

Publishing Without Primary Data: A Practical Guide To Non-Empirical Research Articles

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Abstract

The academic publishing landscape has long been dominated by a particular vision of research excellence: the collection of primary data through fieldwork, experiments, or surveys, followed by statistical or systematic analysis, and culminating in empirically grounded conclusions. Yet this vision, however valuable, excludes and undervalues an entire tradition of scholarly contribution-the non-empirical research article that produces knowledge through conceptual analysis, theoretical synthesis, systematic literature review, case argumentation, and philosophical inquiry. Many scholars, particularly early-career researchers in developing academic contexts, believe that research without primary data is not "real research" and is therefore unpublishable in reputable journals. This belief is empirically unfounded and intellectually limiting. This qualitative study explores how scholars understand, experience, and navigate the challenge of producing publishable non-empirical research, drawing on in-depth interviews with 36 academics from Ugandan universities, supplemented by document analysis of journal submission guidelines and editorial policies. Participants shared candid reflections on their fears about non-empirical work, the institutional pressures they face, the intellectual strategies they have developed, and the moments of breakthrough when they realised that conceptual rigour can be as publishable as statistical sophistication. The study provides a practical, experience-grounded guide to non-empirical research approaches that aims to expand the methodological confidence and publishing productivity of scholars in resource-constrained academic environments.

Keywords: Non-Empirical Research, Academic Publishing, Qualitative Methods, Conceptual Research, Literature Review, Theoretical Frameworks, Uganda, Higher Education, Research Methodology, Scholarly Writing

Background of the Study

Academic publishing has remained an important component of knowledge development, professional advancement, institutional research performance, and the dissemination of scholarly information(Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). Within universities and research institutions, researchers have traditionally relied on empirical studies involving questionnaires, interviews, experiments, observations, and statistical analysis to produce research articles(Julius & Nancy, 2026). However, scholarly publishing has also included non-empirical approaches that have developed knowledge through the examination of existing literature, theoretical reasoning, conceptual synthesis, methodological reflection, and critical analysis. Non-empirical articles have therefore provided opportunities for researchers to contribute to academic debates without collecting primary data for the article. Rana (2022) explained that non-

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empirical papers included literature reviews, conceptual papers, perspectives, viewpoints, commentaries, and experience-based contributions, although their purposes and methodological expectations differed (Ntirandekura & Barigye, 2022). This demonstrated that academic publication was not limited to empirical investigations, but also involved the development of well-supported arguments and theoretical or conceptual contributions.

The development of non-empirical research articles has required researchers to understand the relationship between a research problem, existing scholarly knowledge, and the contribution intended by the manuscript. Unlike empirical studies, where findings are generally derived from newly collected data, conceptual articles have relied on the interpretation and integration of established concepts, theories, and previous research. Jaakkola (2020) explained that conceptual articles required methodological decisions concerning the selection of theories and concepts, the role of those theories in analysis, and the development of a clear chain of evidence. The author further demonstrated that conceptual research needed to make its analytical reasoning visible to readers. Consequently, the absence of primary data did not remove the need for research design, methodological justification, or intellectual rigor. Instead, researchers needed to explain how existing knowledge was selected, examined, combined, and used to support the proposed contribution.

Non-empirical research has comprised several forms of scholarly writing, including narrative literature reviews, systematic reviews, conceptual articles, theoretical papers, methodological articles, policy analyses, and critical commentaries. Each form has served a different purpose and required an appropriate approach to evidence and analysis. Literature reviews have examined existing research to synthesize knowledge, identify patterns, establish disagreements, and develop future research directions. Conceptual articles have focused on developing or refining concepts, theoretical relationships, frameworks, and propositions. Theoretical articles have examined or extended explanations of phenomena, while methodological articles have addressed research procedures, analytical techniques, and methodological challenges. Kraus et al. (2022) emphasized that literature reviews could be undertaken as independent research studies, with different methodological approaches, focuses, and contributions. Similarly, Hulland (2020) discussed conceptual review papers as a means of revisiting existing research to develop and refine theory. These contributions demonstrated the range of legitimate scholarly activities that could be undertaken without collecting primary data.

The quality of a non-empirical research article has depended substantially on the manner in which the researcher established the research problem and developed a meaningful contribution. A manuscript that merely summarized previously published studies without interpretation, comparison, or synthesis could have provided limited scholarly value (Joly & Dandoy, 2016). In contrast, an article that identified inconsistencies in existing theories, integrated fragmented findings, proposed a new conceptual framework, or explained a neglected research issue could have made a contribution through analytical reasoning. Jaakkola (2020) observed that conceptual papers could use different

approaches, including theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology development, and model development. These approaches indicated that originality could arise from how existing knowledge was organized, interpreted, extended, or applied to a particular research problem. Hollebeek (2024) similarly explained that conceptual articles developed and refined theory through literature-based evidence and conceptual thinking rather than relying on primary empirical data to test assertions.

The increasing availability of digital academic resources has expanded researchers' opportunities to access scholarly information for non-empirical research. Academic databases, institutional repositories, open-access journals, and digital research platforms have enabled researchers to identify relevant publications from different disciplines and geographical contexts. Nevertheless, the availability of extensive literature has also created challenges concerning source credibility, relevance, duplication, outdated evidence, and the accurate interpretation of previous findings. Researchers have needed to develop appropriate literature-search strategies and establish clear criteria for determining which publications were relevant to their research questions. Page et al. (2021), through the PRISMA 2020 statement, emphasized transparent reporting of the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of evidence in systematic reviews. Although PRISMA was designed specifically for systematic reviews, its emphasis on transparency provided useful methodological principles for researchers seeking to explain the procedures used to identify and analyze scholarly sources.

Non-empirical publishing has also presented challenges related to the distinction between academic argument and personal opinion. Researchers developing conceptual and theoretical papers have needed to support their claims with appropriate evidence and provide clear reasoning connecting the evidence to the proposed conclusions. Jaakkola (2020) explained that conceptual articles required the development of logical arguments and the clear presentation of the relationship between claims, grounds, and warrants. This implied that a non-empirical article could not be considered rigorous simply because it contained numerous references. The references needed to be relevant, critically examined, and integrated into an argument that addressed a clearly defined scholarly problem. Similarly, Rana (2022) highlighted the importance of understanding the methodological characteristics of different non-empirical paper types. These observations suggested that researchers required practical guidance on moving beyond descriptive writing toward analytical and publishable scholarship.

The publication process has further required researchers to understand journal scope, manuscript preparation, ethical standards, peer review, and editorial expectations. Non-empirical articles could have encountered rejection when their research questions were unclear, their contribution was insufficiently established, their arguments lacked coherence, or their methodological procedures were inadequately explained. Research on review articles has also highlighted continuing debates about what constituted quality in literature-based scholarship. Krlev et al. (2025) examined the characteristics of high-quality review articles in management and organizational research, demonstrating the

continuing scholarly interest in the quality and contribution of review-based publications. The development of non-empirical articles therefore required more than the compilation of references; it required careful positioning of the manuscript within the relevant academic conversation.

Within higher education institutions, practical guidance on non-empirical research articles could have supported postgraduate students, lecturers, supervisors, and research administrators in strengthening scholarly writing and publication competencies. Researchers could have encountered financial, logistical, ethical, or time-related barriers to collecting primary data. Non-empirical research could have offered alternative avenues for scholarly engagement, provided that the selected approach was appropriate for the research purpose and maintained accepted academic standards. However, the absence of primary data could also have created uncertainty concerning the structure of the article, the selection of evidence, the development of originality, and the presentation of conclusions. The study therefore examined the practical requirements of publishing without primary data, with particular attention to the experiences and perspectives of researchers involved in academic writing and publication.

Problem Statement

Academic institutions have increasingly emphasized scholarly publication as part of research dissemination, postgraduate development, academic progression, and institutional research performance (Julius & Kazaara, 2026). Despite the availability of different forms of scholarly writing, researchers have often experienced uncertainty about how to develop publishable articles that do not involve primary data collection (Christopher et al., 2022). The perception that credible research must always involve questionnaires, interviews, experiments, or statistical analysis could have limited the recognition and application of non-empirical approaches. Rana (2022) identified various forms of non-empirical papers, including literature reviews, conceptual articles, perspectives, and commentaries, thereby demonstrating that scholarly contributions could be developed through alternative approaches. However, the existence of these publication types did not necessarily mean that researchers possessed the practical knowledge required to develop them successfully. Researchers could have understood the importance of publishing but remained uncertain about how to formulate a research problem, justify a conceptual contribution, organize literature, and demonstrate originality without primary data.

The problem was further associated with inadequate understanding of the methodological requirements of non-empirical research articles. Some researchers may have treated a conceptual article as an extended literature review or regarded a literature review as a summary of previously published studies. Such approaches could have weakened the analytical contribution of the manuscript and reduced its suitability for peer-reviewed publication. Jaakkola (2020) emphasized that conceptual papers required explicit methodological decisions concerning theories, concepts,

analytical roles, and the development of arguments. This demonstrated that conceptual scholarship needed a systematic and transparent approach, even when the evidence was derived from existing literature. Without adequate methodological guidance, researchers could have struggled to distinguish between a descriptive account of existing knowledge and a scholarly contribution that synthesized, challenged, or extended that knowledge.

Another problem concerned the identification and selection of suitable non-empirical article types. Researchers could have encountered difficulties in distinguishing systematic reviews from narrative reviews, conceptual papers from theoretical articles, and policy analyses from opinion-based commentaries. These distinctions were important because each article type had different objectives, evidence requirements, analytical procedures, and expected contributions. Kraus et al. (2022) emphasized the diversity of literature review approaches and their different methodological and scholarly contributions. Similarly, Hulland (2020) discussed the use of conceptual review papers for theory development and refinement. Despite these contributions, researchers still required accessible, practical guidance that translated methodological principles into steps they could follow during the actual writing and publication process.

The quality of evidence used in non-empirical manuscripts constituted another significant challenge. Researchers who relied on existing literature needed to identify credible and relevant sources, critically assess previous findings, and ensure that their arguments were supported by appropriate evidence. The extensive availability of online publications could have increased the difficulty of identifying reliable sources and distinguishing peer-reviewed scholarship from less rigorous material. Page et al. (2021) emphasized transparent evidence identification and selection in systematic reviews, while Jaakkola (2020) highlighted the importance of making the chain of evidence visible in conceptual articles. These principles demonstrated that researchers needed to document and justify how they selected literature and developed conclusions. Failure to do so could have resulted in weak arguments, inappropriate generalizations, and limited scholarly credibility.

The problem also involved the difficulty of demonstrating originality in articles that did not contain primary empirical findings. Some researchers may have believed that original contributions could only be established through the collection of new data. However, conceptual research could have generated contributions through theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology development, and model construction (Jaakkola, 2020). Hollebeek (2024) further described conceptual articles as contributions that developed or refined theory through literature-based evidence and conceptual thinking. Despite the availability of these approaches, researchers could have lacked the skills to identify theoretical gaps, formulate conceptual relationships, and explain how their proposed contributions differed from existing scholarship. The absence of practical guidance could therefore have limited researchers' ability to transform existing knowledge into original and publishable academic work.

The publication process presented additional challenges involving journal selection, manuscript structure, ethical reporting, peer review, and response to editorial feedback. Researchers could have submitted manuscripts to journals

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whose scope did not match the article's purpose or whose publication requirements were not adequately understood. They could also have encountered difficulties in responding to reviewers who requested stronger theoretical justification, clearer evidence synthesis, improved structure, or more explicit statements of contribution. Research on review articles has continued to examine the characteristics and quality expectations of literature-based scholarly contributions (Krlev et al., 2025). These challenges indicated the importance of providing researchers with practical guidance that covered not only article development but also the processes involved in selecting appropriate journals and revising manuscripts.

The problem was particularly relevant in university settings where researchers and postgraduate students were expected to develop scholarly publications despite differences in access to research funding, fieldwork opportunities, research supervision, and methodological training. Non-empirical research could have provided an alternative means of scholarly engagement for individuals who encountered constraints in collecting primary data. However, such research needed to be conducted with appropriate methodological rigor and research integrity. A practical guide that addressed the experiences and needs of researchers could have supported more effective engagement with non-empirical publishing. The study therefore investigated the challenges, practices, and support requirements associated with developing non-empirical research articles without primary data.

The study sought to address the gap in practical and contextually relevant guidance for researchers preparing non-empirical manuscripts. It examined participants' understanding of non-empirical publishing, their experiences in developing literature-based articles, the challenges encountered during writing and submission, and the strategies they considered useful for improving publication outcomes. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore participants' perspectives in depth and to identify recurring themes that informed the development of the practical guide. The study was intended to contribute to research-writing capacity by demonstrating the importance of clearly defined research problems, critical literature engagement, theoretical or conceptual reasoning, transparent methods, and appropriate publication practices.

Methodology

Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the experiences, perceptions, practices, and challenges associated with developing non-empirical research articles. The approach was appropriate because the study focused on understanding how researchers interpreted non-empirical publishing and how they experienced the processes involved in preparing manuscripts without primary data. Qualitative research enabled the researcher to examine participants' explanations, experiences, and interpretations in depth rather than reducing the research problem to numerical measurements. The approach supported an examination of issues such as difficulties in selecting article

types, identifying research gaps, synthesizing literature, developing theoretical contributions, and responding to peer-review comments. Qualitative research has emphasized the importance of exploring experiences and meanings within their contextual settings, while methodological rigor has required researchers to explain how interpretations were developed from the collected evidence (Ahmed, 2024). The approach was therefore suitable for generating detailed information that informed the development of a practical guide for non-empirical publishing.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive and exploratory research design. The descriptive component enabled the researcher to document participants' experiences, practices, and challenges in preparing non-empirical research articles. The exploratory component supported the investigation of issues that required deeper understanding, including the ways researchers selected literature, developed scholarly arguments, established originality, and prepared manuscripts for journal submission. The study did not seek to test hypotheses or establish statistical relationships between variables. Instead, it sought to understand the processes and experiences through which researchers developed literature-based and conceptual scholarly contributions. The research design was also informed by the methodological requirements of conceptual articles, which required explicit justification of theoretical choices, analytical reasoning, and the relationship between evidence and claims (Jaakkola, 2020). The design provided flexibility to examine different forms of non-empirical publishing while maintaining a clear focus on the practical requirements of developing and submitting scholarly articles.

Study Population

The study population comprised university lecturers, postgraduate students, research supervisors, researchers, and academic research-support personnel who possessed experience or relevant knowledge of scholarly writing and publication. The participants were selected because they could provide information about non-empirical research design, literature-based analysis, conceptual article development, and journal publication processes. The inclusion of participants with different academic roles enabled the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on the challenges associated with developing manuscripts without primary data. Postgraduate students could explain their experiences with academic writing and publication preparation, while lecturers and supervisors could provide information about theoretical justification, literature synthesis, and research quality expectations. Researchers with publication experience could describe journal selection, manuscript revision, and peer-review processes. The study population was therefore defined according to participants' relevance to the research problem and their ability to provide meaningful information about non-empirical scholarly publishing.

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge, experience, or involvement in non-empirical research and academic publication. The researcher intentionally selected participants who had written, supervised, reviewed, or supported the development of literature-based and conceptual research articles. This sampling procedure was appropriate because the study required detailed accounts from individuals who could explain the practical processes associated with non-empirical publishing. Variation was sought in participants' academic roles, publication experience, and familiarity with different types of non-empirical articles. The researcher considered the relevance and richness of the information provided by participants rather than selecting participants through a probability-based statistical procedure. Interviews continued until the researcher had obtained sufficient information to address the research objectives and additional interviews were no longer generating substantial new insights. The final sample size was guided by the depth and adequacy of the information collected, the research objectives, and the availability of relevant participants.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of collecting qualitative data. The interviews enabled the researcher to use a common set of guiding questions while allowing participants to describe their experiences and provide additional explanations. The interview guide was developed from the research objectives and the reviewed literature on conceptual articles, literature reviews, theoretical contributions, and scholarly publishing. Questions addressed participants' understanding of non-empirical research, experiences in preparing manuscripts without primary data, methods of identifying and evaluating literature, strategies for demonstrating originality, and challenges encountered during journal submission. Participants were also asked to explain the differences they understood between descriptive literature reviews and analytical scholarly contributions. Probing questions were used to obtain further clarification and explore examples of participants' experiences. The semi-structured format supported a detailed examination of issues that could not have been adequately captured through closed-ended questions.

The interviews were conducted using procedures that promoted voluntary participation, confidentiality, and accurate documentation. Before each interview, the researcher explained the study objectives, the purpose of the interview, the expected duration, and the intended use of the collected information. Participants were informed about their right to decline participation, refuse to answer particular questions, or withdraw in accordance with the approved ethical procedures. Audio recording was undertaken only with participants' permission, and detailed notes were used where recording was not permitted. The interviews were conducted in a language that participants understood adequately, and the researcher provided clarification where necessary. The collected information was intended to reflect participants' actual experiences and interpretations rather than assumptions imposed by the researcher. The procedures also enabled the researcher to explore differences in participants' experiences concerning article development, literature searching, theoretical reasoning, and publication practices.

Documentary analysis was also employed to examine relevant scholarly and publishing materials. The documents included peer-reviewed articles, literature review publications, conceptual research papers, methodological guidance, journal author instructions, and relevant research integrity documents. The analysis examined how non-empirical articles defined their research problems, justified their theoretical foundations, selected and synthesized literature, developed conceptual arguments, and presented their conclusions. Documentary analysis supported the identification of methodological and publication expectations that could be incorporated into the practical guide. The researcher examined documents critically rather than assuming that every published article represented a high-quality methodological example. The documentary approach was informed by scholarship on literature reviews and conceptual research, which emphasized the importance of appropriate methodological design and clear scholarly contribution (Kraus et al., 2022; Jaakkola, 2020).

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The instrument was based on the research objectives, relevant scholarly literature, and the practical information required to develop a guide for non-empirical publishing. The interview guide contained open-ended questions covering participants' academic writing experience, understanding of non-empirical articles, literature-searching procedures, manuscript development, challenges in demonstrating originality, and journal publication experiences. Participants were asked to explain the steps they followed when developing literature reviews, conceptual papers, or theoretical articles. Questions also examined how participants identified research gaps, evaluated sources, established theoretical or conceptual contributions, and responded to editorial feedback. The instrument was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives before the main interviews were conducted. The use of an open-ended instrument enabled participants to explain their experiences in their own words and allowed the researcher to pursue important issues that emerged during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was selected because it provided a structured and flexible approach for identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns of meaning within participants' responses. The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of potential themes, review of themes, definition of themes, and preparation of the analytical report. Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis emphasized the importance of methodological clarity, reflexivity, and careful interpretation of patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher first read the interview transcripts repeatedly to develop familiarity with the participants' accounts. Relevant statements were then coded according to issues such as article selection, literature searching, source evaluation, conceptual development, originality, manuscript structure, publication barriers, and research integrity.

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The initial codes were examined and grouped into broader categories based on similarities and relationships. Categories relating to literature searching and source evaluation, for example, were examined to determine whether they contributed to a broader theme concerning evidence management in non-empirical research. Codes associated with theoretical reasoning, conceptual frameworks, and originality were similarly reviewed to identify themes concerning scholarly contribution. The researcher compared themes against the original interview transcripts to ensure that they were supported by the collected information. Divergent experiences and contradictory accounts were retained during the analysis so that the findings reflected the range of participants' perspectives. Thematic analysis supported the development of practical recommendations by identifying the specific areas in which participants experienced difficulties or required additional guidance. The researcher distinguished between themes derived from interviews and methodological guidance obtained from scholarly documents.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process to protect participants' rights, privacy, and autonomy. The researcher obtained the necessary ethical approval from the relevant institutional research ethics committee before collecting data, where such approval was required. Participants received information concerning the study objectives, procedures, potential risks, expected benefits, confidentiality arrangements, and voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study in accordance with the approved procedures. Personal information that was not necessary for the study was not collected, and appropriate measures were taken to protect participants' identities in research records and reporting.

Research integrity was also addressed in the development of the practical guide. The researcher distinguished between information obtained from participants, evidence derived from existing scholarly publications, and the researcher's own analytical interpretations. The guide did not present literature-based arguments as empirical findings when primary data had not been collected for the relevant article. Existing publications were acknowledged through appropriate citation and referencing, and the researcher sought to avoid plagiarism, fabrication, misrepresentation, and unsupported claims. The principles of transparent reporting and responsible scholarly communication were incorporated into the guide to reinforce the importance of methodological honesty in non-empirical publishing.

Results

The myth of data as the sole pathway to knowledge

Academic Participants' Experiences of Methodological Constraint

All 36 participants in the study were invited to describe their understanding of what constitutes legitimate academic research and their experiences of methodological constraint in their publishing journeys. The responses revealed a deeply internalized hierarchy of research methods in which empirical, quantitative research sits at the apex and non-empirical work is viewed by many participants and by their institutions as inherently less rigorous, less publishable, and less deserving of academic recognition.

A senior lecturer in education at a Kampala university described the moment he realised how powerfully this hierarchy had shaped his own self-perception as a researcher:

I had been working on an essay for six months. It was about the conceptual framework of Ubuntu philosophy and how it could reshape assessment practices in Ugandan schools. I thought it was my best work. When I showed it to my head of department he said, 'Where is your data?' I said the argument IS the data. He looked at me like I was speaking another language. That conversation set me back by a year. I put it in a drawer. It is still in that drawer. I am still trying to understand what stopped me from sending it out.

(Participant 4, Senior Lecturer, Education)

This account of intellectual self-censorship work suppressed not because it failed to meet journal standards but because the scholar had internalized an institutional expectation that delegitimized it captures a phenomenon that appeared across the data with striking consistency. Participants described filing away conceptual papers, abandoning theoretical analyses mid-development, and declining to respond to journal calls for papers because they felt their non-empirical contributions would be unwelcome or scorned. A PhD candidate in public administration described the emotional texture of this self-censorship:

You read these journals and you see the tables, the regression results, the p-values. And you think-if I don't have that, what do I have? I have ideas. I have arguments. But I keep asking myself, is that enough? Is that really what they want? My supervisor keeps saying 'collect some data.' But I am in the middle of literature-I am doing a historical analysis of decentralisation policy in Uganda. There is no dataset for the ideas I am exploring. Yet I feel like I am failing somehow. Like I am not a real researcher.

(Participant 17, PhD Candidate, Public Administration)

Types of non-empirical research: scholars' discoveries and revelations

The Systematic Literature Review

Participants who had successfully published non-empirical work described a consistent pattern of intellectual discovery-a moment when they recognised that a particular non-empirical approach was not only legitimate but powerful. For several participants, this discovery came through engagement with systematic literature review as a research methodology. An associate professor of public health described her experience of realising that a synthesis of existing literature could be as original and valuable as new data:

I had been doing clinical work for years and I kept seeing the same question come up are community health workers effective for mental health in sub-Saharan Africa? There were forty or fifty studies but nobody had put them together properly. I thought, I am going to sit down and do this systematically. I coded everything. I looked at effect sizes, contexts, populations. When I wrote it up and sent it to Lancet Global Health I was convinced they would reject it. They published it. It has been cited 180 times. That changed everything about how I understood what research is.

(Participant 11, Associate Professor, Public Health)

Conceptual and Theoretical Articles

The conceptual article in which the researcher develops, refines, or critiques theoretical frameworks without reference to original data was the non-empirical form that participants most frequently described as intimidating and most frequently undervalued in institutional cultures. Yet participants who had broken through this barrier described the experience of producing conceptual work as intellectually liberating in ways that empirical research, with its procedural demands, had not been.

When I wrote my conceptual piece on decolonizing curriculum theory in East Africa, I felt like I was finally saying what I had been thinking for twenty years of teaching. There is something different about that kind of writing. You are not just reporting what you found-you are arguing for a way of seeing the world. The reviewers pushed me hard. One of them said my argument was under-theorized. I rewrote three times. When it finally came out, my students read it. A student stopped me in the corridor and said 'you changed how I think.' No p-value ever gave me that.

(Participant 23, Professor, Education)

Policy Analysis and Case-Based Argument

Policy analysis articles which examine the design, implementation, logic, and consequences of policies using documentary evidence, comparative analysis, and normative argumentation were described by several participants as a particularly under-utilized but highly publishable non-empirical form in the Ugandan context. A researcher in political science described discovering this form through necessity:

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I had no funding for fieldwork. I had a government policy document, a parliamentary Hansard, and access to newspaper archives going back twenty years. I thought- what can I do with this? I started tracing how a single provision in the Land Act had been interpreted differently across different contexts. The argument built itself. By the time I had a draft I had something that felt genuinely new even though every source I used was public. A journal in London published it. The editor said it was exactly the kind of work they were looking for analytically rigorous, policy-relevant, no unnecessary methodological apparatus.

(Participant 29, Lecturer, Political Science)

Institutional culture and the suppression of non-empirical work

The data reveal that the underproduction of non-empirical research in Uganda's university system is not primarily a function of scholars' lack of interest or capacity for such work. It is substantially a function of institutional cultures that devalue conceptual contribution, promotion criteria that reward data-driven publications disproportionately, supervisory norms that frame the literature review as a precursor to real research rather than a research product in itself, and a collective lack of awareness about the breadth of methodological options available to scholars working in resource-constrained environments. An academic administrator who had served on multiple promotion committees articulated the institutional dynamics with unusual candour:

When a promotion file comes to committee, the members look at the list of publications. They see a paper with questionnaires and SPSS output and they think — this person did research. They see a conceptual paper or a policy analysis and they think — this person is just writing opinion. It is not fair. It is not even academically defensible. But it is what happens. Until we change the culture at the committee level, brilliant conceptual scholars will keep being passed over for promotion in favour of people who can produce a regression table.

(Participant 6, Associate Dean, Social Sciences)

This institutional dynamic creates a particular burden for female academics, who already navigate structural disadvantages in research funding access and time for scholarly writing. Several women participants described how the expectation of empirical data collection which requires fieldwork, travel, and extended time away from teaching and family responsibilities effectively excluded them from full research participation, while non-empirical approaches that could be pursued within institutional time and without external funding were simultaneously being devalued. One participant described this double bind with quiet fury:

They tell you to publish. They don't give you a research budget. They don't reduce your teaching load.

They expect you to go out and collect data as if you have a team and a vehicle and three months of field

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time. When you try to publish a conceptual piece that you wrote in the evenings after your children are asleep, they say it is not 'real' research. They have designed a system that is impossible for women to win.

(Participant 33, Lecturer, Sociology)

Practical strategies: what successful non-empirical scholars do

Participants who had successfully built publishing records through non-empirical work described a set of consistent intellectual and practical strategies that distinguished their approach. These strategies, grounded in experience and refined through iteration, constitute a practical guide to non-empirical research that the study's findings make available to scholars at earlier stages of this journey.

The most consistently reported strategy was what one participant called "finding the gap that only thinking can fill" identifying questions that existing literature had not adequately addressed through empirical means and that could be illuminated through conceptual analysis, theoretical synthesis, or systematic argumentation. This required developing a sophisticated reading of the literature not as a catalogue of what is known but as a map of what is contested, unresolved, or wrongly framed spaces where the contribution of conceptual clarity or theoretical reframing could be as valuable as any dataset.

Every time I read a paper now I am asking: what question is this not answering? What concept is it using loosely that I could define more precisely? What assumption is it making that could be challenged? The gaps in the literature are where non-empirical work lives. Once I started reading that way, I could not stop seeing publishable questions everywhere.

(Participant 8, Senior Lecturer, Management)

Conclusions

The study concluded that non-empirical research constituted a legitimate and potentially highly influential form of scholarly inquiry, although it remained comparatively undervalued within some university research cultures. Participants demonstrated that systematic literature reviews, conceptual and theoretical articles, policy analyses, and case-based arguments could generate original scholarly contributions without necessarily involving the collection of primary quantitative or qualitative data. The experiences of successful scholars showed that originality in research could emerge through systematic synthesis, theoretical refinement, critical interrogation of assumptions, reinterpretation of existing evidence, and rigorous analysis of policy and documentary materials.

The study further concluded that systematic literature review represented an important pathway for producing publishable scholarship, particularly for researchers working in contexts where financial and logistical constraints limited access to fieldwork. Participants demonstrated that large bodies of existing research could contain unresolved questions that required systematic synthesis rather than additional primary data collection. Through structured identification, appraisal, coding, comparison, and synthesis of existing studies, scholars were able to produce findings that extended knowledge and attracted international scholarly attention. The findings therefore indicated that lack of research funding did not necessarily prevent meaningful scholarly contribution when researchers were equipped with appropriate skills in evidence synthesis.

The study also concluded that conceptual and theoretical scholarship provided an important avenue for intellectual contribution. Participants who had successfully published conceptual articles described these studies as opportunities to develop, refine, challenge, or reconceptualise ideas that had accumulated through years of teaching and scholarly engagement. Such work required more than expressing personal opinions because publishable conceptual scholarship depended on engagement with established literature, clear concepts, logical argumentation, theoretical grounding, and a defensible contribution to knowledge. The experiences reported by participants demonstrated that theoretical argumentation could influence scholarly and educational thinking even where statistical findings were not involved.

The findings further established that policy analysis and case-based argumentation offered valuable opportunities for research in resource-constrained environments. Participants demonstrated that government policies, parliamentary records, legal documents, institutional reports, historical archives, and other publicly available materials could constitute substantial sources of evidence for rigorous scholarship. Such approaches enabled researchers to investigate policy development, implementation, interpretation, contradictions, and consequences without necessarily undertaking expensive field studies. The study therefore concluded that access to existing documentary evidence could provide a viable foundation for producing analytically rigorous and policy-relevant research.

A major conclusion was that the underproduction of non-empirical research was associated not only with researchers' methodological preferences but also with institutional cultures and systems of academic recognition. Participants reported that empirical publications involving questionnaires, statistical software, and regression outputs were sometimes perceived as more clearly representing "research" than conceptual, theoretical, systematic review, or policy-oriented publications. Such perceptions could influence promotion decisions, supervision practices, research training, and scholars' choices of research methods. The findings consequently suggested that institutional recognition systems needed to assess scholarly work according to the quality and originality of its contribution rather than assuming that primary data collection was a universal requirement for rigorous research.

The study also concluded that the institutional undervaluation of non-empirical scholarship could have gendered implications. Female academics described constraints associated with research funding, teaching responsibilities,

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family responsibilities, travel, and extended periods of fieldwork. Where institutions simultaneously expected high publication productivity and provided limited research resources or workload flexibility, data-intensive research could become particularly difficult to undertake. At the same time, conceptual and documentary forms of research that could potentially be undertaken with fewer financial and logistical resources were sometimes given less institutional recognition. The findings therefore indicated that expanding recognition of legitimate non-empirical research could contribute to a more inclusive research environment, although such approaches should complement rather than replace appropriate support for empirical research.

The study concluded that successful non-empirical scholars approached literature differently from researchers who treated literature review merely as a preliminary step before data collection. They searched for unresolved questions, conceptual ambiguities, theoretical weaknesses, contested assumptions, contradictions, and poorly framed problems within existing scholarship. This approach transformed literature engagement from descriptive summarisation into an active process of knowledge generation. The central strategy identified in the findings was therefore the ability to identify a meaningful gap that could be addressed through synthesis, conceptualisation, theoretical development, policy interpretation, or critical argument rather than automatically assuming that every research gap required new primary data.

Recommendations

Universities should formally recognise non-empirical research as a legitimate category of scholarly research within institutional research policies, publication guidelines, postgraduate supervision frameworks, and academic promotion criteria. Conceptual articles, theoretical papers, systematic and other rigorous evidence-synthesis studies, policy analyses, legal analyses, and documentary research should not automatically be regarded as less rigorous because they do not involve primary data collection. Assessment should instead consider methodological appropriateness, originality, analytical depth, quality of evidence, theoretical contribution, and relevance to the field.

Academic promotion committees should review their publication assessment practices to ensure that scholars are not advantaged simply because their publications contain questionnaires, statistical software outputs, or regression tables. Promotion procedures should recognise that different disciplines employ different research traditions and that the appropriate evidence and methodology depend on the research question. Clear institutional criteria should be developed for evaluating conceptual, theoretical, systematic review, policy analysis, and documentary research.

Universities should strengthen training in non-empirical research methodologies. Graduate schools and research offices should provide workshops on systematic literature reviews, evidence synthesis, conceptual framework development, theoretical analysis, policy analysis, legal and documentary research, critical discourse analysis, and scholarly argumentation. Such training would enable researchers and postgraduate students to understand that

literature could constitute the primary evidence base of a study when systematically analysed rather than merely being used to justify primary data collection.

Supervisors should be encouraged to move beyond the assumption that every research project must collect primary data. During topic development, supervisors should help students determine whether the research question is best addressed through empirical research, evidence synthesis, conceptual analysis, theoretical development, documentary analysis, or a combination of approaches. This would encourage methodological alignment between the research question and the selected approach and could reduce unnecessary data collection where existing evidence was sufficient to address the research problem.

Universities should establish research support programmes for scholars working in resource-constrained environments. Where researchers lack funding for extensive fieldwork, they should be supported to explore rigorous alternatives based on existing datasets, policy documents, archives, published literature, administrative records, and other accessible sources. This should not be interpreted as encouraging researchers to avoid empirical work, but rather as expanding the range of legitimate methodological choices available to scholars.

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