

# Toward E-Public Engagement: A Review of Public Participation for Government Governance

*Research-in-Progress*

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## Abstract

*The e-public engagement plays more and more important roles in public decision-making process. It's essential to understand the current status, gaps, and future research directions for e-government platform design, particularly for the approaches to improve the interactive engagement with public opinions. This paper is a first attempt to review a series of literature on e-public engagement from an historical perspective by revisiting a series of concepts including the public sphere, the public engagement, the e-public sphere, and the e-public engagement. The concept of public engagement is thus clarified and the public needs framework is presented to clarify the need to re-design e-government platform contents to engage citizens in a more interactive approach. The review results of this paper suggest that a theoretical framework focusing on e-public engagement shall be investigated by future researchers.*

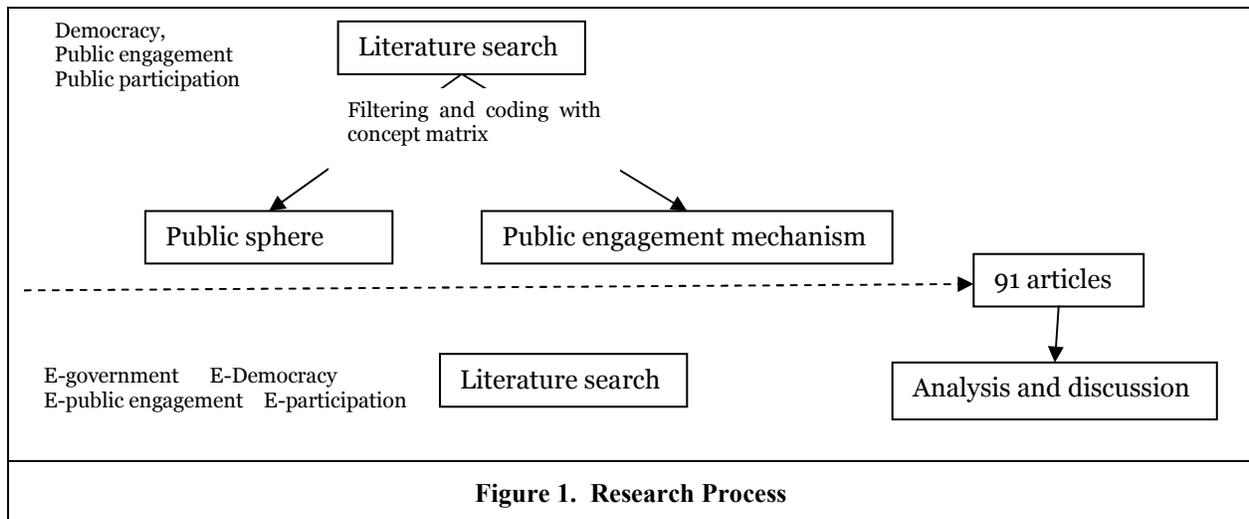
**Keywords:** E-participation, e-government, e-engagement, public sphere

## Introduction

E-public engagement, also referred to as e-participation, has been reported to benefit both states and citizens in a series of previous studies (Chadwick 2008; Kardan and Sadeghiani 2011; Näkki et al. 2011; Novak 2005; Panagiotopoulos et al. 2014; Warren et al. 2014; Zheng and Zheng 2014). Although substantial attention has been given to the outcome of governments' use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to inform, communicate with and involve their citizens in states' decision making process, there is little attempt to investigate how to effectively engage the citizens with ICT artefacts. Research on public engagement through ICT will not only help the policy makers to better design their ICT strategy but also help researches to theoretically understand how ICT could facilitate public decision-making process. This study aims to discuss the evolution of public engagement in the context of governance, provide the state-of-the-art of e-public engagement research, and propose the need for an abstract level of engagement to facilitate e-public engagement. The research paper tries to answer three research questions: 1) What is e-public engagement? 2) What factors have been identified from previous studies to influence e-public engagement? 3) What's the current research gap for e-public engagement research? An extensive review and analysis of 91 articles searched mainly from Google Scholar is presented. The paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on e-government through an in-depth analysis of the social and philosophical origins of public engagement and proposed a research agenda for e-public engagement research.

## Methodology

To build up the literature database on public engagement, we used a two-stage approach to gather the literature on public engagement. First, we used Google Scholar as the search engine to get the relevant literature because it incorporates an extensive range of academic databases (Jacsó 2005). We used terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘public engagement’, ‘citizen participation’ and ‘citizen engagement’ for the first round of search and this resulted in a vast amount of literature. We then filtered and coded the literature based on the topic of papers with the literature review guidance from Webster and Watson (2002). This resulted in a large amount of work centering around Jürgen Habermas’ work on public sphere (1964) and corpus of work centering around Rowe and Frewer’s (2005) typology of public engagement mechanisms. Habermas’ works were very helpful in laying the foundation for this study’s discourse of public engagement while Rowe and Frewer’s work streamlined and guided the discourse of what would have been otherwise a vast topic. Second, building on findings from the first search and review of literature from the first stage, we searched for relevant studies with terms including ‘e-government’, ‘e-democracy’, ‘e-public engagement’ and ‘e-participation’. We then built up a literature database of 91 papers on both public engagement and e-public engagement. The selected articles from both the first and second search phases were analyzed and the findings are discussed in the following sections. Figure 1 described our overall research process.



## Literature Review

To adequately answer the first research question of what is e-public engagement, a historic review of the public sphere and public engagement is first presented by analyzing the first stage of literature search results. By analyzing the origins of e-public engagement from a historic perspective, we will get a clearer picture of how public engagement has evolved into its current status of e-engagement.

### Public Sphere

The concept of public sphere could be traced back to the ancient Greek social system about more than 2000 years ago. Aristotle conceived a two tiered society made up of the *oikos* and the *polis*. The *oikos* represents the private setting or household made up of “master and slave, husband and wife, father and child” and is the basic social unit of the *polis* (Roy 1999, p. 1). The *polis*, on the other hand, represents the public setting, the state or the city and is made up of a collection of households and citizens, where citizens are office holders and administrators of justice (Koçan 2008). However, Jürgen Habermas – a German sociologist who brought out the original concept of public sphere in 1962 and whose works are widely cited - suggests the existence of a three tiered society made up of a *sphere of private autonomy* that can be linked to Aristotle’s *oikos*, a *public power sphere* with the right of governance, and a domain

of private individuals who come together to form a *public sphere* that mediates between the public power sphere and the private sphere (Habermas 1997).

Habermas (1964, p. 49) defined the public sphere as a realm of our social life in which something approximate to public opinions can be formed, while the public opinion refers to a collection of different individual views and beliefs (Herbst 1993). A public sphere must be independent of the state and has no restriction as it concerns assembly and the expression of opinions. Every citizen should be allowed access, be free to put forward individual views and opinions and be free to contest the views and opinions of other citizens in the discourse of issues of general interest (Hauser 1998; Pusey 1987a). Habermas went further to suggest that a public sphere exists when private citizens assemble to converse in an unrestricted manner. He points out that there are basically two types of public spheres:

1. The political public sphere where discussions on “deal with objects connected to the activity of the state” (Habermas 1964, p. 49) are held and where public opinions are towards politics.
2. The literal public sphere where general issues which are not necessarily political are discussed where the nature of discussions within a public sphere are dependent on members (Fraser 1992; Hauser 1999).

Both types of public spheres remain open for anyone to participate. While the literal public sphere has been existed since the formation of human society, the political public sphere emerged along the evolution of social structures and systems (Graham 2012; Grbeša 2004; Pusey 1987b; Shirky 2011) and pushed by radical events such as the American and the French revolutions (Kellner 2000).

### ***Public Engagement***

Public engagement on the other hand, has been defined by the Economic and Social Research Council (2008) cited in Maile and Griffiths (2014, p. 15) as the “involvement of specialists in listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists”. The concept of public engagement had been broadly adopted by medical researchers (Carlsson et al. 2006; Lorenc and Robinson 2015; Pizzo et al. 2014; Rissi et al. 2015) and is referred as Patient and Public Engagement/Involvement (PPE/PPI). Lorenc and Robinson defined this as the process of involving, consulting and listening to patients and the public with the aim of creating and delivering services that are responsive to patients’ needs, the result of which will eventually improve clinical outcomes and patient experience. In scientific research, public engagement is referred to as citizen science (Jackson et al. 2015; Shirk 2015; Supp et al. 2015; Zhao et al. 2015) which affords scientists the opportunity to involve the public in their projects.

In this study, public engagement will be discussed in the context of governance and States’ policymaking process which Phillips (2013) described as being rooted in democracy and as the process of involving the public in the governing system. In correspondence with the definition of public engagement by the Economic and Social Research Council and in the context of this study, specialists may refer to the State and policy-makers while non-specialists refer to the members of public. Therefore, it can be inferred that public engagement refers to the inclusion/involvement of members of the public in the policy-forming process of the State. Rowe and Frewer (2005) discussed the public engagement in three levels. At the first level is the passive public engagement which is realized via public communication. Here, information-flow is one-way and goes from the State as the providers to the public as the consumers. Examples include newsletters, leaflets, and non-interactive TV programs. At the second level is the quasi-active public engagement which is achieved via public consultation. Here information-flow is also one-way but flows from members of public to the State and via a process determined by the state. Examples are balloting, referendum, petition signing, and surveys etc. At the third level is the active public engagement which is achieved via public participation. Here, information flows in both directions, i.e. between members of the public and the State in a deliberative manner as each tries to transform the opinions of the other. Examples are deliberative opinion polls, focus groups, public hearing, citizens’ panels, etc.

Citing a different continuum, IAP2 (2007) suggested that public engagement consists of public information, public consultation, public involvement, public collaboration and public empowerment. Public information is similar to public communication and refers to the provision of balanced and objective information to the public in order for them to understand current problems encountered by the State/policy makers. Public consultation refers to getting public feedbacks on alternatives or solutions decided by the State. Public involvement involves ensuring that public inputs are considered in the

development of alternatives and that feedbacks are provided on how this has been resolved. Public collaboration entails that public inputs are adhered to not just the development of alternatives but also the identification of preferred solutions. Public empowerment involves placing the final decision making process in the hands of the public through certain means like citizen juries, ballots and delegated decisions. The difference between Rowe and Frewer (2005) and IAP2 (2007)'s conceptualization of public engagement is that whilst the former focuses on information flow between the public and State, the latter focused on how the State utilizes information provided by the public in the decision making process. Whilst the public sphere facilitates citizen discussions and information sharing outside of the ruling sphere, public engagement is a means by which the ruling sphere delivers, receives and uses information from the public.

Although the public sphere has been conceptualized as existing outside the public power sphere, citizens have played diverse role in state decision-making process through public communication, participation, consultation, deliberation and citizen empowerment (IAP2 2007; Rowe and Frewer 2005; United Nations 2014). These means by which citizens play a role in states' decision making process fall under two democratic traditions: participatory democracy and deliberative democracy (Cini 2011). The participatory democratic tradition mainly tries to achieve two objectives, (1) that every citizen takes part in all the decisions that would affect the quality and conduct of his or her life (2) that the state provides the means by which the public can independently participate in such decisions (Lynd, 1965) cited in Cini (2011). Participatory democracy would typically involve balloting, referendum, petition signing, surveys etc. (Rowe and Frewer 2005) and aims at addressing the quantitative dimension of mass democracy by finding out how many people were involved in arriving at a certain decision in the state (Cini 2011). On the other hand, the deliberative democratic tradition focused on discourse and argumentation between members of public and the state as the means by which decisions are made in the state (Fung 2003). Citizens become part of a process where mutually acceptable and generally accessible reasons are given for any opinion, stance or decision taken (Gutmann and Thompson 2003). It may involve deliberative opinion polls, focus groups, public hearing, citizens' panels, etc. as mechanism (Rowe and Frewer 2005); and therefore is based on the quality of the argument/discourse. Participatory and deliberative democracies are facilitated through public engagement.

### ***The Internet: Its Effects on the Public Sphere and Public Engagement***

#### **E-public Sphere**

Following the Age of Enlightenment from 1620-1780, the American Revolution in 1765 and the French revolution in 1789, the liberal public sphere emerged. These public spheres were most potent in the European world between 1780 and 1880 when people met in Britain's coffee houses, France's salons and Germany's Tischgesellschaften (table societies) (Habermas 1989). Habermas (1997) observed that as the public sphere expanded, there emerged the need for certain means of information dissemination such as newspapers, periodicals, radio and television. For this reason, mass media including newspapers, radio and television became the new media of the public sphere in the last century. Mass media played a major role in supporting the public sphere as a platform for rational-critical debates and as a means by which public views and opinions were freely presented to the public, especially via mass-circulation newspapers, radios and televisions. In 1960s, Ken Loach's BBC film 'Cathy come home' brought a huge discussion on homelessness which was not discussed in public before and eventually caused a shift in UK housing policy. However, there are also many negative consequences arising from mass media especially with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life (Kellner 2000). Giant firms and governmental organizations that were in control of the mass media also became in control of the public sphere whilst citizens became mere consumers of goods, services, political administration and spectacle. For example, the German government and subsequently the Nazis, tightly regulated radio broadcasting between 1923 and 1945 (von Saldern 2004); similarly, the French government exercised control on radio broadcasting between 1922 and 1940 (Starr 2004). These were done to serve the purpose of State and those in power. Another instance is the McCarthyism era in the 1950s when Joseph Raymond McCarthy, with the aim of discouraging Communism in America, unscrupulously accused many American citizens as being communists and exercised control over media organizations through the practice of blacklisting (Rawlinson 1998). Such occurrences decreased the potency of the Public sphere as a platform for public debate and resulted in its decline. As a consequence, a small number of people influenced and shaped the

perceptions and belief of an entire nation because they were in control of the few-to-many architecture of broadcasting (Rheingold 2004).

With the challenges posed by the few-to-many mass media architecture and progress in the development of the internet, Hans Magnus Enzensberger envisaged a participatory mass media which would be more communicative than distributive in 1970s. This type of media would have the capability to reinvigorate a depressed public sphere (Enzensberger 2000). The internet has turned out to fit into Enzensberger's theory as it provides the ability to easily and quickly distribute large amount of information in addition to facilitating communication. It has been described as the new technology of democracy (Novak 2005) and has become the new Public Sphere - the e-public sphere.

The e-public sphere created on the Internet provides all the characteristics of a Public Sphere as stated by Habermas (1989) but targeting at a broader audience. It offers an open deliberative space regardless of status. It can serve as a domain of common concern where citizens can have rational-critical discourse about public policies and form public opinions that ultimately hold decision makers accountable. It provides a sphere that is autonomous from the state. It has the capability of being all inclusive regardless of the political diversity or geographical location of the participants. The only drawback for e-public sphere is that citizens must be e-literate and have access to the internet.

### **E-public Engagement**

Public engagement efforts were originally made through newsletters, leaflets, non-interactive TV, balloting, referendum, petition signing, surveys, opinion polls, focus groups, public hearing, citizens' panels, etc. (Dahl 1998; Phillips 2013; Rowe and Frewer 2005). With the diffusion of internet into the societal level, e-public engagement emerged as a popular research topic. E-public engagement more commonly known as e-participation refers to government-led initiatives which use technology, especially the internet, to encourage and support active citizenship in order to promote fair and efficient governance and society (Sæbø et al. 2008), particularly in policy-making (Ahmed 2006). E-public engagement refers to the interaction between citizens and governments by the support of ICT. According to United Nations (2014), e-public engagement normally includes e-decision-making, e-information and e-consultation.

Review of previous literature demonstrated that both participatory and deliberative democracies could be enhanced through e-engagement. There are much potential with e-engagement either for one directional communication flow or two-way information flow between government and general public. Most traditional public engagement framework will be enhanced through e-engagement by targeting more audience with enhanced interactive functions. We summarized three types of e-public engagement style in the following sections, i.e., e-decision-making, e-information and e-consultation.

**E-decision-making** facilitates citizenship empowerment and contribution to the design of policies, the production of service components and the delivery modes of these service components. With e-decision-making, governments provide their citizens institutionalized opportunities for them to contribute to the decision-making process (Charalabidis and Loukis 2012; IAP2 2007). E-decision-making has not been well-established and is still in development. It was described by Mainka et al. (2015, p. 239) as a mere "ideological notion". One typical example of e-decision-making can be exemplified by Estonian government with the TOM (Täna Otsustan Mina or 'Today I Decide' in English). According to Glencross (2009), TOM is not a medium for the mere collection of signatures or votes but offers a forum where citizens discuss legislative proposals within 10 days of submission. Before the expiration of the 10 day window, the owners of the submissions refine it according to public inputs. At the expiration of the window, the submission is voted by the audience, forwarded to the relevant government department and a response is posted back on TOM within a month.

**E-information** helps facilitate participation by making public information available and accessible to citizens without on demand. E-information was referred as transparency by Mergel (2013). There is only one-way flow of information from governments to citizens but could target more specific audience compared to mass media.

**E-consultation** affords governments the opportunity to involve citizens in the contribution and deliberation of states' policies and services. E-consultation can either be quasi-active or active. **Quasi-active e-consultation** is liberal and individuated, and involves one-way flow of information from citizens to governments through channels predetermined by the government (Hands 2005; Mergel 2013;

Rowe and Frewer 2005), e.g. online petition and online surveys. **Active e-consultation** is deliberative and involves two-way flow of information amongst citizens and between citizens and the government. Here, governments “use computer mediated communication to foster strong democracy amongst citizens and between citizens and representatives” (Hands 2005, p. 13). Active e-consultation involves real-time conversations and has been facilitated by social media (Hartmann et al. 2013). Active e-consultation should also be collaborative, open, social, communicative, interactive and user-centered (Mainka et al. 2015; Mergel 2013). Wright and Street (2007) observed there are three main approaches by which governments provide active e-consultation: (1) the policy forums which are typically highly structured and focused and through which policy documents are made available for citizens to read after which they leave comments/questions (2) the ‘have your say’ sections which consists of unstructured and open discourses and which typically involves citizens initiating discussions on topics they find important which may or may not be what the government is interested in (3) the mixed model which has separate policy forum and ‘have your say’ areas. Flew (2005) argued that e-government is not just about electronic service delivery, provision of information, or limited consultation typically through e-voting and e-petitions while highlighting the benefits of active e-consultation. It is more about providing citizens with tangible channels to make seasoned inputs into policy. Citizens become part of a process where mutually acceptable and generally accessible reasons are given for any opinion, stance or decision taken (Gutmann and Thompson 2003) through e-deliberation. It enhances a collaborative approach to generating solutions within the state, involves both people and public officials who are affected by the problem (Fung and Wright 2001), and allows the opportunity to form the e-public sphere. It also refines and revises preferences through public discourse towards a mutual understanding and common action (Sirianni and Friedland 2003). Active e-consultation platforms provide citizens an avenue for public deliberations and afford governments the opportunity to host, coordinate and appropriate these deliberations. This becomes really important considering the fact that such deliberations constantly go on in the public sphere and when appropriated by activists or opponents of the state, can be used to stir up civil unrests. Furthermore, a study by Jensen (2003, p. 349) showed that government-sponsored online political debate platforms are more “successful in achieving democratic ideals of openness, respect, argumentation, enlightenment and deliberation than private ones”.

## **Factors Affecting Active E-public Engagement**

Generally speaking, engagement on the internet - especially on social media- has been of particular importance in the field of marketing as businesses seek ways of attracting customers, improving their online experience, getting them engaged in their advertisements, making sales and thus profit (Calder et al. 2009; Gummerus et al. 2012; Heath 2007; Mollen and Wilson 2010; Sashi 2012); this has also spread to the field of politics as politicians try to gain followers using social media (Baumgartner and Morris 2009; Crawford 2009; Gueorguieva 2008). Individuals and firms have also become interested in knowing how well their online websites and contents are engaging their customers and followers.

At the core of active e-public engagement is the information provided by the government or what Mergel (2013) refers to as a government’s attempt for transparency. According to Zuiderwijk et al. (2012), the process of e-public engagement starts from the publication of information by the government, which is then used by the citizens, who then provide feedback to the government on the use of the information. This information has also been referred to as Open Government Data (OGD) and is “data produced or commissioned by government or government controlled entities” and which “can be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone” (Open Government Data 2015; Sussha et al. 2015). OGD not only facilitates better transparency and trust in the government (Sussha et al. 2015) but also encourages participatory governance and creates a “read/write” society who follow and contribute to what the government does (Open Government Data 2015). Although it is widely believed that the value of OGD - just like other internet-based artefacts - is in its spread and ‘publication’ (Cha et al. 2010; Goggins and Petakovic 2014; Lerman and Hogg 2010; Onnela and Reed-Tsochas 2010; Ye and Wu 2010), Janssen et al. (2012) argue that its true value is in its use by the citizens, public or audience to make better decisions about their lives and contribute/participate meaningfully in public affairs (Ubaldi 2013). Being present online and providing information on the internet for citizens to access does not necessarily mean e-public engagement (Coursey and Norris 2008), the citizens must be able to engage with such information. Citizens need to engage with governments’ contents/information on the internet before they can participate (give meaningful feedback to government), which would then generate collaboration

(interaction between citizens and government) which is the essence of active e-engagement. If governments are to properly engage their citizens on the internet, they should move beyond just making information/contents available on the internet. The information/contents must be able to engage the public before the governments can. From this point of view, e-public engagement shall put much effort on contents/information engagement through ICT. Citizens' level of engagement with and attention to governments' online contents/information (e.g. OGD) is said to be determined by their contribution to the discourse around those contents (Albrecht 2006; Dahlberg 2001; Wright and Street 2007) or what Ubaldi (2013) referred to as contribution in public affairs.

Previous research on e-public engagement mainly focus on the discourse that exists on government-owned platforms and how the design and moderation of such platforms facilitate or hinder such discourse (De Cindio et al. 2007; Jensen 2003; Jones and Rafaeli 2000; Preece 2001; Sack 2005; Wilhelm 2000; Wright and Street 2007). There is a dearth of research on the contents or information provided by the government, their value to the public and their effects on e-public engagement (Janssen et al. 2012). Similarly, Zuiderwijk et al. (2014) observed that the citizens engagement with and use of government's information is an unexplored niche topic that needs more research attention. This oversight needs to be addressed because comments that show deliberation may be seen as the strongest evidence of audience-content engagement (Sample 2014).

## **Conclusions**

This study aims at providing a brief literature review on e-public engagement from a historic perspective. We tried to answer three questions, 1) what is e-public engagement? 2) What factors have been identified from previous studies to influence e-public engagement? 3) What's the current research gap for e-public engagement research? Guided by the framework of Habermas (1964), we have reviewed the concept of public sphere and public engagement and how this have evolved in the internet age. It's concluded that the internet have enlarged the traditional public sphere to broader audience but increased the access level for general public, i.e., people need to be able to access the internet to participate in the public sphere. At the same time, e-public engagement is a government led-initiative that uses ICT, especially the internet, to encourage and support interaction between citizens and the government (via e-consultation or e-information) for better public decision making. The key factor that affects e-public engagement is citizens' engagement with the information provided on the internet by their government. However, most information/content in the government public consultation platforms hasn't provided effective information/content for the public to engage with. We argue that establishing audience-content engagement is necessary for the discourse that takes place in the e-public deliberative spheres and should be the first step towards the affordances of e-public consultation. There must be an abstract level of citizens' engagement with governments' online contents before there would be substantive e-public consultation.

Presently, there is not adequate research to help answer the emergent question: "what are the factors that can facilitate citizen-content engagement on the internet?". Previous literature have relied on the spread (Cha et al. 2010; Goggins and Petakovic 2014; Lerman and Hogg 2010; Onnela and Reed-Tsochas 2010; Ye and Wu 2010) of and discourse that follow governments' online contents (De Cindio et al. 2007; Jensen 2003; Jones and Rafaeli 2000; Preece 2001; Sack 2005; Wilhelm 2000; Wright and Street 2007) as adequate proof of citizen-content engagement. However, it has been argued that there is really no correlation between spread of online contents and audience engagement with such contents, and that comments left on online contents can sometimes be outside the context of the information provided (Haile 2014; Manjoo 2013; Upworthy 2014). As a result, researchers have called for studies on citizens' engagement with governments' online information (Janssen et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2013; Zuiderwijk et al. 2014).

This study should also inspire a redirection of research focus from the broader perspective of ICT's effects on e-public engagement, to a narrower perspective of how citizens' engagement with governments' online information can facilitate e-public engagement in general and e-public consultation in particular. Theoretical frameworks and strategy on how to engage general public are missing from past literature. More empirical research shall also be called for given most research are qualitative analysis.

The limitation of this study lies in its quality analysis nature. As a literature review paper, a well coded database shall give us better tool in analyzing the result. Literature review tools such as Nvivo will offer better concept map for this paper. We acknowledge the limitation of this part and will improve for the next version.

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