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From Metrics to Meaning in Systematic Literature Reviews

Richard Yeaw Chong Seow[1,*]

[1]*Spectrum International University College, Selangor, Malaysia*

1. RETHINKING BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS IN SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEWS

The last ten years have been marked by a fast growth of academic literature in economics, sustainability, and innovation, which lead to the unorganized spread of knowledge through outlets and disciplines and creates fragmentation and conceptual vagueness. The problem of finding a study of relevant interest, critically evaluating its quality, and synthesizing the findings is becoming more and more difficult to researchers, making the task of deciding what evidence to use in future research and publications more challenging. It is thus the systematic literature reviews (SLRs) that have become necessary, as they offer structured and reproducible ways of systematizing the knowledge, setting up research contexts, explicating theoretical backgrounds, and finding gaps that will inform new avenues of inquiry (Manoj *et al.,* 2023; Seow, 2025a). SLRs reflect a range of protocols, including the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page *et al.,* 2021) and the Scientific Procedures and Rationales to Systematic Literature Reviews (SPAR-4-SLR) (Paul *et al.,* 2021), that transparency, comparability, and precision of methodology are ensured, unlike in narrative reviews, which are less rigorous and more selective. Properly implemented, they can not only synthesize previous knowledge but also open up new questions that have not been properly addressed and promote theoretical synthesis to promote academic discourse and facilitate meaningful innovations (Linnenluecke *et al.,* 2020). Although SLRs are particularly useful when conducting focused reviews with limited-sized data, they might not be effective when investigating a too wide question and requiring exhaustive coverage (Passas, 2024).

Bibliometric analysis is a more regular part of SLRs, which is explained by the necessity to deal with huge volumes of literature and trace the intellectual framework of highly dynamic disciplines (Passas, 2024). Whereas, some researchers consider bibliometric research a different type of SLRs, others consider bibliometric research as a type that utilizes quantitative methods like descriptive statistics, performance analysis, science mapping to bibliographic data (Fan *et al.,* 2022; Lim *et al.,* 2022). The extent of its scholarly value is also disputable, but its approachability is proven by its fast development of the last twenty years (Donthu *et al.,* 2021). Numerous reviews which are intensive in their use of bibliometric tools are left at the stage of descriptive reporting and provide structural representations of domains without generating the interpretive information which contributes to theoretical knowledge (Hulland, 2024; Lim & Kumar, 2024). This pressure indicates not only the novelty of bibliometric methods in business research but also a desire of researchers to use them incompletely (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022). To have a significant effect, the techniques selected by bibliometric studies have to be relevant to the purpose of the review, and the findings should be merged with more conventional SLR methods to produce a synthesis, still, the essence of any review (Hulland & Houston, 2020). It is only at that point that bibliometric analysis can transcend explanation and offer new information that leads to an evolution of theory and deeper comprehension of the phenomenon in question to the reader.

Bibliometric-intensive SLRs are increasingly under the increased questioning of editors and reviewers, and many are being rejected on the basis that they do little other than provide descriptive reporting. In many good journals, the reviewers have remarked that most authors tend to limit their scope to give bibliometric findings without going further to give substantive information or theory. These types of reviews are often criticised as too descriptive and repeating what has already been known instead of exploring assumptions or creating new insights (Hulland, 2024; Lim & Kumar, 2024). They risk being redundant in areas where the scholarly field grows at a very fast rate by listing previous research without synthesising its ideas or making a theoretical contribution, and are often accused of not doing so. This mode of presentation seems machine-like and diminishing, providing data regarding who publishes and where leaving unanswered the question of why it is important and how it contributes to knowledge (Hulland, 2024). This weakness has cemented the belief that empirical work is better placed to develop theory and that SLRs are in the back seat. Bibliometric reviews which are based on citation numbers or journal volumes oversimplify sophisticated scholarly environments and, through their lack of interpretation, cannot provide the more profound understanding needed to develop theories (Donthu *et al.,* 2021; Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015). Consequently, a long-standing conflict has arisen on the academic merit of bibliometric studies that do not proceed to deliver propelling contributions (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022).

[*]Address correspondence to this author at Spectrum International University College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: richard-seow@hotmail.com

Although bibliometric analysis has been criticised as descriptive in SLRs, such weaknesses ought not to contravene its capabilities in the presence of rigorous and analytical application. Critical analysis can easily exceed the synthesis and discover the hidden patterns, provoke ordinary beliefs and reveal the theoretical opportunities that are impossible to realize by simply empirical studies. In such a way, SLRs remain important contributors to the process of amalgamation of scattered knowledge, the establishment of intellectual frontiers and to inquire in fields such as sustainability, economics and innovation. The issue of usefulness of bibliometric methods is not the primary issue but it is how to make it useful so that the following results can be maximum scholarly output. Thus, this editorial examines the kind of bibliometric analyses that can convert reviews into descriptive storeys into critical and proactive ones and the other analytical methods that can be added to bibliometrics to enhance their scholarly prowess. The discussion is based on the practical examples of high-quality SLRs that reveal how these approaches can be utilised in practise. Finally, valuable insights can only be achieved through descriptive mapping in conjunction with synthesis that form new perspectives and directions of research. According to (Hulland, 2024), knowledge that offers new options on how scholars and practitioners can frame problems and come up with answers that further deepen the academic knowledge is valuable.

2. THE EXPANDING ROLE OF BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS IN SLRS

The sustained popularity of bibliometric analysis is that it allows handling large amounts of scholarly data and querying it in a highly efficient, almost impossible, way to do manually. Bibliometric techniques enable researchers to create a big picture perspective of a discipline by systematically cataloguing and studying the features of the publication, their authors, references and citations, keywords and references. They are able to determine nomological networks of topics, follow the temporal changes, and discern new tendencies, which allow revealing nuances, gaps, and implications that would otherwise be obscure (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022). Higher-order methods of bibliometrics offer credible and objective quantitative data on the development of scientific publications as well, which is why the methods can be valuable regarding handling big data and measuring the consequence of the research over time (Manoj *et al.,* 2023; Passas, 2024). In addition, bibliometric analysis is a comparatively recent development in business and management research, and its application is not always optimally capitalising on its analysis capabilities (Donthu *et al.,* 2021).

The solution is to create bibliometric studies that are rigorous and have their objectives in line with the aims of the review and combine them with other strategies that focus on synthesis. Remembering that the hallmark of a good review is synthesis (Hulland & Houston, 2020), and bibliometric tools should be regarded as literature description techniques, it is important to mention that they are closely interconnected. Their real academic value can be seen in the combination of descriptive mapping and interpretive logic which questioning assumptions, exposing blind spots, and coming up with new ways of seeing things. When conducted correctly, bibliometric analysis can reveal certain secrets of scholars, institutions, and research subjects and, therefore, clarify the process of disciplines development, as well as its possible further evolution (Manoj *et al.,* 2023; Passas, 2024).

Bibliometric analysis is a wide-ranging methodological framework that includes two pillars performance analysis that quantifies productivity and impact and science mapping that demonstrates the organization and dynamics of academic domains (Hulland, 2024). As summarised in Table **1**, these methods offer a set of methods, including co-citation and bibliographic coupling up to co-authorship networks, which can be implemented in SLRs to produce useful insights into the production and impact of scholars. A combination of these techniques goes well beyond the descriptive aspects of statistics by converting conjecture into empirical evaluation. They map the origins of knowledge together with its development, as well as reveal the networks of collaboration, which the research communities are built on. Furthermore, with the introduction of sensemaking methods, including scanning, sensing, and substantiating, the bibliometric analysis will be able to leave description behind, providing actionable knowledge that can enhance theoretical value, initiate innovation, and shape further research priorities (Lim & Kumar, 2024).

3. INTEGRATING BIBLIOMETRIC AND CONTENT ANALYSIS FOR DEEPER INSIGHTS

Even though bibliometric analysis is known to be effective at quantifying scholarly production, its potential can be fully achieved when supplemented with content analysis (Ellili & Seow, 2025). In general, bibliometric techniques are more likely to produce statistics of publication, citation, and collaboration patterns, but when applied in isolation, they tend to have mainly descriptive results (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022; Xiao & Watson, 2019). To address this weakness, most studies use content analysis as an enhancement to bibliometric findings to get deeper and more substantive meanings of the literature (Ellegaard & Wallin, 2015). This intersection of science mapping and content analysis has been essential because the former gives structural mapping and the latter goes further to elaborate the meaning of reading through the contents of scholarly arguments.

The use of content analysis enhances the SLRs as it involves the application of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitatively, it has the ability to encode textual objects like keywords, abstracts and conceptual categories with the aim of identifying thematic groups and quantifying the repetition of ideas. On a qualitative level, it allows

researchers to explore claims, assumptions, and theoretical orientations that cannot be disclosed with the help of statistical counts only (Post *et al.,* 2020; Torraco, 2005). It is this dual capability that enables scholars to argue about the structural patterns, and deal with the conceptual dead ends and new perspectives, in order to have a more detailed literature account.

The beauty of the content analysis is that the method can measure its own anti-measurement. Bibliometric tools disclose who publishes, where the study is focused and how the impact of one writer spreads across the world but content analysis of the study discloses what those writers are saying to theory, context and variety of the approaches. It provides the interpretative depth which is necessary to convert descriptive bibliometric portraits into analytical narratives which can guide theory development and influence future studies in case they are used strictly (Paul & Criado, 2020; Xiao & Watson, 2019). As is apparent in Table **2**, quantitative mapping/qualitative interpretation technique offers methodological synthesis and thus the methods are more rigorous and insightful. Quantitative methodologies are highly transparent and comprehensive in the sense that they reflect the dynamics of research and qualitative techniques help in bringing conceptual richness which is the focus on theoretical contribution and nuanced meanings.

Table 1. Bibliometric analysis techniques and their value for SLRs.

Document	Analysis	Description	Value for SLRs
(Liu *et al.,* 2025); (Widyawati, 2020)	Publication trend	Studies the magnitude and the trend of publications over a period of time	Determines growth trends and indicates maturity or emergence of a research field.
(Seow, 2024b); (Widyawati, 2020)	Most influential journals	Evaluates the journals that have been the most successful in number of citations and output	Highlights the main outlets that influence the discourse and directs scholars to the appropriate publication outlets.
(Seow, 2024c); (Widyawati, 2020)	Most influential documents	Maps very well-known papers that are very frequently cited	Displays their relationships in citation networks.
(Pathan & Mohanty, 2025); (Seow, 2025b)	Most influential authors	Determines most impactful scholars in terms of the number of citations and scholarly contribution	Relates the concept of thought leadership and intellectual pillars that may be used to develop a theory.
(Chytis *et al.,* 2024); (Pu *et al.,* 2023)	Co-authorship network	Dissects the ways of cooperation of authors within the field	Demonstrates knowledge clusters and research communities.
(Seow, 2024c; Seow, 2025b)	Most influential institutions	Showcases universities and research centers with the greatest academic influence.	Identifies institutional leadership and possible centers of expertise in the area.
(Galletta *et al.,* 2022); (Seow, 2024a)	Most influential countries	Measures geographic productivity and impact of research	Determines strengths in the region, global differences, and cross-country research productivity.
(Galletta *et al.,* 2022); (Liu *et al.,* 2025)	Countries co-authorship network	Visualizes international collaboration by cross country co-authorship	Discloses global research networks and routes to developing cross country collaboration.
(Ellili & Seow, 2025); (Seow, 2025b)	Author collaboration	Studies the level of patterns of scholarly partnership at the individual level.	Offers micro-level data on the intensity, frequency and structure of collaboration.
(Ellili & Seow, 2025); (Liu *et al.,* 2025)	Affiliation network	Maps the associations among authors with their institutional affiliations	Relates persons to organizations, and draws attention to institutional associations and cross-disciplinary connections.

Source: Author's compilation

Table 2. Content analysis approaches and their contribution to SLRs.

Document	Analysis	Description	Value for SLRs
Quantitative Analyses			
(Galletta *et al.,* 2022); (Liu *et al.,* 2025)	Co-occurrence of authors' keywords (cartography analysis)	Plots the prevalence and correlation of keywords to determine linkages of themes.	Reveals research hotspots, intellectual structures, and evolving clusters within the literature.
(Thomas *et al.,* 2024)	Thematic mapping (algorithm-based)	Bibliometric clustering methods are used to cluster related topics.	Highlights dominant and emerging themes, offering a visual representation of field development.
(Dwibedi *et al.,* 2024); (Tumewang *et al.,* 2024)	Bibliographic coupling (authors, sources, documents)	There are links between works, which refer to the same reference, either by author, journal or document level.	Exposes intellectual proximity among contributors and sources, clarifying knowledge communities.
(Ellili & Seow, 2025); (Seow & Ellili, 2026)	Co-occurrence by theoretical framework	Examines the frequency of application of theoretical frameworks in combination.	Identifies dominant and underused theories, highlighting theoretical convergence or gaps.
(Ellili & Seow, 2025); (Galletta *et al.,* 2022)	Most cited references	Plays hugely popular works in the dataset.	Identifies seminal contributions that form the conceptual foundation of the field.
(Galletta *et al.,* 2022); (Tiwari *et al.,* 2023)	Co-citation reference network	Studies the frequency of joint citation.	Maps the intellectual structure of a domain, showing how foundational ideas interconnect.
(Chytis *et al.,* 2024); (Seow, 2025b)	Temporal analysis	Looks at the changes in the patterns of publication over time.	Detects shifts in scholarly attention, indicating emerging topics and declining trends.
(Galletta *et al.,* 2022); (Martiny *et al.,* 2024)	Data sources	Systematizes the data that is involved in empirical studies.	Informs methodological transparency and allows comparisons of data reliability across studies.
(Bai & Kim, 2024); (Seow, 2024c)	Comparative analysis (statistical)	Makes quantitative comparisons of fields, contexts or regions.	Provides cross-sectional evidence that highlights similarities and differences across research streams.
Qualitative Analyses			
(Nervino *et al.,* 2024); (Truant *et al.,* 2023)	Thematic analysis	Determines repetitive ideas and meanings using interpretive coding.	Offers nuanced insights into conceptual debates and emerging theoretical directions.
(Truant *et al.,* 2023; Truant *et al.,* 2024)	Research methodology	Makes reviews and classifies research designs and methods employed.	Assesses methodological rigor and highlights opportunities for novel approaches.
(Seow, 2024a; Seow, 2024c)	Theoretical framework	Studies and criticizes the application of theories in research.	Identifies dominant, neglected, or emerging theories, guiding theoretical advancement.
(Martiny *et al.,* 2024); (Seow, 2024c)	Antecedents (determinants)	Assembles drivers or precursors of a phenomenon.	Clarifies underlying mechanisms and conditions shaping observed outcomes.
(Seow, 2024a)	Consequences (quality or quantity)	Investigates the consequences of an occurrence in either size or impact.	Provides insight into the impact and relevance of studied variables.
(Liu *et al.,* 2025); (Tsang *et al.,* 2023)	Antecedents and consequences	Combines determinants and outcomes in a synthesis.	Clarifies causal pathways, enriching both theory and practice.
(Pathan & Mohanty, 2025); (Waldau, 2025)	Research themes	Outlines the conceptual areas of the field.	Enhances understanding of topic breadth and directs future inquiries.

(Table 2) contd....

(Khushk *et al.,* 2025)	Challenges	Determines research barriers or restrictions, or contradictions.	Highlights unresolved issues and informs agenda-setting for future work.
(Seow, 2022b)	Traits and characteristics	Theoretically studies the traits and characteristics of individuals or organizations.	Strengthens understanding of behavioral and personal dimensions.
(Xia, 2022)	Single-loop vs. double-loop learning	Explores differences of concepts of organizational learning.	Provides theoretical depth and connects micro-level behaviors with broader learning frameworks.
Seow, 2024b, Seow, 2024c)	Country investigated	Takes into consideration geographic or institutional setting of studies.	Illuminates contextual differences and promotes cross-country comparisons.
(Khamisu *et al.,* 2024)	Motives	Explores motivation of individual or organizational behavior.	Reveals underlying rationales and extends explanatory frameworks.
(Narula *et al.,* 2025); (Truant *et al.,* 2024)	Conceptual framework	Inventures integrative models or typologies.	Provides original theoretical contributions and conceptual clarity.
Hybrid Analyses			
(Thomas *et al.,* 2024)	Thematic mapping (interpretive extension)	Mixes thematic clustering and qualitative interpretation of themes.	Offers a balanced view by blending structural patterns with conceptual depth.
(Bai & Kim, 2024); (Seow, 2024c)	Comparative analysis (mixed)	Combines statistical analyses and more interpretive information.	Produces both descriptive and theoretical contributions across contexts.
(Bai & Kim, 2024); (Khan, 2022)	Meta-analysis	Summary empirical evidence statistically and theorizing.	Strengthens evidence-based conclusions and reveals boundary conditions for theories.

Source: Author's compilation

Besides that, the sensemaking might be incorporated in the content analysis and, as a consequence, the reviews may conclusively transcend description. By scanning, sensing and substantiating with the 3Ss, researchers can gather and systematize information in an efficient, uncover latent themes and root cause, and validate the validity of their findings (Lim & Kumar, 2024). This process renders the knowledge of the content analysis realistic and sound. Such an approach plus bibliometric analysis does not only allow making the intellectual landscape very clear but also enables new research agendas to begin (Donthu *et al.,* 2021). Through such kind of developments, SLRs are elevated over the staging catalogues into the moving platforms that ooze concept gaps, knowledge pathways, and challenge the development of theoretical and practical theory in future.

4. IMPROVING CONTENT ANALYSIS WITH THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

The content analysis becomes very strong when it is informed by general models like theory-context-method (TCM), theory-context-characteristics-methodology (TCCM) and antecedents-decisions-outcomes (ADO). These and other frameworks, as described in Table **3**, provide systematic and structured methods of finding and organizing literature in a way that allows the review process to be more than a description to include a full analysis. Their introduction of distinct analytical dimensions help researchers to look at the application of theories, when and where they test them, what constructs and variables are put into the limelight and the impact of methodological decisions on the results. This systematic orientation enables the reviews to reveal concealed assumptions, exposing a blind spot of the conceptual assumptions, and discovering inconsistencies in the theory, hence enhancing their contributions to the scholarly world (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022; Post *et al.,* 2020).

The framework to be adopted should however be selected with keen consideration of the goals of the SLR. As an example, TCM is especially helpful when one has to review works devoted to evaluation of theories application to various contexts and methodological designs (Paul *et al.,* 2017). TCCM builds upon this and introduces constructs and variables that make it particularly useful in assessing conceptual rigor and operationalization of the concept (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). ADO, in its turn, is more integrative and is more appropriate to applied fields like sustainability or innovation, where the connection between antecedents, decision-making process, and outcomes play the main role (Paul & Benito, 2018). These frameworks differ in terms of scope and focus as indicated in Table **3**, hence it is apparent that one can never use a single framework across the board. In some instances, the current frameworks need to be modified to fit the specific objectives and purpose of a review, and an example of such a framework is the contributor-context-characteristics-methodology (CCCM) framework, which was constructed as the further expansion of the TCCM framework (Seow, 2025a).

Table 3. Analytical frameworks for structuring content analysis in SLRs.

Framework	Dimension	Document
ADO	Antecedents, decisions, and outcomes	(Aggarwal, Dsouza, *et al.,* 2025); (Aggarwal, Rathee, *et al.,* 2025)
TCM	Theories, contexts, and methods	(Goel *et al.,* 2025); (Paul *et al.,* 2017)
TCCM	Theories, constructs, characteristics, and methods	(Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019); (Seow, 2025b; Seow, 2026)
ADO-TCM	Antecedents, decisions, outcomes, theories, contexts, and methods	(Kumar & Ranjani, 2025); (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2024)
CCCM	Contributors, constructs, characteristics, and methods	(Seow, 2025a)
SALSA	Search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis	(Aldowaish *et al.,* 2022); (Bradbury-Jones *et al.,* 2019)
CIMO	Context, intervention, mechanism, and outcome logic	(Crișan *et al.,* 2021); (Kochan & Nowicki, 2018)
BAO	Belief, action, and outcome	(Yan *et al.,* 2025)
CFI	Country-level, firm-level, individual-level	(Seow, 2022a)

Source: Author's compilation

The timeless significance of frameworks like TCM, TCCM, and ADO is that they have been able to turn content analysis into a prospective exercise. They enable reviewers to go beyond the cataloguing of previous scholarship to create new understanding that will inform new research agendas by imposing conceptual organization on the disjointed scholarship. Indicatively, a review guided by TCCM might demonstrate where theories have been overused, as well as those areas that have been underutilized and need to be addressed. In the same manner, an ADO-based methodology would be able to highlight the hidden decision-making processes or evidence that has not achieved a result and can have both theoretical and practical implications. By so doing, analytical frameworks serve as a source of innovation by making SLRs a moving vehicle that transforms the theoretical arguments and informs decision-making by managers (Post *et al.,* 2020; Snyder, 2019).

Finally, the application of the structure as presented in Table **3**, among others, will make sure that the analysis of content provides both the form and the depth critical. They are not only broadening the literature reviews, but also enhance their capacity in contributing towards theory development and practical relevancy. Such frameworks can make SLRs useful contributions to the academic literature, in that they assist the researcher to historicize fragmented outcomes into consistency, and discover how to proceed to conduct such research.

5. DESCRIPTION TO ANALYSIS IN SLRS

Scholars must not stick to the descriptive reporting in order to realize their potentials, they must embrace analytical forms of reporting that can assist in improving intellectual contribution. With rigor, bibliometric and content analysis can be applied with helpful underpinnings in that they measure patterns of publications and already provide depth of interpretation. Still, they are not regarding the production of statistics or thematic inventories but about the ability to develop critical analysis pointing to relationships and assumptions and dislodge any theoretical blind spots (Mukherjee *et al.,* 2022; Snyder, 2019). To adopt an analytical stance, reviews have to look further than the mapping of the past and establish themselves as knowledge carriers are formed. This can take the form of bringing fresh ideas to the table, re-packaging old arguments or challenging the premises that underlie mainstream views. Reviews can also in other instances come up with conceptual frameworks which integrate knowledge and come up with new theoretical propositions. Although not all reviews will be as innovative as this one, they are bound to have a higher chance of impacting academic discourse and finding a place in the most prominent journals (Kraus *et al.,* 2022).

The success of these analytical efforts, though, is based on the quality of the methodology used in the review. Unambitious analyses have no credibility when the article identification and selection is not done in a transparent or rigorous manner. A significant SLR must thus start with a protocol that is systematic and replicable in nature, under the expert advice of the existing standards of PRISMA or SPAR-4-SLR. Such frameworks preserve the reliability and keep the following analyses be it bibliometric, content-based or conceptual, on the basis of valid evidence. Without such a basis, even the most innovative analytical work is prone to methodological vices.

After all, the SLRs which not only engage in strict bibliometric and content analysis but also serve to identify a clear orientation of the analysis can assist with transforming the disjointed scholarship into coherent frameworks of the research in the future. Such reviews can decisively overcome the descriptive catalogues through an innovative (and

creative) search to attain novelty, conceptual richness and by basing their work on sound methodological performances. When properly done, they end up being good studies that do not only assimilate research done previously, but it also has a bearing on future scholarly debates and presents it with good advice in theory formation and how to put it into practice.

EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER

"The author has included several self-citations which have been reviewed and deemed necessary for the scientific continuity and methodological integrity of this study."

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