



THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS IN RESEARCH: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

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Abstract

It has been discovered over the years that most students lack a proper understanding of both theoretical framework (TF) and conceptual framework (CF) and the distinctions between the two. The researcher is required to anchor the work on either a conceptual framework or a theoretical framework. Both are essential ingredients for research studies because they both lay the foundation for interpreting and understanding the phenomena under study as both terms are used interchangeably despite their distinct meanings and purposeful uses. This article tends to give a conceptual clarification of these two concepts, their development and importance. Data were obtained from secondary sources-documentary survey type. It used content analysis to analyse data. The study is entirely a library desk research without any fieldwork component. The study revealed the distinction, importance, construction and development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. As conceptual defines the key concepts, variables, and relationships in a research study as a roadmap that outlines the researcher's understanding of how different concepts are interrelated, the theoretical present a structure of theories, models, and concepts that guide the research process and helps the researchers to develop the research questions or the needed hypotheses. The study recommended that researchers should take advantage of the two frameworks in their research activities because they will both clearly allow them to get a good idea of their work, benefit future readers and users and increase the work's stability. It also makes their findings generalizable.

Keywords: Theoretical, Conceptual, Theory, Concept, Framework

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been observed in previous studies that most postgraduate students fell short of a clear understanding of what theoretical and conceptual frameworks entail. They seemed to be confused about the distinction between a theoretical framework (TF) and a conceptual framework (CF). They are equally deficient in the knowledge of their respective usages (Kivunja, 2018; Grant and Osanloo, 2014).

The TF and CF are the whole essence of the study. It constitutes the basement or the foundation on which the study is erected. It could be likened to the study master plan or blueprint. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks demonstrate clearly the journey of a study from the beginning to the end. The conceptual framework entails the author's perception of the work being carried out. It explains, justifies,

supports and conveys the writer's understanding of the motivation for the study and how each aspect of the study connects to the identified gap or research problem (Crawford, 2020). TF provides an overall depiction of relations. It describes the theory part of the work to be undertaken, existing theories presented in the field of study by researchers supporting the research endeavor. It can also be described as a group of interconnected theories that guide the study. In order to establish a theoretical basis, e.g. for data analysis and interpretation of results, the researcher must draw on the previously tested and published knowledge. This study tends to give a conceptual clarification of these two concepts as they are important in any academic research endeavour.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory

A theory, according to Kerlinger (1986), is "a set of interconnected constructions, definitions, and propositions that give a systematic view of events by establishing relations among variables with the objective of explaining and predicting phenomena." A theory can be utilized to successfully anticipate outcomes, and this predictive capacity can assist direct researchers to select acceptable study questions.

Framework

A framework is defined as "a set of ideas utilised to create decisions and judgments" (MacMillan English dictionary, 2002:561). A framework, on the other hand, gives structure for explaining the relationships between variables in a phenomenon (Kerlinger, 1986).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework (TF) is a systematically developed and intertwined set of concepts and foundations; coined from one or more theories with the sole intent of supporting a study. A theoretical framework, according to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), is a collection of related ideas that can be used to direct research with the intention of foretelling and explaining study results. Simply expressed, the foundation for conducting research is laid forth in a theoretical framework (Caliendo and Kyle, 1996; Radhakrishna et al., 2007).

The TF intends to explain the existing theories that are relevant to the study being conducted and how they are connected. It also emphasizes the theory or theories that form the foundation of the study. The TF is the starting point for paper critique. It is part of the master plan that pilot the conduct of the research work (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). It is the solid rock on which the study is built. It is a reflection of the study hypothesis. It could be likened to the plan of an itinerary to a specific destination. It could equally be seen as a google map indicate the direction of the research work. The theoretical framework entails borrowed existing theories that are relevant to the current study being undertaking, concepts, constructs and theoretical principles (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). The TF is equally defined as the organogram that pilots the study based on relevant existing theories developed using a consistent discussion of specific ideas and their interconnections (Eisenhart, 1991).

In general, the theoretical framework and concept aims at making research findings relevant, acceptable and generalizable for research-related theoretical structures (Dickson, Emad and Joe 2018). One of the key reasons for the development of a theoretical context for research is for a scientific basis in which all

the meanings of the data are self-rationalized (Neuman, 1997). It is the plan or research guideline (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Researchers use theoretical frameworks to develop study structures in a logical manner and then relate them to the study at hand, which are rationally established and linked from one or more theory sources. Simply put, a theoretical framework reflects the proposed work a researcher intends to carry out using a theory in the study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is an expression either narratively or graphically of the study being embarked upon. It consists of the study variables: dependent, independent, and at times, intervening or control variables; and the presumed relationships among the variables (Miles et al., 2014). It is equally a depiction of the importance of the study being carried out and the appropriateness/ relevance of the ways/ methods of accomplishing the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

A full description of the keywords of the investigation, the variables (i.e., dependent, separate, interference/control variables), and the constructions – who and how can be studied? (Miles et al., 2014). The conceptual framework specifies how the study variables are interconnected and how they are connected to research design/methodologies (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The conceptual framework explicitly outlines, discusses, and explains the reasons for the approaches used (Maxwell, 2013).

It is a global idea conceptualization of the research work. It is a much wider concept than the theoretical framework. It looks at the bigger picture. In essence, it encompasses the following:

- i. What the researcher hope to accomplish by conducting the study?
- ii. Why does the researcher want to accomplish it? i.e. the significance, importance, or justification for the study.
- iii. How does the researcher desire to accomplish it? i.e. methodologies, data gathering, and analyses.
- iv. How will the researcher interpret the results of the data analysis?
- v. How will the researcher classify his/ her research work? Will it be a positivist, pragmatic or critical paradigm?
- vi. How will the researcher publish his/her paper? E.g. journal article, conference proceedings, seminar paper, report, book section, or book chapter?

In summary, a conceptual framework is the totality of the idea conception, the organisation of the study, linking them together from the introduction to conclusions/ recommendations and how the researcher desires to accomplish the work. It encompasses the thinking of the researcher regarding the title of the study to be conducted, problem or gap identified and desired to be examined or filled, posers to be raised, sufficient interactions with the literature, relevant existing theories, adoption of appropriate methodologies, data gathering, analyses, discussion of results/ interpretation, conclusions and recommendations, contributions to the existing body of knowledge and suggestions for further studies in the field (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is entirely a library desk research without any fieldwork component. Data were obtained from secondary sources-documentary survey type. It used content analysis on the previous studies and documents.

4. DEVELOPING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is clear from the meaning of theories that they are generic or abstract statements made or formulated by authorities in a given field. They are targeted at a particular topic and as a result, they are not title-specific. Consequently, to write a good TF, there is a need for sufficient interactions with the literature.

The researcher's elaborate, thorough review of the literature will enable researcher to come up with a distinct problem to be solved and questions that will need to be asked to resolve the identified problem. Sufficient consultation of the extant literature will bring out relevant theoretical formulations by the scholars who could be regarded as authorities in the field (Scott and Usher, 2004).

The researcher, having a critical and creative mindset, will need to synthesise the identified relevant theories during the literature review, based on their underlying assumptions, assertions, predictions, concepts and models, with the intent of coming up with topic-specific theory/ theories that will be used to answer the research questions, solve the identified problem or fill the ascertained gap, gather and analyse data, etcetera. Therefore, for a researcher to develop a good theoretical framework, he/ she needs to provide answers to the following questions:

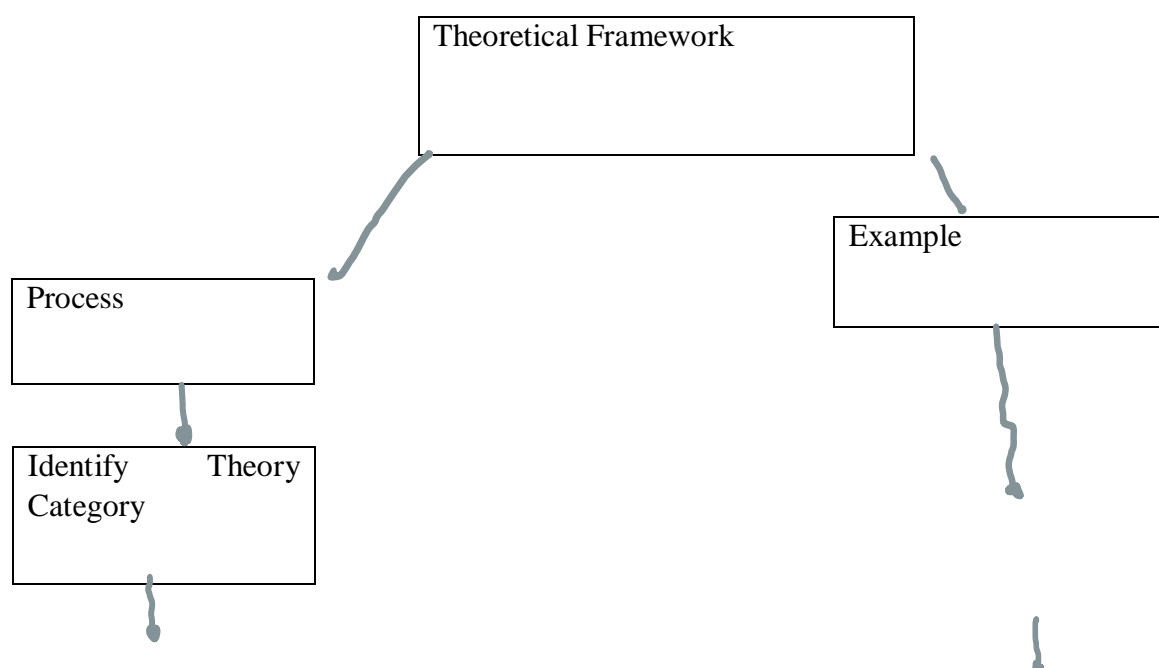
- i. What theory could be used to utilise the data obtained to provide answers to the research questions?
- ii. What theory could be explored to bring about a better understanding of my research topic, research questions, research problem, data gathering and analysis?
- iii. What is the position of the scholars, who could be regarded as authorities in the field, on the problem the study is set to probe?
- iv. What is the take of these authorities about the research questions the study is set to answer?
- v. What is the stance of these scholars on the variables (i.e. dependent, independent, intervening/control, moderating, mediating variables) of the study?
- vi. What are the underlying assumptions, assertions, concepts, predictions and models in the identified theories from the review of the literature and how can the researcher make them relevant to the current study in terms of the research question, identified problem or gap and data gathering and analysis?
- vii. What modification(s) could be done to the existing theories to come up with the researcher's theoretical formulation that will be topic-specific to the current study data?
- viii. Has the researcher given concise context meanings to the keywords and concepts within the theoretical framework?
- ix. Has the theoretical framework the researcher is developing been able to address the research questions and hypothesis (i.e. where hypotheses are applicable)?
- x. Does the theoretical framework being developed addressed the identified problem?

- xi. Has the researcher incorporated all the analytic models and relevant theories to study in the theoretical framework?
- xii. Will the theoretical framework that has been developed enables the researcher to analyse the data gathered and interpret the research findings?
- xiii. Is the theoretical framework properly organised and in line with standard academic requirements?
- xiv. Does the theoretical framework incorporate all the key study variables?
- xv. Is the theoretical framework capable of aiding the researcher to expatiate on the contextual meaning of the study data?
- xvi. Is the researcher able to access and use the latest and most current data in the study area?
- xvii. Is the theoretical frame able to identify the appropriate date to use in the analysis, which one to remove and the reason for the removal?

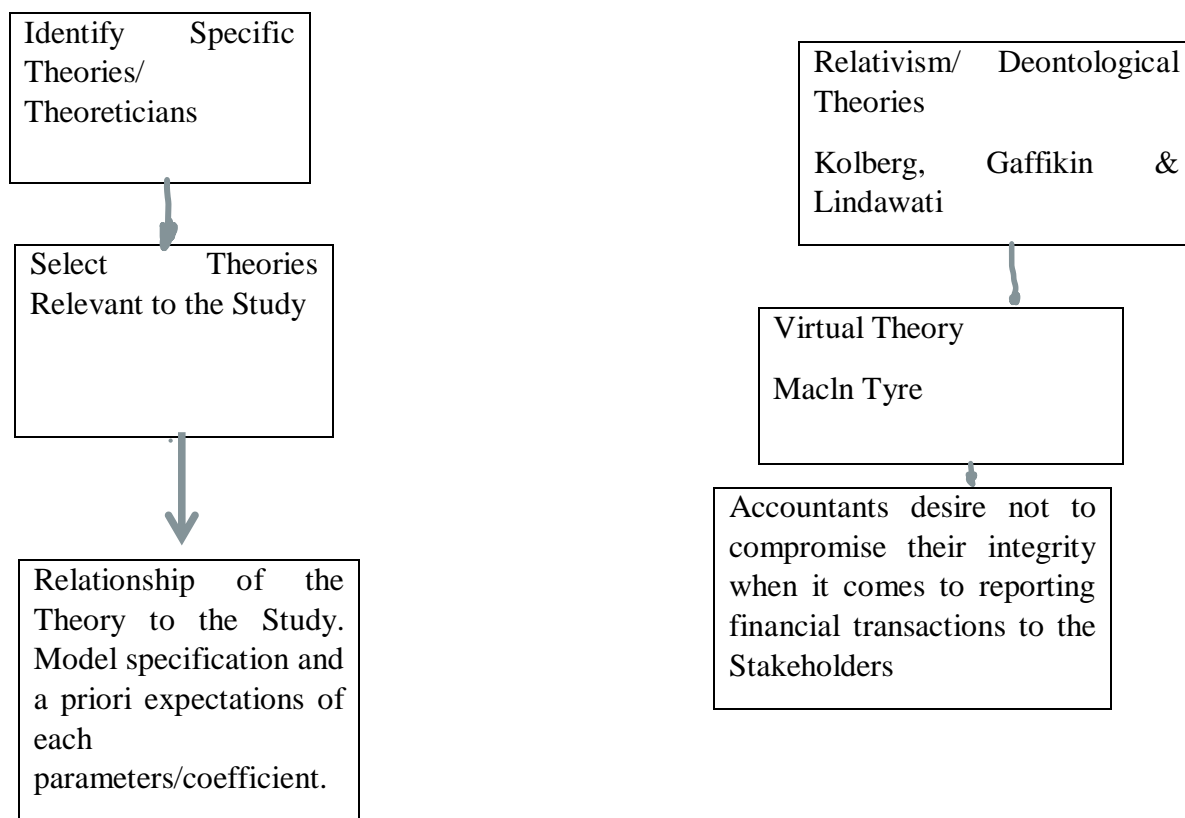
In summary, as a researcher, you are expected to describe the theory that served as the foundation for the study, identify its proponents, list the key points that were emphasized in the theory, cite ideas from other experts to support the exposition of the theory, use a model to illustrate the TF, and restate the theoretical proposition in the study. Crawford (2020), considered the TF as a portion of the CF that examined the linkages in the study in the context of creating additional theories or testing existing theories. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) posited that a good theoretical framework should contain the following qualities:

- i. State the categories of theories identified and how they are connected;
- ii. Recognise the theories that are relevant to the study and the author/ or the theorist;
- iii. Specify the theories on which the study is anchored;
- iv. Using the pertinent ideas, describe how the investigation will add to the corpus of existing knowledge.

Example of a Theoretical Framework



(Ethics)



Adapted from Crawford, 2020.

The TF provides a basis of what should be expected in the research data and they are linked with each other (Neuman, 1997). The TF enables the researcher to interpret the results and findings in line with existing and relevant theories within the study area. It enables the researcher to link the abstract to the key observations of the study data. It equally enables the researcher to raise posers such as: what do the authorities in the field theorise about the research topic and which ones are relevant to the current study.

The TF assists the support and elucidates the line of thought or discussion. It aids the researcher to substantiate the research findings, draw the conclusion and make recommendations. Concisely, the theoretical framework shows that the researcher has a thorough rather than faint understanding of the study area and the contents of the study data analysis (Kivunja, 2015).

Adopting Guba's 1981 qualities of good research work, theoretical enables the accomplishment of the following qualities of good research work:

- i. It enhances the reliability of the narrative data or the internal acceptability of the figurative data.
- ii. It could increase the wider usage of the results of the narrative data analysis or external acceptability and general usage of the figurative data analysis.
- iii. It improves the verification of the results of narrative data analysis or the unbiasedness of the results of the figurative data analysis.
- iv. It equally aids the sustainability of the results of narrative data analysis or reliance on figurative data analysis.

The TF helps the researcher to expressly state the underlying assumptions on which the research work is based and the variables that would be subjected to analysis. Consequently, the theoretical framework provides the researcher with a level playground for conveying his/ her research focus/ thought from the abstract to background to the study to the literature review, to data gathering and analysis, to the interpretation and discussion of findings, to ascertaining whether or not the study objective have been achieved and identified problem, originally solved, to the summary, to drawing conclusions and making recommendations, to contributions to the body of existing knowledge, to suggesting further studies in the area and each of these aspects are linked with one another.

5. DEVELOPING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The CF is usually constructed by the researcher and is derived from the researcher global conception of the study idea (Polit and Tatano, 2004). Ravich and Carl, (2016) asserted that conceptual framework is the creation of the researcher based on his/ her overall idea conception regarding the entire research process. It is usually presented using a diagram, flow chart or map, using arrows to link the variables together.

Fisher (2007) posited that the researcher could decide to adopt an existing conceptual framework for his/her work, but must carry out appropriate modifications to ensure that it eventually agrees with the context meanings of the research problem, questions and objectives. Fisher (2007) equally observed that a good conceptual framework must be committed to discussing the variables contained therein and the relationships among them, such as independents, dependent, intervening, mediating, moderating and control variables.. Latham (2017) postulate that the methodologies must be in tandem with the conceptual framework and the study variables contained therein, including how they are linked together.

First, the researcher needs to have a set of concepts to work with; which always come from existing theory, researcher's experience, and literature review-previous studies. The main thing to keep in mind is that at this point you are trying to represent the theory you already have about the phenomena you are studying, not primarily to invent a new theory

The presentation of a conceptual framework could be done in 2 basic ways, viz: i. narrative, ii. graphic. The narrative entails presentation in pros, while the graphic concerns presenting the framework using a diagram. Some authors adopt diagrammatic, pictorial, flow chart, or map presentations (Marshall and Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Robson and McCartan, 2016).

To develop an insightful conceptual framework, the researcher must be guided by the following steps:

- i. Conduct an extensive literature review after selecting topic for research, the research that was done on the issue of interest must be understood.
- ii. Look for and explore the relationship among the different variables discussed in the literature.
- iii. Ensure that the thesis helps and fills a gap in existing information.
- iv. Creates the conceptual framework which can be in a narrative format or a fluctuating diagram, a mind map etc.

Narrative Presentation

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) were against graphical presentation. They provided succinct examples of conceptual framework presented in a narrative form and showed how the research design, data gathering, data analysis, discussion of results, interpretation and presentation of findings were linked together. It is a text-based presentation of the conceptual framework.

Graphic Presentation

Miles et al. (2014) and Robson and McCartan (2016) postulated the format for making a graphic presentation of the conceptual framework using six specific criteria: The graphic should be stated on a page;

- i. The study variables should be inputted and linked together using arrows while considering the thought of prior researchers and other professionals in the study area.
- ii. Ensure that the variables within the graphic presentation align with the study contents.
- iii. Provide several linkages and flows for the framework flow chart.
- iv. Provide as many breakdowns as possible in the presentation based on what the researcher has garnered from experience.
- v. Where in doubt, incorporate rather than remove an item.

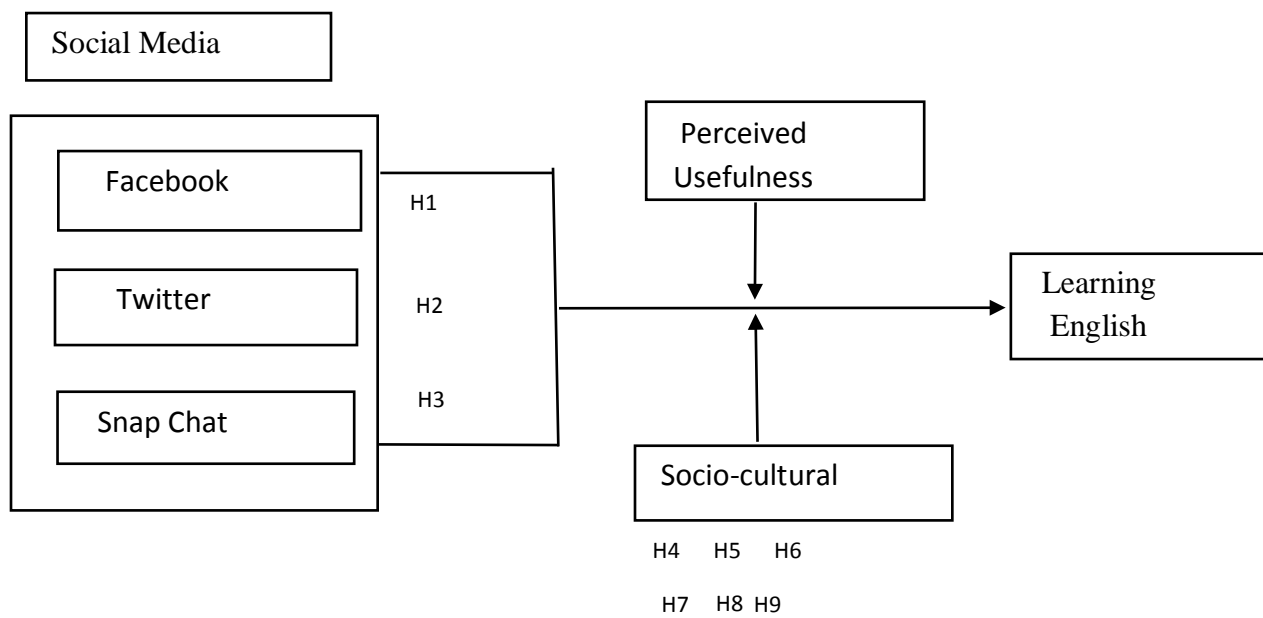
According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), the conceptual framework gives the researcher the chance to recognize and shape how they perceive the research topic under consideration. It is the most conducive way of presenting the proposed solution to the problem identified (Liehr and Smith, 1999; Akintoye, 2015). It brings out the motivation for the study, the underlying assumptions, concurrence or otherwise with previous researchers in the field on the conceptual ground (Evans, 2007).

Akintoye (2015) observed that conceptual framework is often used in instances where there is a paucity of existing theories that are relevant to the current study or are inadequate to provide a solid foundation for the study. The CF provides clarification on the driving force for the topic of interest, the appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the research design and the methodologies proposed to be adopted (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

The CF gives a detailed description of the study keywords, the variables (i.e. dependent, independent, intervening/ control variables), the constructs – i.e. who and what to be studied (Miles et al., 2014). The conceptual framework specifically indicates the interconnectivity among the study variables and how they are linked to the research design/ methodologies (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

The conceptual framework expressly states, discuss and elaborate on the rationale behind the chosen methodologies (Maxwell, 2013). The study's purpose as well as how it will add to the body of already-existing knowledge in the subject are both made clear by the conceptual framework (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Conceptual framework equally serves the purpose of identifying the research problem to be solved or gap to be filled, the appropriate research questions to be asked, the right design and methodologies, data gathering and analysis, discussion, interpretation and presentation of research findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The conceptual framework could likewise be used as a means of shedding light on the study variables and their linkages (Anfara & Mertz, 2015).



Conceptual Framework

Underpinned by Constructivism theory and Acceptance Theory. Study hypothesis are:

H₀₁: Facebook has a negative relationship with Learning English Language
H₀₂: Instagram has a negative relationship with Learning English Language
H₀₃: Snap Chat has a negative relationship with Learning English Language

H₀₄: Perceived Usefulness does not mediate the relationship between Facebook and Learning English Language

H₀₅: Perceived Usefulness does not mediate the relationship between Instagram and Learning English Language

H₀₆: Perceived Usefulness does not mediate the relationship between Snap Chat and Learning English Language

H₀₇: Culture does not mediate the relationship between Facebook and Learning English Language

H₀₈: Culture does not mediate the relationship between Instagram and Learning English Language

H₀₉: Culture does not mediate the relationship between SnapChat and Learning the English Language

6. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Both are similar in these ways:

- They both emphasize that past research findings and hypotheses show the dependability of the study.
- Conceptual and theoretical frameworks together assist researchers to understand clearly in a study the key factors and ideas
- They both explain the future route of research, justifying the reliability of the findings.
- They are used both to explain and guide study development, collecting and analysis.
- They present a broad methodological approach to design, population target and study samples, data collecting and analysis.
- They lead the researcher in collecting, interpreting and explaining the study data
- Both illustrate the connection and the relationships to study and guide future research between concepts and theories, specifically where literature reviews and field data are incorporated in the conceptual framework.

The theoretical framework (TF) is just a section of the conceptual framework (CF). In other words, the latter is much wider than the former. For instance, in an aeroplane, there is the first class, the business class and the economy class. The theoretical framework will be just a class within the three classes in an aeroplane, whereas the conceptual framework is the whole plane. Another example is an edifice, whereas the CF could be as the whole edifice, the TF will just be an apartment within the edifice.

While the theoretical framework is concerned with tapping theories from the existing literature that are relevant to research work being embarked upon, the CF is the researcher's idea conception, thinking and perception of a problem that is desired to be probed, how he/she hope to go about the work and the interconnectivity among the dependent, independent and intervening/ control variables.

It should be noted that a solid theoretical framework for research research work can't be over stressed by choosing a good subject that can be investigated, that is, with advanced theoretical literature as it helps to theorize and to arrive at a practical logical conclusion on the subject.

Table 1: Differences between Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Theoretical Framework	Conceptual Framework
It is a much smaller set of ideas within a given field where a study is being conducted. It is a portion of the conceptual framework.	It is a much wider concept than the theoretical framework in the sense that it constitutes the global idea conceptualisation of the work from the beginning to completion.
It stemmed from borrowed existing theory/ theories formulated by authorities in the field and obtained from interactions with the literature. These theories must be tested and	It originated from the author's idea conception of what he/ she wants to do, what informed his/ her decision to do it, how to do it, how to obtain the necessary data to do it,

validated by previous researchers in the study area.	how to analyse the data, how to discuss and interpret the data, how to draw conclusions and make recommendations, how to extract contributions to the body of existing knowledge in the field, how to suggest further studies, and how each of these are interconnected.
It is in the form of established norms in the study area which serves as a mirror for work being undertaken.	It is the researcher's idea of how to resolve an identified problem or fill a gap in the study area. The concept is equally used to express the relationships among the variables of the study (i.e. dependent, independent and intervening/ or control variables).
Theory/ theories would have been tested, validated and accepted as working tools for an investigation, enquiry or study in a given field.	The researcher's ideas or concepts may not have been tested, validated or accepted. It is the author's idea of how to go about resolving a specifically identified problem or filling a gap identified in a particular study area.
It contains the theories that are relevant to the study being undertaken and the specific theory/ theories on which the study is anchored.	It is composed of the study variables (i.e. dependent, independent, intervening/ control variables) and how they are linked to one another.
This is used to test borrowed and existing theories with the aim of forecasting and monitoring conditions in the context of the current study.	This is the researcher's idea of aiding the formulation of more theories that will be of immense benefit to future researchers in the study area.

Source: Modified from Adom, Hussein & Agyem, 2018

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conceptual clarification demands that any scientific research should entail an organised and systematic arrangement of certain key concepts. It requires knowledge or identification of a specific problem or gap, existing work in the study area, hypothesis, methods and theories about the objects of the study. The necessity for conceptual clarification stems from the fact that some specific concepts need to be articulated in an organised manner in research work. In a nutshell, every scientific research work must commence with the identification of the problem to be solved or the gap to be filled. This is then followed by a statement of the research hypotheses (i.e. how the researcher proposes to solve the problem), methodologies to be adopted which could be deductive, inductive or mixed (i.e. combination of both).

It could be discerned from this study that the theoretical framework derives its base from the testing of existing theories in the study area, whereas the CF is much wider, and considers the bigger picture. It has a global view of the entire idea conceptualization of all that the study is all

about from the beginning to completion. Whilst the theoretical framework is drawn from theories formulated by authorities in the field, the conceptual framework concerns the author's ideas, thinking, and focus. It must be noted that both aim at the same goal or objective. They serve the same purpose in academic writing.

Both frameworks aim overall to improve the relevance and acceptance of research findings for theoretical research structures and to ensure generalization. They encourage research while providing guidance on research activities to ensure the expansion of knowledge. It also improves empiricism and research rigor.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks are always useful for all research activity carried out, which helps readers to comprehend the fundamental principles or foundations behind the study effort and the elements behind the claims, proposals and conclusions of the scientist. Therefore, lack of research work both distorts the thesis and may not contribute enormously to the progress.

Therefore, researchers are advised to take advantage of TF and CF in their research activities because they will both clearly allow them to get a good idea of their work, benefit future readers and users and increase the work's stability. The study, therefore, recommends

1. It is a requirement that every good project, dissertation and thesis must discuss the theoretical framework or conceptual framework, upon which the study is anchor on.
2. If there are existing theories supporting your study, use theoretical framework.
3. If your work involve model specification, then anchor your study on theoretical framework. The theory will provide a priori expectation that exist among the variables.
4. If the variables or concepts cut across many theories, conceptual framework can be constructed to link the variables.
5. Framwork is necessary if your study involve inferential questions, which require hypothesis testing. Any of the two can be used.
6. According to some researchers, the researcher's theory of choice must be articulated explicitly at the outset of the dissertation's writing (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It is advisable that TF or CF is place after gap in literature under literature review chapter or at the beginning of Chapter three under methodology. It is the touchlight to modelling, measurement of variables and specification of a priori expectations under methodology.

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