



**The new trends in operations management: a systematic review of inventory and quality management in small-medium enterprises**

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**Abstract:** SME are engines of the economy in many countries, particularly in developing countries. However, studies on them, especially in the field of operations management, remain insufficient. This paper is one of the few existing systematic reviews for SMEs in the field of Operations management. This systematic review has the purpose of knowing the state of research in the management of operations concerning SMEs, more precisely the management of inventory and quality. Although there are fewer articles dedicated to the Operations management of SMEs, sixty-three articles were found during the literature selection step from 2000-2020, and then forty of them were retained for the study. The differences, similarities, and limitations are highlighted in the discussion. Finally, we conclude that inventory and quality management are beneficial for SME and they should get more attention in the research. Some recommendations are made both to organizations in charge of SMEs and to scholars.

**Keywords:** Inventory management, quality management, Small-medium enterprises (SMEs), Operations management (OM), systematic review

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## 1. Introduction

The three main departments of an organization are human resources, operations and marketing. To have a competitive advantage over competitors, every organization (large, medium, small or micro) should carefully manage these important departments. The marketing department role is to access the needs and desires of consumers to satisfy them. The Human resource management is defined as the management of the people working in a company. And one of the most important which is the operation management oversees the production of goods or services from the inputs to the outputs for

the end-users. Operations department work closely with the financial department to know how much money they will need for the production. With the marketing department, to know perfectly the wants of customers, with HR to know which kind of persons they need to hire to manufacture the final goods correctly or deliver the best service to customers.

Operations is then defined as the process of transformation of inputs into outputs. Operations management includes planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling the resources needed to produce goods and services. Operations play an important role in each organization, for manufacturing and service companies, in the sense that every company's survival depends on how the management of processes to make products or services is made. By accessing the right capacity to match the supply with the demand under different conditions, it will make satisfied customers and an increase in profits. Since Operations management is a broad field, it regroups many subareas such as the location planning and analysis, process selection and facility layout, capacity planning, management of quality and inventory, the supply chain management and aggregate planning and master scheduling. For this reason, this paper will cover two important sub-areas of Operations management which are inventory and quality management.

Inventory is the amount of goods in stock. The main different kinds of inventories are raw materials (used to produce the finished goods), work-in-process or partially finished goods, in-transit inventory, finished goods inventory (available to be sold). Inventory management then is the monitoring of the flow or quantities of goods from the supplier to the manufacturer, or to the production facility, and from them to the stores to meet the customers' demands. Inventory management is an essential operations management activity. Performance goals for a company can be attained through a well elaborated inventory strategy (Koumanakos, 2008). Generally, there are three main types of inventory management techniques or strategies among all the existing techniques: just-in-time inventory management (JIT), economic order quantity (EOQ), materials requirement planning (MRP). Inventory management should be carefully managed at all stages of the supply chain, since it has an impact on finance (Sabure, 2020), marketing and operations. A suitable inventory management strategy can help every company, large or small to economize on operating costs, to facilitate production requirements, increase customer satisfaction by anticipating their demands, and give to the company a sustainable competitive advantage (Sohail & Sheikh, 2018), (Namusonge & Naliaka, 2015).

Nowadays, being in conformity with the quality standards is one of the main challenges of every business. The general definition of quality is the ability of a product or service to meet or exceed customer expectations. It exists different dimensions for product quality such as performance, special features, conformance, reliability, and service quality such as time, courtesy, convenience, reliability. A poor quality of products or services can cause the loss of a business with dissatisfied customers, increases costs of repairing defective products or services, and hampers the overall productivity. On

the other hand, an excellent quality can be benefic for businesses in the sense that it can help to build a strong company reputation which lead to competitive advantage over competitors (Kim-Soon, 2011), a long-term customer loyalty, few production problems. Quality management can be explained as a set of activities of actions with the objective of ensuring that product and services are in accordance meet the specifications. There are different sides of quality management in a business context which are: quality control (ex: inspection of raw materials), quality planning, quality assurance (ex: focus on product design stage) and quality improvement. Some quality management techniques are Six Sigma, zero defects, Statistical process control, Total quality management (TQM) (Sadikoglu & Olcay, 2014), Theory of constraints... Quality management techniques can positively or negatively impact the performance of an organization (Pasin, Lakhali, & Limam, 2006).

Concerning small-medium enterprises, there is not an exact definition internationally of which kinds of businesses should be called an SME. The definition of SMEs varies from one country to another one, or from one sector to an another one (Hilary, 2000) (Berisha & Pula, 2015). SME size or definition depends on different factors such as the number of employees, the annual turnover or the value of assets of enterprise. It can be classified broadly as micro enterprises (1-10 employees), small enterprises (10-100 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (100-250) (International Labor Organization, 2015). They represent an important part of countries' economies, develop as well as developing economies. According to the International labour organization (ILO), two-thirds of all jobs worldwide are provided by small-medium enterprises. They contribute to the reduction of poverty by reducing unemployment rates especially for young people through entrepreneurship (Keskin, Onur, Canan, & Hakan, 2010). And, to the nations' gross domestic product growth (Robu, 2013). With this information, we can see that SMEs are important for national and worldwide economy, so attention should be paid to the administration of these kind of enterprises.

Operations management is mostly applied in large organizations, but it can have also a good impact for SMEs if applied there. As an illustration, capacity planning can help SMEs in waste reduction by knowing the right amount to produce. SMEs can select manufacturing process regarding the company strategy or current resources (Raymond, 2005), the efficient use of facilities and equipment, the choice of the right location, the appropriate supply chain system (Kot, 2018), (Awheda, Nizam, Ramli, & Arshad, 2015) ... Operations management can be a performance driver for SMEs (Battistoni, Bonacelli, & Schiraldi, 2013), and lead them to achieve sustainable growth, efficiency and effectiveness (Manghe, 2016). Even if Operations management seems to be good for SMEs business operations, there are not a lot of articles in Operations management focus on SMEs compared to large companies, which constitute a problem for the whole understanding of SMEs. Hence, regardless this situation, the aim of this paper is to try to identify the new trends or questions addressed in the field of

Operations management, precisely the inventory and quality management for SMEs. The research questions are the followings:

**Research question 1: What is the state of research in Inventory management for SMEs over years?**

**Research question 2: What is the state of research in Quality management for SMEs over years?**

## **2. Systematic Review methodology**

### **2.1 Literature selection**

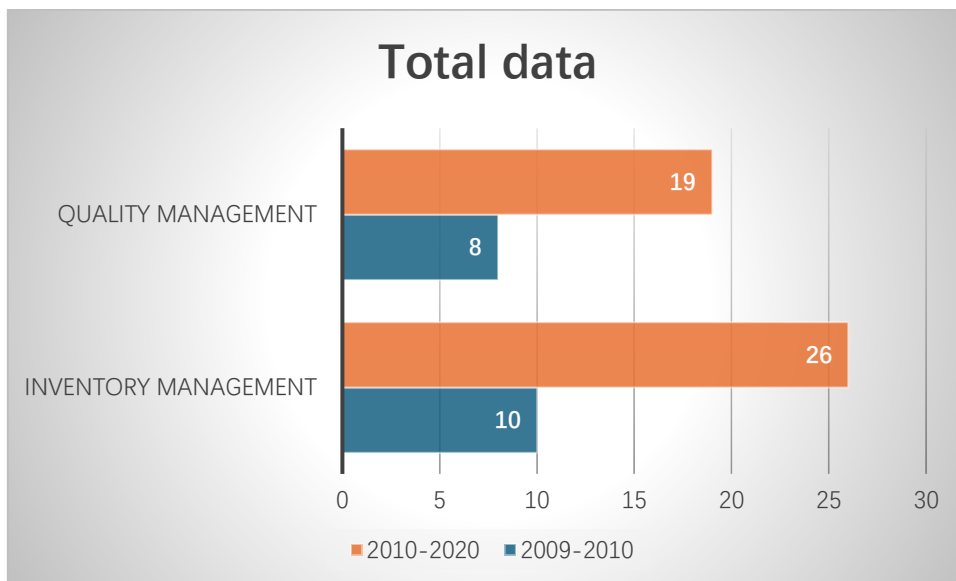
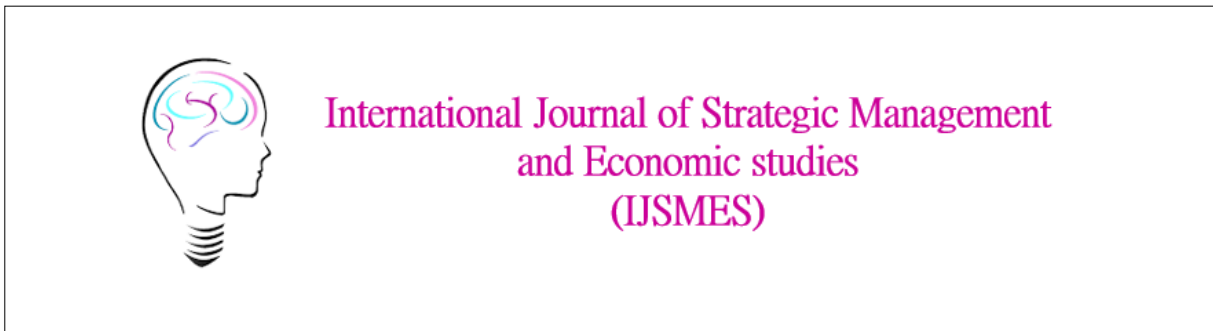
The literature review is a kind of enumeration or overview of previous research done in a certain field for a specific topic (Baumeister, 2013). Sources in the literature review can be articles, books, conference proceedings or other information relevant for the study. Meanwhile, the small difference with the systematic literature review (SLR) is that the SLR includes a formal methodology or process chosen by the author starting from the collection and selection of existing published literature (secondary data), the critical evaluation and the summarizing of findings quantitatively or qualitatively (narrative or meta-analysis review) (Siddaway, Wood, & Hedges, 2019). In addition, the goal of a systematic review is to answer a well-defined question, the previous studies selected for the systematic review have a relation with the research question. The comparison of relevant existing published literature in a field helps to identify potential gaps or key findings, and then provides some recommendations for future research. The SLR is useful to understand a phenomenon in a field of research that is exposed in the research question or to know which improvements have been made in this field for a certain period (for example a review of 5 or 10 years).

There exist different standards or methodologies for conducting a systematic literature review, but they follow generally these steps: formulation of the research question, the search of the literature, data extraction, selection of relevant data, data analysis, and data presentation ( Robinson & Lowe, 2015). The SLR as a research method has been widely used by researchers in OM. In fact, it exists several systematic literature review articles in the field of Operations management in general (Thomé, Scavarda, & Scavarda, 2016). However, few systematic literature reviews or simply literature review have been made in the field of Operations management concerning SMEs. The themes highlighted in those reviews are innovation (Saunila, 2019), project management ( Parizotto, Tonso, & Monteiro ) , lean impact (Hu, Mason, Williams , & Found, 2015). For this study, the followed methodology will be the systematic review methodology for management studies proposed by (Tranfield, Denyer , & Smart, 2003). This methodology emphasizes three stages:

- Planning: Identification of the objectives, definition of research questions and development of the protocol
- Conducting: Selection of studies, exclusion or inclusion analysis, data synthesis
- Reporting: Reports and recommendations

To search for the literature, the database was online well-known journals publishers like Emerald, Elsevier, ResearchGate, SAGE, Taylor&Francis. In these online libraries, we select articles, conference proceedings, or reports related to OM and SMEs. Regarding the choice of journals, specific newspapers were not chosen for the simple reason that given the few articles in the field of operations management on SMEs, there are not many publications related to OM and SMEs in some

well-known famous journals. I have used excel software to organize the information from the online manual research for the literature review. The journals used are journals related to OM, management, and business fields. On the figure 1, we can see the number of all the articles gathered on the online searches before using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The time range for the search of information was divided into two parts: from 2000-2009 and from 2010-2020. There were in total 63 articles (36 in Inventory management and 27 in quality management), before the selection of the relevant ones.



**Figure 1.** Total of articles gathered

## 2.2 Literature evaluation

After collecting the data from the operations and business management journals in the online database cited above, we will use some elements to include or exclude certain information. It is the data extraction process where we use the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Key words	Inventory management, quality management, small-medium enterprises, small businesses, inventory management techniques, quality management techniques	Supply chain, logistics, large companies, impact of OM of SMEs,
Types of data	Journal articles, conference proceedings, articles published by scholarly social network	Books, Book section, university reports
Research methodology	Qualitative, and quantitative methodology	Review articles, observational studies, opinions

**Table 1.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

### 3. Analysis of results

Here we will identify the important points highlighted in the selected papers after the data selection process. After going through the stage of data evaluation with the data inclusion and exclusion criteria, we are going to analyze closely the finally chosen data which are now forty, and twenty-three articles were rejected because they did not respect the inclusion criteria. Data retained are journals articles, articles directly published by scholarly online network and conferences proceedings. The work will be separated into two parts to split the information gathering, talking about inventory and quality management.

We saw while working on the selected information that certain studies are grouped into a very precise theme. Thus, four common themes or sub-categories were listed during the in-depth analysis of the selected papers. These categories were seen both in the Inventory and quality management papers. These common categories are: The impact of quality or inventory management on SMEs performance, growth or competitive advantage, the techniques or systems used in these two domains, the issues encountered by SMEs in using quality or inventory management and finally the combination with other domains in management. These common themes have been identified during the various decades; the articles are listed without considering the difference in the periods of publication. The articles with references are grouped under each theme highlight.

#### 3.1. Inventory management for SME

- a) Impact of inventory management on SME performance or growth

- Positive impact of the use of Inventory management on the competitiveness and organization performance of Ethiopian micro and small enterprises (Atnafu & Balda, 2018), in Nigeria (Nsikan, Etim, & Ime, 2015), and in Kenya (Ojera & Nyabwanga, 2012)
- Organizational efficiency with the complete use of resources by using Inventory management in Nigeria (Olusakin, 2015)
- Growth of SMEs with effective inventory management (Chalotra, 2013)

b) Inventory management techniques or systems

- Adequate inventory planning with the use of simple and non-expensive methods especially for SMEs in developed countries like Canada (Freeman, 2008), and in an emerging country like Malaysia to reduce inventory costs (Panzuto & Rodrigues, 2010).
- Less utilization or promotion of JIT inventory management technique by SMEs compared to large companies (Ramaswamy & Selladurai, 2002). Techniques like the ABC inventory model, Continuous replenishment, and Economic Order Quantity are used by Malaysian micro enterprises (Ahmad & Zabri, 2016).
- Application of improved inventory control systems in daily operations for Nigerian SMEs (Onwubolu & Dube, 2006), use of a simple and comprehensible coding system by SMEs in Ghana for the different types of inventories to have an effective inventory control (Agbola & Amoah, 2015).

c) Issues of application of Inventory management encountered by SMEs

- Several problems encountered by SMEs in the application of inventory management in their businesses like the lack of necessary capital knowledge concerning the Inventory management techniques in India (Rajeev, 2008), and in Russia (Viktorovna & Ivanovich, 2016).
- South-African SMEs are faced with the problems of poor supplier networks when wishing to use the just-in-time technique (Mazanai, 2012), challenges in Inventory management like demand variability in Kenya (Nyang'au, 2013), low utilization of advanced or formal inventory management software in the Czech Republic (Ferenčíková, 2014).
- Factors such as underproduction and overproduction influence the effective use of inventory management by manufacturing SMEs in Malaysia (Chan, Aziati, Rasi, & Ismail, 2017).

d) Connection with other areas

- Significant impact of inventory management on the financial performance of SMEs in Zimbabwe (Muchaendepi, Hamandishe, & Mbohwa, 2019), and in Ghana (Kasim & Antwi, 2015)

### **3.2. Quality management for SME**

a) Impact of quality management on SME performance or growth

- Total quality management has been seen to a good influence on SMEs performance in Portugal (Pinho, 2008) (Sousa, Aspinwall, Sampaio, & Guimarães, 2005), in Nigeria (Anthony, Olorunleke, Akintimehin, & Ojeka, 2019), and in Australia (Gadenne & Sharma)

-it helps Indian SMEs to be competitive (Dhamodaran & Saifi, 2007), and also favors the growth and competitiveness of SMEs in Ghana (Fening, 2012), in the USA (Beheshti & Lollar, 2003), and in Nigeria too (Agwu, 2016), compared to those who do not implement quality management

- SMEs in the Cyprus experienced an increase in customer satisfaction and revenue by using TQM (EH, Ozgurur, & Sian, 2015)

b) Quality management techniques and systems

- Quality control systems designed especially for SMEs (Anholon, Zoqui, Quelhas, & Novaski, 2017) (Raisová & Ďurčová, 2013)

-TQM technique is widely knowing by SMEs in Malaysia, but still practice by some of them (Mustapha, Muda, & Hasan, 2011).

c) Issues encountered by SMEs

- The lack of knowledge about the quality management process and modern methods (Sousa & Sampaio, Performance measures and quality tools in Portuguese small and medium enterprises: Survey results, 2015), and the costs of implementing them constitutes an issue for SMEs in Namibia (Mutingi & Chakraborty, 2018). This fact is seen also in Malaysia (Sahran, Zeinalnezhad, & Mukhtar, 2010) (Ahmed & Hassan, 2002)

- Absence of clarity concerning the quality system used in SMEs (Nugroho & Nurcahyo, 2018)

d) Connection with other areas

-Promote the Knowledge about quality importance by using internal marketing in some French and English SMEs (Barnes & Morris, 2000).

- A total quality management strategy addressing good human resources practices can enhance job satisfaction of employees in SMEs (Trivellas & Santouridis, 2009).

- Implementation of quality management can effectively increase financial performance (Kober, Subraamanniam, & Watson, 2012).

#### **4) Discussion**

Some key findings were noted during the analysis of the results. The discussion on these findings is divided into several points

##### **4.1. Differences in the two decades**

According to figure 1, we see that there are more articles published in the domain of inventory management compared to quality management concerning Operations management for SMEs. Again, more attention was given in the literature to this kind of enterprises since 2010. There is an increase in publication compared to the first decade which is from 2000-2009. Again, compared to the years 2000-2009 where emphasis have been put on quality and inventory management systems or techniques, the years 2010-2010 put an accent on the relation between SMEs performance or



competitive advantage with the implementation of inventory or quality management methods or the problems met by them while using these methods.

In addition, most of the studies concerning SMEs were conducted in developing or emerging countries in Europe, Asia and Africa, only two developed countries were identified in the literature (USA and Canada). It seems like more importance are given to the Operations management of larger companies in the developed countries. In addition, from 2010 till now, we see that more research on inventory and quality management were done on the African continent more precisely in English-speaking African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana ...

#### **4.2. Similarities in the two decades**

We note that concerning the nature of research over the two decades, descriptive research is the most used. In more than half of the research, a sample of SMEs is selected and studied in order to have concrete data and results and to draw conclusions. The number of selected SMEs vary from one country to other one, or from one industry to other one. At the data collection step, primary data are gathered directly from the sample of selected SMEs. It was done through two methods which surveys (face-to-face interviews, written semi-structure or structure questionnaire), and case studies.

Inventory and quality management are beneficial for SMEs according to the various studies that have been carried out in various countries. First, they allow the company to have a competitive advantage over competitors in the same sector, to retain customers, to reduce management efforts through an intelligent organization of internal resources and operations in general. All this leads to the installation of an organizational performance for SMEs. This allows SMEs to grow and reach a certain level in their activities a few months or years after having implemented methods of inventory and quality management. Performance and competitive advantage are attained by those SMEs choosing to implement inventory and quality management because some problems mentioned in the research such as underproduction, overproduction, lack of required stock of the different kind of inventories, customer complaints, supply chain problems ... are avoided at the maximum. We also noticed that inventory and quality management can impact other areas of the management of the company such as internal marketing, human resources and the financial performance of small-medium sized companies.

It is true that these practices of inventory and quality management have proven to be essential for the proper functioning of SMEs, however many of them are still reluctant to adopt them in their companies. Even if the few issues are different from one country to another one, there are common issues found in each country. This is because many companies do not have in-depth knowledge on this subject, or do not pay attention to the training of their employees concerning advanced techniques of inventory and quality management. So, the lack of computer skills for example pushed them to use informal practices for inventory and quality management. In addition, some people find it too expensive to be able to use modern techniques in their businesses, since they have fewer financial means compared to large companies. For others, this is even considered as not necessary for the proper functioning of their activity.

During the various studies, it has been found that certain simple methods or techniques, inexpensive and comprehensible for the level of SMEs have been adopted. These reduce the financial costs related to the use of complex inventory and quality management techniques. However, there is still a great lack of knowledge of all the techniques available in these two domains. Most SMEs know only a few. Regarding inventory management, some knew methods are ABC inventory, Just-in-time, Economic order quantity. And the concept of Total quality management is recurrent in the SMEs environment across the countries.

### 4.3. Limitations

Some papers do not show the difference between micro, small and medium enterprises. Even if they are put in the same basket, they are different on different aspects such as the number of employees, their revenues, their operating costs ... So, a generalization concerning their inventory or quality management is not the best way of analysis according to us. The low sample of SMEs in some studies makes it difficult to generalize the results for a huge number of SMEs in the same industry or same city. Also, we notice that there is an important lack of literature concerning the use or the impact of Operations management in SMEs, but more precisely concerning the use of Inventory and quality management techniques, which makes difficult the study of Operations management for these kinds of enterprises. Therefore, the research were made only for registered or formal SMEs, since we know that most of them, especially in developing countries are in informality, these results cannot maybe match their realities.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The objective of this systematic review was to see the new trends or the stage of research in operations management, more precisely the state of research on inventory and quality management for small-medium sized businesses. For this study, 63 articles from five well-known publishing houses were studied and 40 articles were retained after analysis of the data with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Through the analysis of the retained data, the discussion was articulated around four points which are: The impact of quality or inventory management on SMEs performance and growth, the techniques or systems used in these two domains, the issues encountered by SMEs in using quality or inventory management, the combination with other domains in management.

It appears that quality and inventory management have a positive impact on the SME using techniques adapted to their conditions. However, even though this is useful to them, many SMEs are reluctant to adopt these types of techniques in their businesses. This can be explained by the fact that they encounter many obstacles, especially of an internal order, for the implementation of these techniques. Also, we have seen more and more research done on the African continent during the decade of 2010-2020. The themes which were more focused on inventory and quality management techniques during the years 2000-2009, gave way to more focused themes on the performance and competitiveness of SMEs by using inventory management. and quality.

At the sight of these results, we recommend that organizations in charge of SMEs educate these businesses on the importance of operations management, more precisely the importance of quality and inventory management. As mentioned above, some SMEs do not see the importance of implementing this kind of practice in their daily activities. If decision-makers focus on the training of these businesses' owners/managers, often with little knowledge, financial and human resources compared to large companies, it can make their small businesses efficient and thus participate in the growth of the economy of their country. Also, regarding geographical location, this type of study can be done in developed countries or in French-speaking African developing countries for example.

This systematic review was not easy because of the lack of articles on operations management for SMEs. We humbly think that SMEs are the engine of the economy of both developed and less

developed countries, so greater importance must be given to them in the field of operations management. Most literature reviews or systematic literature reviews in the field of operations management are made for large companies. We recommend that researchers, professors as well as students focus on writing more articles on the sub-fields of Operations Management for SMEs to provide information to the existing little literature. Some questions for future research can be: How government can help SMEs to have skills in inventory management? Can specific inventory and/or quality management techniques or systems be created and fitted for SMEs?

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