

Mapping Methodological Issues in Knowledge Management Research, 2009–2014

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ABSTRACT

By drawing on the nuances in methodological research literature, this qualitative content analysis study investigated the research procedures employed in knowledge management (KM) research between 2009 and 2014, to gain an understanding of the methodological choices made by KM researchers. In total, 989 articles published in five leading KM-centric journals were reviewed. The results revealed that KM research utilised a variety of research procedures. The predominance of positivist epistemologies varied across the five journals, but mixed methods research was not prevalent. True to the interpretivist presuppositions of this study, these results are not definitive. Deploying multi-methods may result in a deeper understanding of the use of research procedures in the field. The value of this study lies in the fact that it will lead to greater knowledge of research methodologies in the subject field and provide a baseline for future studies that have an interest in reflecting on context-specific methodological practices.

KEYWORDS

Content Analysis, Knowledge Management, Paradigms, Reflective Practice, Research Methodologies, Research Methods

INTRODUCTION

Investigating methodological approaches is a continuing concern in many subject fields. Since methodological rigour determines the quality of research (Collis & Hussey, 2009; Gorard, 2013), research that is conducted rigorously is likely to support practice and extend the frontiers of knowledge. Rigorous studies were identified at the inception of the *Knowledge Management Research and Practice* journal as one of the strategies for ensuring that knowledge management (KM) reliably informs KM practice (Edwards et al., 2003, p. 59). In most cases, research is well intended, but fails to yield the desired outcomes as a result of decisions concerning the research design. Thus, the research design should be both appropriate and sound if it is to produce research that is trustworthy and beneficial to society. This becomes very important if the fact that knowledge management is an “evolving body of concepts, relationships, strategies, and practices” (Hornett & Stein, 2007, p. 1) is taken into consideration. Research on these factors may help organisations to understand the sources of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991), and facilitate the optimum utilization of all the resources of the organization, including knowledge (Darroch & McNaughton, 2003).

KM, with its focus on creating competitive advantage for organisations and enhancing their performance, has the potential to contribute to the development and delivery of services that add value to society. That partly explains why KM studies are preoccupied with exploring and understanding

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how organisations “develop, deploy, exploit and combine [...] organisational knowledge assets in order to update, renew and create organisations’ capabilities” (Schiuma, 2009, p. 290). Research aimed at exploring and understanding KM dynamics should therefore be based on robust and thorough research procedures. Consequently, it should “exhibit a high degree of methodological fit” (Edmondson & McManus, 2007, p. 1155).

The quality and rigour of research are of the utmost importance if that research is to gather appropriate knowledge and evidence to support practice. Valid research evidence reduces the potential for practice to be shaped by personal whims and untested procedures. It was therefore decided to review the choice of research methods in the field of KM using articles from the *Journal of Knowledge Management (JKM)*, *Knowledge Management Research and Practice (KMRP)*, the *International Journal of Knowledge Management (IJKM)*, *Knowledge and Process Management (KPM)* and the *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management (JIKM)* as units of analysis. These journals are evidence that the KM field is growing and accumulating a relatively large corpus of knowledge. There is a need to map the various developments in a field in order to determine the discipline’s state-of-the-art and its growth at different times.

Various studies have mapped the territory of research in a wide range of fields in order to understand the production and utilization of knowledge in context. The KM field is no exception. Dwivedi et al., (2011) conducted a study on research trends in KM using the keyword search in the title. Their search strategy meant that studies without the keyword in the title were excluded. Furthermore, their research was limited to one database. Despite this limitation, the study provides a useful starting point to understand the research trends in the field. Although, the number of articles used by Dwivedi et al., (2011) were 54 more than those used in the current study, the current study used articles published in the leading KM-centric journals as compared to those from any journal, which is not KM specific. Of the 1043 articles that were analyzed, Dwivedi et al., (2011) only used 67 articles from journals in the KM area. That implies that the scope of the articles may be a limitation to the study.

Ngulube (2015) also conducted a study of a limited scope because he used articles that were published between 2009 and 2013 in the *Journal of Knowledge Management* to attend to the research question. The study of trends in one journal may fail to give a complete picture as some journals may be biased towards covering certain geographical regions and research orientations at the expense of others. The results cannot also be generalised to the whole KM field. The same may be partly said in the case of the study by Alajmi and Alhaji (2018), which focused on articles in the *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management*.

Although Gu (2004), Holsapple and Wu (2008) as well as Serenko and Bontis (2004) conducted earlier research to understand the research trends in KM, their studies were not able to adequately map the utilisation of mixed methods research (MMR) in the field. MMR has been described as a third methodological movement (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), which expanded its use between 2000 and 2009 (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; 2018). It is doubtful that studies that were conducted before 2009 can fully capture the influence of MMR in a research field. This gap partly justifies the need for this study.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on trend studies in KM, and engage with other researchers who have conducted similar studies. Secondly, it contributes to research practice and understanding of the use of various research designs when investigating KM matters. Thirdly, it contributes to mapping of the contours of the field of research methodology in KM in the wake of the third methodological movement. It is our hope that this study will provide a source of reference for other researchers interested in KM research methodologies and help to stimulate further thinking and debate on the subject.

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