hussin (2016) surface their taxonomy of research themes on social commerce, but they more or less replicate those used by Baethge et al. (2016). Similarly, it is unclear how Alves et al. (2016) surfaced their key themes, but they present two main groups of themes, firm/organisation and consumer, and sub-themes within these areas. For firm /organization: degree of use and facility of using social media; optimisation, measurement, and impact of social media marketing strategies; abusive/unethical use. For consumer: increased consumption; use, search, and a share of information; attitude toward the brand; and influence among consumers. Zhang and Beyouncef (2016) adopt a rather different approach in their review of consumer behaviour in social commerce. Their analysis is informed by the stimulus-organism-response model of human behaviour, coupled with the five stage consumer decision-making process (need recognition, search, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase). These theories are used to distil the literature and to propose a ‘complete theoretical framework for consumer behaviour in social commerce’. King et al (2014) also use a previous theoretical framework to help to structure both their review of the previous literature (‘what we know’) and their proposals for future research (‘what we need to know’) in four quadrants associated with antecedents of eWOM Senders, consequences for eWOM senders, the antecedents of the receiver, and the consequences to the receiver. Adopting yet another variation, Ngai et al (2015), with an interest in causality between research constructs in social

media research, proposes some categories of attributes, each with sub-categories. These categories are: antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes; they are used as the basis of a causal chain framework for social media research.

***Development of a future research agenda*** Most articles suggest an agenda for future research on the basis of their literature review. As Baethge *et al* (2016) assert, ‘by providing a research agenda, we hope that our results will stimulate and guide future research in this exciting field’ (p.1). Some researchers use the themes in the concept matrix to analyse and report on past research, and to assist in framing a future research agenda. For example, King *et al* (2014), as described above offer an elaborate research agenda (‘what we need to know’) which embraces eleven specific research questions. Busalim and Hussin (2016) offer a simple research agenda for s-commerce, with three key themes: theoretical considerations, customer behaviour considerations, and design and implementation considerations, each with three or four related research questions. Other authors offer a narrative account, without the identification of specific themes. For example, Alves *et al.* (2016) offers a narrative account that identifies a number of future lines of research, embracing both consumer and firm behaviours, whilst Ngai *et al* (2015) offer a narrative discussion of future research directions, organized under the following four headings: organisation orientation, social power, cultural differences and impacts of social media. In contrast, Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) are less prescriptive; they do not specifically propose an agenda for further research, but rather suggest that their theoretical framework may inspire related research in the future.

### *3.3 Discussion and Reflections from Experience*

This article has sought to demonstrate the extent to which undertaking an SLR is very different from developing a narrative literature review. Indeed, it should be evident that conducting such a review in an area in which the field has a significant literature base is a ‘research project’ in its own right, which demands resources and time as well as a specific suite of research expertise. From the perspective of an author, the downside of investing effort in an SLR is that not all research assessment and performance processes (in universities) will accord the same status to SLR articles as they might to an ‘empirical’ article. More positively, however, a well-crafted review on a topical theme has a very good chance of attracting a considerable number of citations, which builds the reputation and visibility of both the author(s) and the journal in which it is published. The other significant gain from taking time to focus on the past literature in a structured way is that the authors have a very clear picture of the research gaps in their field, often both in terms of topics and methodological traditions, on which to base their future research plans.

Turning to the process of conducting the review, it is important, as with all research to commence with a pilot study. In other words, to conduct one or more preliminary searches to scope the terminology of the field, to gauge the extent of the knowledge base, and, most importantly, to identify any previous literature reviews in the field. However, none of the authors report on this stage. The pilot study should lead to decisions regarding the scope of the search, in terms of, for example, topic and date range. In addition, the choice of search engine is pivotal, and may depend on the focus of SLR. As this review demonstrates there are many decisions to be made regarding the purpose, scope and process of an SLR, and whilst there is some agreement as to the main steps, there is also considerable variation in practice. For example, from the practical perspective there are choices to be made on the best database and on the search terms and strategies to be used. In addition, undertaking a search using a range of databases will generate many irrelevant articles, including duplicates. Sifting this dataset is a significant task. Next decisions need to be made regarding the inclusion criteria to be applied, and in judgments of relevance to the topic. Again, this review shows that different

authors use different inclusion criteria. For example, most SLR's seek to focus on articles in academic journals, but there are debates regarding the inclusion of conference papers (that might be more current than some journal papers), and books and practitioner articles (especially if the purpose of the SLR is to inform practice as well as research). Whilst there is an expectation that the search terms and search statements used in an SLR and the inclusion criteria are explicitly stated, leading to a certain level of transparency and replicability, the variability in how these processes are executed has considerable potential to undermine the espoused replicability of an SLR.

Next, authors of SLR's seek to make sense of the literature base. Typically, some kind of bibliographic profile is offered, showing, for example, the key journals in the field, the development of the field over time, research methodologies used, and key authors, but there is no consensus as to the relative importance of these profiles. On the other hand, there is a consensus that development of a concept matrix to identify the current research themes within a field, and to use this as a basis for recommendations for future research.

Reflecting more specifically on our own experience, we have found a key consideration, to be the identification of a journal for publication. Not all journals accept literature review-based papers, and some of those that do have a separate series, with their own editor. Some of these editors have clear views as to the topics on which they would like to see reviews published, and also may wish to offer advice on the shaping of a final draft of the article and provide feedback to the authors prior to formal submission. Another very interesting challenge is length. Generally, it is nigh on impossible to bring in a literature review based article at less than 12,000 words. This is largely due to the number of references (typically including in the word count) that any review of a significant literature base must necessarily include. Yet, many journals have maximum article lengths of around 8,000 words. This situation is difficult enough on first submission, but, in revising to respond to reviewers' comments alongside requests from editors not to expand the word limit, it becomes exceptionally challenging. Furthermore, our experience has been that some reviewers do not understand the SLR process, and may not appreciate that the SLR process can both miss articles and deliberately exclude articles, but rather sometimes expect anything they have encountered and regard as important to be included, even though it did not emerge in the dataset created through the SLR process. As Lambertson and Stephen (2016) in their *Journal of Marketing* paper suggest that the aim of an SLR 'is not to provide a comprehensive literature review of the growing body of DSSM work or to cite every article in this domain' (p. 146).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This article contributes to research by performing a meta-analysis of recent literature reviews in a specific area, social media marketing. The reviews vary in their specific focus, covering topics such as social media marketing, social commerce, social strategy, consumer behaviour in social commerce, and social media based value creation and business models. They also take different perspectives on the relative importance of theory, research and practice. Nevertheless, whilst there are some commonalities in their approach to an SLR, and common themes emerging regarding future research agendas, there is also a surprising level of disparity in both of these areas. Future research into the purpose, processes and contribution of SLRs in marketing would have the potential to develop good practice in the conduct of SLRs, and thereby improve the processes whereby researchers *look back to go forward*.



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**Table 1 - SLR Purpose**

<i>SLR Purpose</i>	<i>Abed et al. (2015)</i>	<i>Alves et al. (2016)</i>	<i>Baethge et al. (2016)</i>	<i>Busalim et al. (2016)</i>	<i>Effing and Spil (2016)</i>	<i>Ketonen-Oksi et al. (2016)</i>	<i>King et al. (2014)</i>	<i>Lamberton and Stephen (2016)</i>	<i>Ngai et al. (2015)</i>	<i>Zhang and Benyoucef, (2016)</i>	<b>Count</b>
<i>Making sense</i>		X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	8
<i>Research agenda</i>			X					X	X		3
<i>Synthesize perspectives</i>		X		X		X	X	X		X	6
<i>Understand evolution of a research domain</i>			X	X			X	X	X	X	6
<i>Develop a concept matrix/taxonomy</i>	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		8
<i>Establish rigour</i>			X	X				X		X	4
<i>Draw together a fragmented literature base</i>		X			X	X	X		X		5
<i>Identify theoretical perspectives</i>		X		X	X			X	X	X	6
<i>Help researchers and practitioners</i>	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
<i>Identify key issues</i>	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			7