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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Supplementary strategies identified additional eligible studies in qualitative systematic reviews

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: There is an increasing number of qualitative systematic reviews being produced. Searching for qualitative literature to include in these systematic reviews is, however, more challenging and may result in less than favorable recall. Database searches relying solely on key elements of the research question may not retrieve all relevant qualitative studies for synthesis, and supplementary searches may be pertinent to complement the searches. This study aimed to determine, if a) supplementary search strategies (citation searches and alternative search strategies) were able to identify relevant publications for qualitative systematic reviews that were nonretrievable, when conducting traditional database searches based on key elements; and b) to investigate the total number of identified publications when combining traditional database searches with these supplementary search strategies.

Methods: From a previous study, a gold standard of 12 qualitative reviews including 101 PubMed-indexed publications was used. One of the reviews had only one included publication and in one review, the two included studies were identifiable in PubMed. In the remaining 10 reviews, 61 publications were retrievable through traditional database searches, and 37 were nonidentifiable. The 61 publications were used as basis for possible identification of the 37 publications by using the supplementary search strategies: citations searches (review of reference lists, PubMed ''Cited by'' function; Scopus ''Cited by'' function, Citationchaser, CoCites plugin for PubMed) and alternative search strategies (PubMed ''similar articles'' function; Scopus ''Related documents based on references'').

Results: Traditional database searches retrieved 62.4% of the 101 publications. Citations searches in Scopus, Citationchaser and CoCites identified 21 (56.8%) of the 37 remaining publications. The PubMed ''Cited by'' function did not identify any of the 37 publications. The alternative search strategies, the PubMed ''Similar articles'' together with Scopus ''Related documents based on references''-function) identified 15 (40.5%) of the 37 publications. Together, these supplementary search strategies identified 25 (67.6%) of the 37 publications, resulting in an overall retrieval of 87.1%, when combining traditional database searches and supplementary search strategies.

Conclusion: The results of this study indicate that supplementary search strategies (citation searches and alternative search strategies) increase the retrieval potential, when searching for qualitative publications and should be included, when identifying literature for qualitative reviews. © 2023 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Keywords: Qualitative reviews; Systematic reviews; Literature search; Retrieval; Supplementing searches; Alternative searches; Citation searching

1. Introduction

The number of qualitative systematic reviews/qualitative evidence syntheses has increased dramatically, and there is a growing volume of studies addressing methods on how to systematically review and synthesize findings from qualitative studies [1,2]. A systematic review relies on the retrieval of relevant studies, but the searches needed for a qualitative systematic review can be challenging and time consuming to conduct [2,3].

Among the challenges faced by a qualitative reviewer are the lack of clear concepts related to qualitative studies

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What is new?

Key findings

- Combining all of the supplementary strategies used in this study 67.6% of the publications that were not retrieved using thorough searches in databases were retrieved. An overall retrieval of 87.8% of the eligible publications was achieved, when combining both traditional database searches with supplementary searches.

What this adds to what was known?

- The results of this study indicate that citations searches, reviewing reference lists and alternative search strategies increase the number of eligible publications retrieved, when searching for qualitative publications.

What is the implication and what should change now?

- There are considerable differences across tools and choice of tool for supplementary searches should be considered carefully.

and the lack of methods developed specifically for locating qualitative studies [3]. Search filters to identify qualitative studies can be a helpful tool and many have been developed [4]. A search filter needs to balance the ratio of sensitivity (retrieval of all relevant articles) and precision (retrieval of relevant articles as a proportion of total number of records found), but unfortunately it is not possible to suggest a single search filter to identify qualitative research [4–6]. Furthermore, many researchers rely on identifying relevant studies using database features that identify similar or related publications which typically relies on either word similarity using weights of terms appearing in title, abstract and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) [7] or shared references in the reference lists [8]. Generally, many approaches are suggested in the literature to strengthen the retrieval of qualitative studies, however there are few standard requirements and robust, general approaches may be laborious [9]. Supplementary approaches include citation chasing, handsearching, trial register searching, web searching and contacting study authors or experts [10].

When searching for qualitative health literature it is particularly challenging to retrieve all potentially relevant studies [11,12]. Relevant studies may be indexed in the databases although not retrieved using traditional search strategies in the databases [13]. Challenges with indexing and abstract content make it difficult to devise an efficient search strategy in traditional bibliographic databases and it is therefore necessary to go beyond the traditional database search strategies [14] or use a tailored approach to identify eligible studies [15]. Existing guidelines for the conduct of systematic reviews of qualitative health literature emphasize the importance of performing supplementing searches [10,16,17] and it is recommended to report the results explicitly [18–20].

Citation searching is recommended as a supplementing search strategy, and frameworks exist [21–23]. Citation searching can be directed both backwards and forwards. Backward citation searching identifies the references that were cited by a seed reference and can be manually checked in the reference list of the seed document. Forward citation searching identifies the citations to a seed document using a citation index [24]. Tools have also been developed to streamline and semiautomate tracing citation linkages [25]. An example is CoCites which consists of two searches: the cocitation search and the citation search [26]. Another example is Citationchaser which is a free and open source R-based tool for rapidly performing forward and backward citation chasing from a starting set of articles. Citationchaser makes use of The Lens.org, which includes >255 mill. Scholarly records [27,28].

The use of supplementary search strategies has been evaluated in many studies [10,24,29–31]. A recent scoping review concludes that citation searching adds value in most of the studies in the review; however, the benefit of using citation searching is difficult to assess and depends on multiple factors [24]. Recent single review cases show that citation searching was necessary to identify all included studies in a systematic review of urgent and emergency care [32] and implementation of nurse-led interventions in dementia care [33]. In some cases citation searching can retrieve a high share of the relevant studies for a systematic review [34] but citation searching may not always be the best use of valuable time and resources [35]. The low recall may be caused by lacking citation links that create citation islands which means that citation networks cannot be relied on for evidence retrieval [36].

The use of supplementary search strategies is recommended as best practice; however, further research is needed to better understand these search methods and especially to generalize to provide researchers with a clear overview of strengths and weaknesses of each method [10]. The aims of this study are to a) determine if supplementary search strategies, that is, citation searches (forward and backward citation searches) and alternative search strategies (database features that identify similar or related publications), can be used to retrieve relevant publications for qualitative systematic reviews that are not retrieved when conducting traditional database searches; and b) to investigate the total number of identified publications when combining traditional database searches with these supplementary search strategies.

2. Methods

This study relies on a set of qualitative systematic reviews from the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews

and the JBI database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation [11]. Figure 1 shows an overview of the study.

2.1. Inclusion of reviews and publications

Conceptualization models are recommended to structure a clinical question but also to facilitate searching for a precise answer to that question [37]. To investigate the retrieval potential of elements of conceptualizing models (e.g., PEO) in qualitative systematic reviews, an earlier study has investigated a pool of 12 reviews that were randomly chosen from the 71 reviews. We use these as a gold standard to evaluate the efficiency of alternative search strategies. The 12 reviews included 101 PubMed-indexed publications [13]. One of the 12 reviews had only one included publication that were nonidentifiable in PubMed, when following current recommendations (i.e., including the conceptual elements (P: patients/population), I (intervention/phenomenon of interest) and research type to structure the literature search). However, since the review only included one publication it would not be possible to perform the supplementary search strategies, and this publication were not included in these supplementary search strategy analyses. Another of the 12 reviews had two included studies, which were both identifiable in a PubMed search following current recommendations. These two publications were therefore not relevant to include in the supplementary search strategy analyses.

From the remaining 10 reviews, 61 publications were identifiable through traditional database searches, but 37 publications would not be possible to retrieve in a database search in PubMed, when designing a search strategy following current recommendations. We do not consider how these publications originally were identified for the reviews. These publications *are* indexed in PubMed, but since their bibliographic records lack terms for the specific elements of conceptualizing models that are recommended to form the search blocks, the publications would not be identified in a PubMed search following these recommendations. Therefore, to identify these publications, alternative search strategies would be necessary. To imitate the recommended procedure of citation searching [38], the publications that were identifiable through database searches ($n = 61$) were used as basis for the supplementary search strategies in the attempt to identify the remaining 37 publications.

2.2. Supplementary search strategies

The two categories of supplementary search strategies include a total of seven unique supplementary strategies used in this study:

Citation searches.

1. Review of reference lists (*backward citation search*)
2. PubMed ‘‘Cited by’’ function (*forward citation search)*
3. Scopus ‘‘Cited by’’ function (*forward citation search*)
4. The CoCites plugin for PubMed (reviewing the first 20 co-cited publications or publications co-cited $\geq$3 times).
5. Citationchaser (*forward citation search*)

Alternative search strategies.

6. PubMed ‘‘Similar articles’’ function (reviewing the first 20 publications)
7. Scopus ‘‘Related documents based on references’’ (reviewing the first 20 publications)

As a cutoff point for both the PubMed ‘‘Similar articles’’ function, Scopus ‘‘Related documents based on references’’ and the CoCites plugin for PubMed, we chose the first 20 publications, as we believe this would be a realistic and pragmatic number of publications for systematic reviewers to go through.

3. Results

From the 61 identifiable publications used as basis, the potential of the citation searches to retrieve the 37 nonidentifiable publications was explored. Table 1 provides an overview of the reviews, the number of publications that can be retrieved using traditional bibliographic database searches and the results of various citation searching strategies.

From the results it is evident that the ‘‘cited by’’ function in PubMed do not identify further publications. However, by using the same publications as starting point for the ‘‘cited by’’ function in Scopus, we can identify four additional publications. This discrepancy is due to lack of citation data for some publications in PubMed compared to Scopus. Reviewing the reference lists of the 61 publications retrieved from PubMed, provides us with nine additional publications. Finally, by reviewing the first 20 cocited publications in CoCites, we identify 16 publications. In total, when using citation searches, we can identify a total of 21 publications (56.8.%) of the 37 publications not retrieved in traditional database searches.

Now we turn to the retrieval potential of alternative search strategies (PubMed ‘‘Similar articles’’ and Scopus ‘‘Related documents’’). Table 2 provides an overview of the retrieval potential of these alternative strategies. The ’’Similar articles’’-function in PubMed identifies 13 of the 37 publications while Scopus’ ‘‘Related documents’’-function identifies eight publications. However, due to overlap in the retrieved publications, these alternative search strategies together identify 15 (40.1%) of the 37 publications not retrieved in traditional database searches.

The maximum retrieval (25 of the 37 publications, i.e., 67.6%) is achieved, when combining related searches, reference, and citation searches. Alternative search strategies thus provide us with 15 (40.5%) unique publications and citation searching provides us with 10 (27.0%) unique

Table 1. Retrieval of included publications using citation searches

Rev. no.	Publications identifiable through database searches[a]	Included publications *not* identified in database searches[b]	1. Review of reference lists	2. PubMed "cited by"	3. Scopus "cited by"	4. CoCites[c] plugin for PubMed	Citationchaser	Total number of publications retrieved in citation searches
#1	9	5	1	0	1	2	0	**3 (60%)**
#2	5	3	0	0	1	1	1	**1 (33.3%)**
#3	3	1	1	0	0	1	0	**1 (100%)**
#4	7	2	0	0	0	1	0	**1 (50%)**
#5	4	4	1	0	0	2	0	**2 (50%)**
#6	8	15	3	0	0	6	0	**8 (53.3%)**
#7	5	2	0	0	1	0	1	**1 (50%)**
#8	10	1	0	0	0	0	0	**0**
#9	9	3	3	0	1	2	1	**3 (100%)**
#10	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	**1 (100%)**
Total	**61**	**37**	**9**	**0**	**4**	**16**	**3**	**21 (56.8%)**

[a] The publications listed in this column were identifiable through traditional database searches and were used as basis for the citation searches.
[b] The publications listed in this column were nonidentifiable through traditional database searches and were attempted identified via citation searches.
[c] The first 20 cocited references, cocited >1. Recall can be increased by changing the parameters in CoCites. The results are available in Appendix 1.

publications (Table 1). Consequently, both strategies add a considerable number of uniquely retrieved publications. The "Similar articles"-function in PubMed as well as CoCites seem to be powerful supplementary tools to traditional database searches. In addition to the cocitation search in CoCites shown in Table 1 (first 20 publications), we explored different cut-offs for CoCites (Appendix 2). Using a CoCites cutoff of cocited ≥3 as alternative to the first 20 cocited publications (Table 1), only increased the total number of unique publications with one publication, from 25 of 37 (67.6%) to 26 of 37 (70.3%). The number of publications needed to be screened on the other hand varied a lot (from an average of 0.7–106 publications), when changing the cutoff to cocited ≥3, indicating that changing the cut-off to possibly identify more relevant studies comes with a time cost.

Despite using and combining several strategies and tools, we still lacked identification of 12 of 37 publications (32.4%). Furthermore, one of the 12 reviews had only one publication included. This publication was nonidentifiable through database searches, but being the only included publication, it was not possible to perform neither citation search nor alternative search strategies to identify this publication.

Thus, a total of 13 publications were not identifiable neither through traditional database searches nor the citation searches and alternative search strategies performed in this study. These 13 publications are indexed in the

Table 2. Retrieval of included publications using traditional database searches and alternative strategies

Review	Included pub. not retrieved in database searches	PubMed "similar articles"	Scopus "related documents based on references"	Unique pub. Retrieved through alternative strategies	Unique pub. Retrieved through citation searches and alternative search strategies
#1	5	1	1	**2**	**3 (60%)**
#2	3	0	0	**0**	**1 (33.3%)**
#3	1	1	1	**1**	**1 (100%)**
#4	2	0	0	**0**	**1 (50%)**
#5	4	2	0	**2**	**3 (75%)**
#6	15	5	3	**6**	**10 (66.6%)**
#7	2	2	2	**2**	**2 (100%)**
#8	1	0	0	**0**	**0**
#9	3	2	1	**2**	**3 (100%)**
#10	1	0	0	**0**	**1 (100%)**
Total	**37**	**13**	**8**	**15**	**25 (67.6%)**

databases; however, using recommended strategies and alternative strategies failed to retrieve them.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to determine whether supplementary search strategies in terms of citations searches, and alternative search strategies could identify publications for systematic reviews of qualitative health literature that are not retrieved when conducting traditional database searches. Furthermore, we aimed to investigate the total number of identified publications when combining traditional database searches with these supplementary search strategies.

Our findings suggest that it may be challenging to retrieve publications for qualitative reviews, even though these publications are indexed in PubMed. Traditional database searches managed to retrieve a total of 62.4% (63 identifiable publications from 11 reviews with a total of 101 publication) of the included studies in a set of qualitative reviews [13], and supplementing with alternative search strategies and citation searching recall increased to 87.1% (63 publications identifiable through traditional database searches plus 25 publications identifiable through citation searches and alternative search strategies out of 101 total publications). Again, it should be stressed that all the publications not retrieved are in fact indexed in PubMed, and therefore should be expected to be identifiable in some way. Citation searching and alternative search strategies contribute with a considerable number of uniquely retrieved publications. The specific number depends on the tools applied, and in particular ''Related articles'' in PubMed and citation searching in CoCites contributed considerably.

There are obvious limitations to this study that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, the data material is rather limited; hence, the number of publications not retrieved in traditional database searches was just 37. Despite using retrievable publications to identify nonretrievable from the same review, it is possible that retrievable and nonretrievable publications differed significantly in scope and outcome and therefore would not cite each other, nor identify as ''similar'' or ''related''. Despite reaching a rather high level of retrieval (87.1%), when combining traditional database searches with citation searches and alternative search strategies, this could perhaps explain why the retrieval percentage is not even closer to 100%.

In addition to this, the ''Related documents'' function used in Scopus is based on documents that share references with the specific reference searched for [39]. In a few cases, reference lists were not indexed in Scopus, preventing this functionality to work. It is possible to find related documents in Scopus based on authors and keywords, which could potentially have identified more of the *non*identifiable references. Furthermore, only the first 20 publications were reviewed when using the ''Similar articles''-function in PubMed, ''Related documents'' in Scopus and CoCites cocited publications. Setting broader limits would very likely have resulted in a higher number of identified publications.

Other explanations to as why the retrieval is not 100% could be that two of the 12 not-retrieved publications are in Portuguese [40,41] which could indicate a language barrier. These publications could theoretically have been identified via PubMed's ''Similar articles''. However, the ''Similar articles''-function rely on word similarity, and the two publications had short English abstracts and relatively few MeSH-terms, making identification difficult. Another important aspect that should be brought into this discussion, is the fact that our analyses are based on

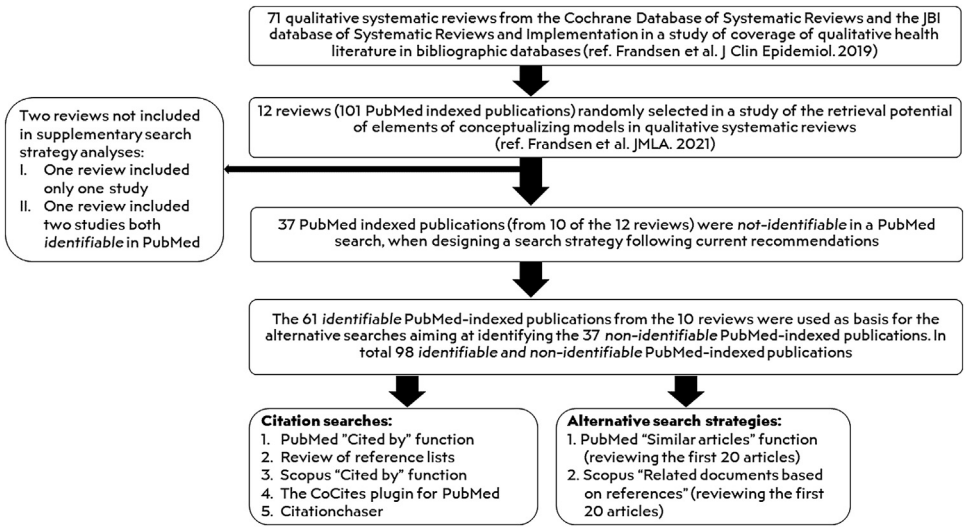

Fig. 1. Shows an overview and flow diagram of the study.

qualitative reviews and hence, qualitative studies and publications. As mentioned previously, traditional database searches only retrieved 62.4% of the (PubMed-indexed) publications included in a set of qualitative reviews [13] (when the specific elements of conceptualizing models that are recommended were used to form the search blocks). You would therefore have to rely on supplementary searches. Booth argues that reference checking must be a default for every (qualitative) review and that citation searching may also be quite fruitful [2]. Our analysis focuses on qualitative reviews and the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to all review types.

Existing studies find many advantages of citation searching as a search strategy. Citation searching overcomes the reliance of using MeSH terms, keywords, or potential lack of indexing. Furthermore, citation searching can use the citation network surrounding a seed document to identify further relevant studies. The citation network consists of the studies that are in the reference list of a seed document and the studies that cite it [19]. Among the disadvantages is that there is little agreement on the number and choice of citation databases as well as lacking knowledge of the cost-effectiveness [10]. This study confirms that searching for eligible studies for qualitative reviews is challenging and that citation searches and alternative strategies are essential to increase the recall achieved through traditional database searching. However, we also find that the applied alternative search strategies in this study cannot retrieve *all* the relevant studies not found in traditional database searches. Citation searching increases overall recall in these reviews from 62.4% to 83.2%. Alternative search strategies increase recall from 62.4% to 77.2%. Combining these two approaches increases recall from 62.4% to 87.1%, leaving 12.9% of the included studies that the supplementary search strategies applied in this study fail to retrieve. Consequently, supplementary search strategies cannot completely compensate for poor retrieval in the traditional databases. However, it should be noted that searches for a systematic review should always be conducted in multiple databases and as indexing differs across databases, and this may also increase retrieval of relevant studies.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, our results suggest that supplementary search strategies, that is, citations searches and alternative search strategies, are beneficial and should be included, when identifying literature for qualitative reviews.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2023.04.017.

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