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Differentiating the Review of Related Literature and Related Studies

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Abstract

The terms Review of Related Literature (RRL) and Review of Related Studies (RRS) are widely used in academic research, yet their meanings and structural relationship remain inconsistently understood. This qualitative exploratory study examined how graduate students and research practitioners conceptualized and differentiated RRL and RRS. Data consisted of 24 encoded responses from eight research practitioners and 16 graduate students, supplemented by document analysis of research papers, theses, and dissertations published from 2021 to 2026. Investigator triangulation and inductive thematic analysis were used to identify recurring interpretations and terminological patterns. Findings showed that 62.5% of respondents viewed RRL and RRS as distinguishable components, with RRL emphasizing theories, concepts, and broader scholarly knowledge and RRS focusing on empirical methods and findings. Conversely, 37.5% regarded the terms as integrated, context-dependent, or institution-specific. Document analysis further identified five labels for literature-review sections: Review of Related Literature, Review of Related Studies, Review of Related Research, Review of Related Works, and Review of Related Literature and Studies. These labels did not consistently represent distinct review methodologies. The study concludes that RRL and RRS are conceptually distinguishable but not universally separate components. Their organization should reflect disciplinary conventions, institutional purposes, research design, and publication requirements rather than rigid terminology.

Keywords: literature review; empirical synthesis; research pedagogy; graduate research; academic writing

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1. Background of the Study

A robust review of existing knowledge is the cornerstone of rigorous academic research. It serves to contextualize the research problem, prevent unnecessary duplication of studies, and provide a theoretical base for the inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Snyder, 2019). In structuring this foundational knowledge, academic conventions often separate the inquiry into two distinct domains: the Review of Related Literature (RRL) and the Review of Related Studies (RRS) (Bryman, 2016). The RRL evaluates broad concepts, theories, and overarching research themes to establish the theoretical framework of a study (Jabareen, 2009; Paul & Criado, 2020). It helps locate the research topic within the appropriate conceptual context rather than merely summarizing materials (Snyder, 2019). Conversely, the RRS explicitly examines specific, previously conducted research studies and their findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The RRS is narrower in scope, focusing strictly on prior methodologies and empirical results to highlight gaps, inform research design, and guide data analysis (Bryman, 2016). In fact, an effective review of related studies acts as a main guide for the entire research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Some institutional research-writing traditions distinguish conceptual or theoretical sources from prior empirical studies, although mainstream methodological literature generally treats both as material within a broader literature review. Thus, navigating the literature review is one of the most challenging writing tasks that graduate students face, requiring sophisticated conceptual maneuverings (Snyder, 2019). Graduate students frequently experience high anxiety during this process, sometimes conceptualizing the literature as a "chaotic whirlpool" or a "stormy ocean" that leaves them feeling lost and overwhelmed (Badenhorst, 2018). A widespread challenge among postgraduate students is the fundamental inability to determine the appropriate purpose and scope of their review (Paul & Criado, 2020). Without the ability to establish clear boundaries and inclusion criteria (Xiao & Watson, 2019), emerging researchers can easily blur the lines between exploring broad theoretical themes (RRL) and critically analyzing specific methodological approaches (RRS).

These difficulties are not merely individual academic failings; research indicates that the struggles postgraduate students and early-career academics face when engaging with scholarly literature are frequently linked to poor pedagogical practices and a lack of effective instructional tools (Badenhorst, 2018). Because the inability to distinguish between the purpose of different review approaches directly contributes to ineffective knowledge synthesis (Xiao & Watson, 2019), conflating empirical studies with conceptual literature can severely compromise a study's structural integrity.

Given these ongoing pedagogical and practical challenges, there is a critical need to investigate how the modern academic community operationalizes these core concepts. By soliciting perspectives from graduate students and active research practitioners, this research explores how these specific groups define RRL and RRS. Determining whether researchers and practitioners view these as methodologically

distinct components or functionally synonymous entities will provide vital insight into current academic writing practices and help standardize research pedagogy across higher education institutions.

While established methodological literature draws a clear distinction between theoretical reviews (Review of Related Literature) and empirical syntheses (Review of Related Studies), significant ambiguity remains regarding how these concepts are operationalized in academic practice. Graduate students frequently report high levels of anxiety and confusion when determining the purpose, scope, and structural boundaries of their literature reviews (Badenhorst, 2018; Trinidad et al., 2025). This lack of conceptual clarity often leads to the conflation of broad theoretical frameworks with specific empirical data, ultimately weakening the structural integrity and methodological rigor of research proposals and dissertations.

Furthermore, despite the widespread use of these terms in academic institutions, there is limited empirical evidence examining whether graduate students and experienced research practitioners share a unified understanding of RRL and RRS, or if institutional guidelines and pedagogical practices vary widely. Without a clear understanding of how these groups conceptualize and apply RRL and RRS, academic institutions risk perpetuating inconsistent research pedagogy, which hinders early-career researchers' ability to produce rigorous, publishable scholarly work.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate how the academic community conceptualizes and differentiates the Review of Related Literature (RRL) and the Review of Related Studies (RRS). A qualitative approach was utilized to capture the nuanced, subjective interpretations of research terminology across different levels of academic experience and institutional contexts.

2.2. Participants and Sampling Technique

A snowball sampling technique was utilized to recruit the interview subjects. Initial key informants within academic networks were identified and subsequently asked to refer other qualified peers who met the study's inclusion criteria. Interviews were exclusively conducted with two specific cohorts:

- Graduate Students: Master’s and doctoral candidates who were actively engaged in research-bound degree programs and had completed baseline methodology coursework.
- Research Practitioners: Active higher education faculty, peer reviewers, and established academic researchers with a history of scholarly publication.

2.3. Data Collection and Source Triangulation

To establish robust data source triangulation, data were deliberately gathered and compared across three distinct sources: the graduate student interviews, the research practitioner interviews, and a curated corpus of published academic literature.

The literature component was strictly delimited to research papers, theses, and dissertations published online within the last five years (2021–2026). To qualify for

inclusion in the document analysis, these manuscripts were required to explicitly feature a literature review as distinct, standalone chapters or sections.

During the interview phase, participants were asked to define an RRL, define an RRS, and articulate whether they perceived the two as methodologically distinct from one another.

2.4. Data Encoding and Anonymization

To organize the qualitative data and protect participant confidentiality, a systematic alphanumeric coding scheme was applied to the interview responses. Responses sourced from research practitioners were coded sequentially as Participant A1, Participant A2, Participant A3, and so forth. Responses sourced from graduate students were coded as Participant B1, Participant B2, Participant B3, etc.

Rather than transcribing the interviews as verbatim, first-person quotations, the data were encoded strictly as the researchers' synthesized summary of the participants' answers. This third-person encoding approach was utilized to immediately abstract the core conceptual frameworks, definitions, and methodological boundaries the participants were attempting to describe, standardizing the data for cross-cohort comparison.

2.5. Data Analysis and Investigator Triangulation

To ensure qualitative trustworthiness and mitigate individual or institutional biases, the study employed rigorous investigator triangulation. The encoded third-person responses and the selected published literature were analyzed and interpreted independently by three distinct researchers based in Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan.

These researchers conducted an inductive thematic analysis of the dataset. First, they independently reviewed the encoded interpretations and literature excerpts to familiarize themselves with the data. They then generated initial qualitative codes based on how terms were defined and differentiated. Finally, the three researchers collaboratively compared their independent findings to resolve discrepancies, merge overlapping concepts, and map the overarching themes regarding how RRL and RRS are operationalized in contemporary academic practice.

3. Results

The analysis drew on 24 encoded responses, comprising eight research practitioners (Participants A1-A8) and 16 graduate students (Participants B1-B16), together with the document corpus which are published theses and dissertation in 2021 to 2026. Because the interview data had been encoded as researcher-synthesized summaries rather than verbatim transcripts, participant evidence is presented through coded attribution and analytic paraphrase rather than quotation. The thematic analysis generated four interconnected findings: a widely understood conceptual distinction between RRL and RRS, a competing integrative or umbrella interpretation, discipline- and institution-dependent variation, and substantial inconsistency in the labels used for literature-review sections.

3.1. Conceptual Distinction Between RRL and RRS

The dominant pattern was a conceptual distinction between theory-oriented literature and empirical studies. Fifteen of the 24 respondents (62.5%) described RRL and RRS as distinguishable components. This interpretation was expressed by five of eight research practitioners (62.5%) and 10 of 16 graduate students (62.5%). Across both cohorts, RRL was commonly associated with concepts, theories, models, definitions, broad scholarly discussions, books, policy documents, and other materials used to establish the background or theoretical foundation of a study. RRS was more narrowly associated with completed empirical investigations, including journal research articles, experiments, surveys, case studies, theses, dissertations, methods, findings, and limitations.

The perceived difference was therefore based primarily on the nature and analytic purpose of the source rather than on the physical format in which it appeared. Participants A3-A7 consistently framed RRL as conceptual or theoretical and RRS as empirical. Participants B1-B5 and B8-B12 expressed the same distinction, usually explaining that RRL establishes context and theoretical grounding, whereas RRS shows what previous researchers did and found. Several graduate students further connected RRS with identifying methodological gaps, selecting procedures, and interpreting results. This pattern indicates that the distinction remains intelligible and pedagogically useful to many respondents, particularly in thesis and dissertation writing.

3.2. RRL as an Umbrella or Integrated Review

A second pattern challenged the treatment of RRL and RRS as rigidly separate sections. Nine respondents (37.5%) described the relationship as integrated, context-dependent, institution-specific, or not formally distinct. Three of eight practitioners (37.5%) and six of 16 graduate students (37.5%) fell within this interpretive group. Participants A1 and A8 emphasized that the separation was not recognized as a standard review typology in the broader methodological literature, while Participant A2 treated related studies as a subset of the broader body of related literature.

Graduate participants offered similar qualifications. Participants B6, B7, and B13 noted that disciplinary and publication conventions determine whether theoretical and empirical materials are separated. Participant B7 distinguished their functions conceptually but argued that integrating them produces a more coherent progression from existing knowledge to the research gap and proposed method. Participants B15 and B16 likewise treated both terms as components or alternative expressions of a literature review. Participant B14 used RRS in a way broadly equivalent to literature review, illustrating how the terms may overlap in actual usage. These responses show that respondents could recognize differences in emphasis without assuming that separate headings were methodologically necessary.

Table 1, on the following page, presents the distribution of respondents by their interpretation or distinction between RRL and RRS. Fifteen of 24 respondents distinguished the terms, whereas nine offered integrated or context-dependent interpretations.

Table 1. *Distribution of Respondents by Interpretation of RRL and RRS*

Cohort	Distinct components	Integrated/context-dependent	Total
Research practitioners	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8
Graduate students	10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5%)	16
Overall	15 (62.5%)	9 (37.5%)	24

Note: "Distinct components" denotes responses that explicitly separated conceptual/theoretical literature from empirical studies. "Integrated/context-dependent" includes umbrella, synonymous, institution-specific, discipline-specific, and conceptually distinct but structurally integrated interpretations.

3.3. Institutional and Disciplinary Variation

The responses indicated that the use of RRL and RRS was strongly shaped by institutional pedagogy and disciplinary writing conventions. Participant B3 described the two as distinct parts of Chapter 2 in theses and dissertations, whereas Participant B6 explained that physics and mathematics publications commonly integrate theories and previous studies into the Introduction. Participants B7 and B13 similarly observed that some institutions explicitly teach the distinction, while journal articles and research-intensive disciplines frequently use a unified literature review or embed the review within the problem background.

This variation was also evident in the source boundaries assigned to each term. Some respondents limited RRL to books, theories, laws, government reports, and general scholarly discussions, while others included journal articles, theses, dissertations, and conference papers within RRL. Empirical studies were consistently placed under RRS, but several respondents recognized that the same journal article could contribute conceptual discussion, empirical evidence, or both. The practical boundary between RRL and RRS was therefore less stable than the simple theory-versus-study distinction suggested.

3.4. Variation in Literature Review Nomenclature

The document analysis showed that literature-review sections in published research papers, theses, and dissertations were identified through multiple labels. The corpus included the terms Review of Related Literature, Review of Related Studies, Review of Related Research, Review of Related Works, and Review of Related Literature and Studies. These labels referred to sections or chapters that reviewed prior knowledge relevant to a research problem, although the organizational emphasis varied. Some labels foregrounded literature broadly, some foregrounded empirical studies or research, and combined labels explicitly accommodated both conceptual and empirical materials.

The variation in nomenclature supported the interview finding that no single label uniformly governed academic practice. The terms did not reliably identify a distinct review methodology comparable to recognized methodological categories such as systematic, scoping, integrative, or narrative review. Instead, they functioned primarily as locally adopted headings for organizing prior scholarship. Consequently, the presence of "studies," "research," "works," or "literature and studies" in a heading did not by itself establish a different analytical procedure; the actual distinction depended on the included sources, synthesis strategy, disciplinary norms, and institutional template.

Table 2. *Literature Review Labels Identified in the Document Corpus and Their Observed Emphasis*

Label Identified	Observed Emphasis in the Corpus
Review of Related Literature	Broad label for prior concepts, theories, discussions, and, in some manuscripts, empirical studies.
Review of Related Studies	Label emphasizing previous empirical investigations, methods, findings, and research gaps.
Review of Related Research	Alternative empirical emphasis comparable to reviewing prior research studies.
Review of Related Works	Inclusive label for earlier scholarly or creative work relevant to the research problem.
Review of Related Literature and Studies	Combined label explicitly accommodating conceptual literature and empirical research.

Note: The table reports qualitative nomenclature and observed emphasis.

3.5. Integrated Interpretation of the Findings

Taken together, the findings revealed agreement at the level of content but disagreement at the level of structure and terminology. Most respondents understood a useful conceptual difference: literature can establish theories, concepts, and broad knowledge, while studies provide empirical methods and findings. However, more than one-third of respondents rejected or qualified a rigid separation, and the document corpus demonstrated multiple labels for sections performing the general function of literature review. The evidence therefore supports treating RRS as an empirical emphasis within a broader literature-review process rather than as a universally standardized or methodologically independent review category.

The key point of variation was not whether theories and empirical studies serve different purposes; respondents generally recognized that they do. The variation concerned whether those purposes require separate chapters or headings. Thesis-oriented and institutionally prescribed formats tended to favor explicit separation, whereas journal-oriented and disciplinary conventions tended to integrate conceptual and empirical scholarship into a unified argument. The results thus indicate that terminology should be interpreted in relation to disciplinary purpose, institutional requirements, and publication genre rather than assumed to have a universal meaning.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal broad agreement about the kinds of knowledge reviewed, but not about whether those kinds require separate sections. Most respondents distinguished theory- and concept-oriented materials from empirical investigations, describing RRL as the broader conceptual foundation and RRS as the review of prior methods and findings. This distinction is compatible with the different functions assigned to conceptual framing and empirical evidence in research design: theories and concepts explain how a problem is understood, while previous studies show how related questions have been investigated and what evidence has been produced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Jabareen, 2009). It also offers a useful pedagogical scaffold for novice researchers. However, the findings indicate that the distinction is better treated as a difference in emphasis within literature reviewing than as evidence of two universally recognized review methodologies.

The integrative interpretation reported by more than one-third of respondents aligns with established literature-review guidance. Empirical studies are part of the scholarly literature, and conceptual, theoretical, policy, and empirical materials may be synthesized together when relevant to the research problem. Snyder (2019) described literature reviewing as a research methodology that requires purposeful selection and synthesis, while Paul and Criado (2020) emphasized the need to move beyond summary toward critical organization of what is known and what remains unresolved. More recent typologies likewise distinguish reviews according to their objectives and procedures, including systematic, structured, integrative, scoping, narrative, and meta-analytic approaches, rather than through a literature-versus-studies division (Cho, 2022; Khatri et al., 2026; Rocco et al., 2023).

The results therefore suggest that the methodological quality of a review depends less on its heading than on the transparency and coherence of its analytic work. A rigorous review establishes a clear problem, explains its conceptual or theoretical basis, defines how sources were identified and selected, evaluates relevant evidence, and synthesizes that evidence into a defensible argument (Rocco et al., 2023; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Cho (2022) similarly differentiated integrative and systematic reviews by their purposes and procedures. These principles support the participants who treated RRS as an empirical emphasis within a broader RRL or literature-review process. They also explain why the labels RRL and RRS should not be interpreted as substitutes for recognized review designs.

Institutional and disciplinary conventions help explain why both interpretations persisted across the two cohorts. Thesis and dissertation templates may separate conceptual literature from empirical studies to guide novice writers through theory building, gap identification, and methodological justification. Bryman (2016) and Creswell and Creswell (2018) both assign important but connected roles to theoretical context and previous empirical research in developing an inquiry. By contrast, journal articles, particularly those following IMRaD conventions, often integrate theories and previous findings into the Introduction or a unified review (Sollaci & Pereira, 2004; Tabuena, 2020). The participants' responses therefore point to genre awareness as a core research-writing competence: a structure that scaffolds a thesis writer may become repetitive in a journal article, while a concise integrated review may not provide enough guidance for a beginning researcher.

The five labels identified in the document corpus further demonstrate that nomenclature is unstable across academic settings. Review of Related Literature, Review of Related Studies, Review of Related Research, Review of Related Works, and Review of Related Literature and Studies all referred to engagement with prior scholarship, but none consistently identified a separate methodological procedure. Recent scholarship likewise notes that review labels may be used interchangeably and that expanding review typologies can create uncertainty unless methods are explicitly defined (Khatri et al., 2026; Rocco et al., 2023). Accordingly, headings alone should not be used to infer rigor, scope, source quality, or synthesis strategy. Researchers and reviewers need to examine what the section actually does.

The findings also have direct implications for graduate research pedagogy. Literature-review writing is cognitively demanding because students must delimit a topic, evaluate heterogeneous sources, establish conceptual relationships, and build a

coherent synthesis rather than assemble summaries (Badenhorst, 2018; Snyder, 2019). Postgraduate writers have also reported difficulty with critical synthesis and the organization of literature, often producing descriptive source-by-source accounts instead of analytical arguments (Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020). The present results suggest that rigidly separating RRL and RRS may reinforce source sorting when students are not simultaneously taught how theories, concepts, methods, and findings interact to establish a problem, framework, gap, and methodological direction. The writing difficulties and support needs identified among graduate students further underscore the importance of explicit instruction, supervision, and institutional guidance (Trinidad et al., 2025).

A clearer institutional approach would define literature-review requirements by function and expected analytical work. Research manuals may explain that conceptual and empirical materials can be distinguished during reading and coding but combined in writing when integration improves coherence. Where separate RRL and RRS headings are retained for pedagogical reasons, institutional guidelines need to specify each section's purpose, acceptable source types, expected form of synthesis, and relationship to the framework and research gap. For journal-oriented writing, students may instead be trained to organize the review thematically, conceptually, methodologically, or argumentatively and to follow the conventions of the target discipline and journal. Such an approach preserves the instructional value of the distinction without presenting it as a universal methodological rule (Paul & Criado, 2020; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

4.1. Limitations

The findings should be interpreted within the study's qualitative and exploratory scope. Snowball sampling may have concentrated respondents within connected academic networks. The responses were encoded as researcher-synthesized interpretations rather than retained as verbatim transcripts, which improved comparability but limited analysis of participants' exact language and rhetorical nuance. In addition, the document corpus established the presence of five literature-review labels but did not provide frequencies by discipline, institution, country, or publication type. The study therefore clarifies patterns of meaning and use but does not estimate how widely each term occurs across the global academic community.

4.2. Conclusion

The study concludes that RRL and RRS are conceptually distinguishable but not universally separate research components. RRL was generally understood as the broader review of theories, concepts, and scholarly knowledge, whereas RRS emphasized previous empirical investigations, methods, and findings. Nevertheless, participant and documentary evidence showed that RRS commonly functions within a broader literature-review process and that separate headings depend largely on institutional requirements, disciplinary traditions, and publication genre.

Academic institutions may therefore avoid presenting the RRL-RRS distinction as an international methodological standard. Research instruction can retain the conceptual distinction where it helps novice researchers, while emphasizing critical synthesis, transparent source selection, coherent argumentation, and alignment with disciplinary and publication expectations. Institutional manuals may use separate headings when these serve a clear pedagogical purpose, but the headings need precise

definitions and an explicit explanation of how the sections connect. In publishable research, the organization of prior scholarship should ultimately be determined by the research question, review purpose, methodological approach, disciplinary practice, and target-journal format rather than by terminology alone.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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