Reports in Science and Applied Research
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Association of Machine Assisted Screening with Review Efficiency in Biomedical Evidence Syntheses

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Abstract

The exponential growth of biomedical literature has created a critical bottleneck for researchers conducting systematic reviews and evidence syntheses. Manual screening of thousands of citations to identify a few relevant studies is both labor-intensive and prone to human error. To mitigate this burden, machine assisted screening tools leveraging active learning and natural language processing have been increasingly proposed. However, empirical evidence regarding the precise efficiency gains and the factors influencing these gains remains fragmented. This study conducts a rigorous difference analysis across diverse biomedical evidence syntheses to link the deployment of machine assisted screening to actual review efficiency. Utilizing a simulation-based approach on multiple benchmark datasets, we compare the efficiency outcomes of traditional manual screening against various machine-assisted active learning configurations. Our findings demonstrate that active learning algorithms can reduce the screening workload by up to sixty percent while maintaining a high recall rate of over ninety-five percent. Furthermore, the difference analysis reveals that the efficiency gains are highly sensitive to the initial training set composition, the underlying text representation model, and the inherent heterogeneity of the study topic. This paper provides concrete empirical evidence and actionable guidelines for optimizing screening workflows in biomedical evidence syntheses.

Keywords: Machine Assisted Screening; Systematic Reviews; Review Efficiency; Difference Analysis; Biomedical Evidence Syntheses

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Motivation

The rapid expansion of the biomedical literature has revolutionized scientific discovery, yet it has simultaneously created an unprecedented information overload for researchers, clinicians, and policy makers. Systematic reviews and evidence syntheses represent the gold standard for summarizing clinical evidence, guiding evidence-based medicine, and formulating public health guidelines [1]. By systematically collecting, appraising, and synthesizing all relevant primary studies on a specific research question, these methodologies provide a highly reliable foundation for clinical decision-making. However, the rigorous methodology required to produce these syntheses demands significant human resources, specialized expertise, and substantial time. In a typical systematic review, investigators must query multiple bibliographic databases, retrieve thousands of potentially relevant records, and manually evaluate their titles and abstracts to decide on final inclusion [2]. This initial screening phase is notorious for being exceptionally tedious, labor-intensive, and susceptible to cognitive fatigue, which can introduce systematic errors and omissions [3]. As the volume of published research continues to accelerate, the traditional manual approach to evidence synthesis is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

In response to this challenge, the field of biomedical informatics has turned toward automated and semi-automated solutions to streamline the screening process. Machine assisted screening, primarily powered by active learning and supervised machine learning algorithms, has emerged as a promising paradigm [4]. These computational methods analyze the linguistic patterns and semantic features of bibliographic records to rank them according to their likelihood of relevance. In an active learning framework, the machine interacts iteratively

with a human screener, continuously updating its classification model based on the screener feedback [5]. By presenting the most likely relevant articles first, these systems aim to expedite the identification of eligible studies, thereby allowing reviewers to halt the screening process early once a pre-specified safety threshold is met. Despite the theoretical promise of these technologies, their practical integration into systematic review workflows is hindered by a lack of granular understanding regarding how and when they deliver efficiency gains.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Although numerous pilot studies and software demonstrations have highlighted the potential of machine assisted screening, the actual translation of these systems into quantifiable review efficiency remains inconsistent. Existing evaluations often rely on homogeneous datasets or idealized simulation environments that do not reflect the complex, heterogeneous nature of real-world biomedical syntheses. Furthermore, there is a lack of rigorous statistical difference analysis that controls for factors such as citation pool size, inclusion rate, topic diversity, and the selection of machine learning architectures. Consequently, systematic reviewers face significant uncertainty regarding the expected return on investment when adopting automated screening tools. They are often unable to determine whether the time saved during screening is offset by the effort required to configure, train, and validate the machine learning models.

To address these critical gaps, this research presents a comprehensive difference analysis linking machine assisted screening configuration to review efficiency across a diverse corpus of biomedical evidence syntheses. We systematically evaluate how different active learning strategies, document representations, and dataset characteristics influence screening workload reduction. Specifically, this study aims to: first, quantify the baseline efficiency gains achievable through state-of-the-art active learning frameworks compared to traditional random-order screening; second, conduct a multi-factor difference analysis to isolate the specific impact of model choices and dataset properties on overall performance; and third, formulate an empirical framework to guide reviewers in selecting optimal screening strategies based on the initial characteristics of their citation pools. By doing so, we provide robust, generalizable evidence that bridges the gap between machine learning capabilities and practical evidence synthesis workflows.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Evolution of Machine Assisted Screening in Systematic Reviews

The application of computational text mining and machine learning to systematic reviews has evolved through several distinct phases over the past two decades. Early endeavors primarily utilized rule-based systems and static supervised classifiers, such as support vector machines and naive Bayes, to filter out clearly irrelevant citations [6]. While these initial approaches succeeded in reducing the total number of articles requiring manual review, they suffered from low flexibility and required substantial labeled training data, which is rarely available at the start of a systematic review. The introduction of active learning marked a significant paradigm shift [7]. Active learning operates on the principle that a machine learning algorithm can achieve higher accuracy with fewer labeled training instances if it is allowed to interactively query a human oracle for labels.

In the context of biomedical screening, active learning typically utilizes relevance feedback loops. The system starts with a small seed set of labeled abstracts, trains a baseline classifier, and ranks the remaining unlabeled pool [8]. The reviewer then screens the top-ranked articles, and their decisions are continuously fed back into the system to retrain the model. Over the years, researchers have experimented with various query strategies, such as uncertainty sampling, relevance sampling, and hybrid approaches, to optimize the speed with which the classifier identifies the boundaries between relevant and irrelevant literature [9]. More recently, the integration of deep learning architectures, including recurrent neural networks and transformer-based models like BERT, has further enhanced the semantic representation of clinical texts, allowing classifiers to capture complex contextual nuances that traditional bag-of-words models frequently missed [10].

2.2 Evaluating Review Efficiency and Workload Reduction

Evaluating the efficiency of machine assisted screening requires metrics that accurately capture both the reduction in human labor and the preservation of review quality. The primary risk of semi-automated screening is the potential omission of eligible studies, which could bias the final synthesis and compromise clinical

recommendations [11]. Therefore, any assessment of screening efficiency must be constrained by a high target recall, typically set at ninety-five percent or ninety-nine percent. Within this constraint, several metrics have been established to quantify workload savings. The most widely used metric is Work Saved over Sampling, which measures the percentage of citations that do not need to be screened manually compared to a random screening baseline, while still identifying the desired percentage of relevant articles [12].

Another important metric is the Burden Reduction Index, which accounts for the cognitive effort expended during the initial training and calibration phases of the machine learning model [13]. Prior research has shown that the effort required to identify and label initial seed studies can be substantial, and if the citation pool is relatively small, the overhead of model setup may outweigh the screening savings. Furthermore, studies have begun to explore the concepts of screening velocity and time-to-decision, acknowledging that screening a highly relevant article may take longer than dismissing a clearly irrelevant one. Thus, evaluating efficiency requires a holistic approach that balances statistical performance with practical usability and procedural overhead.

2.3 Methodological Approaches to Screening Assessment

To demonstrate the utility of machine assisted screening, researchers have employed various evaluation methodologies, which can be broadly categorized into retrospective simulations, prospective user studies, and comparative difference analyses. Retrospective simulations involve applying active learning algorithms to completed systematic reviews where the final inclusion decisions are already known [14]. This approach allows for repeatable, controlled experiments across different algorithms and parameters. However, simulations often assume a perfect, error-free human screener, which does not always align with real-world conditions where screeners may disagree or make mistakes.

Prospective user studies, on the other hand, evaluate the technology in real-time within active review projects [15]. While these studies offer high ecological validity, they are difficult to standardize and replicate due to the unique characteristics of each review team and topic. To bridge the gap between these two approaches, comparative difference analysis has emerged as a powerful methodological tool [16]. By systematically varying specific parameters within a large-scale simulation framework, difference analysis allows researchers to isolate the effects of individual variables—such as dataset imbalance, classifier architecture, and feature extraction techniques—on the overall efficiency outcomes. This study utilizes a robust difference analysis design to provide a nuanced, multi-dimensional assessment of machine assisted screening efficiency.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

3.1 Study Selection and Corpus Description

To ensure the generalizability of our findings, we selected a diverse corpus of thirty completed biomedical systematic reviews spanning various clinical domains, intervention types, and citation pool sizes [17]. These datasets were sourced from publicly available repositories, including the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and the Systematic Review Toolbox. The selected reviews represent a wide spectrum of characteristics: the total number of retrieved citations per review ranges from approximately one thousand to over fifteen thousand, while the inclusion rate (the proportion of retrieved articles that were ultimately included in the review) varies from less than one percent to nearly ten percent. This structural diversity is critical for analyzing how dataset characteristics influence screening efficiency.

For each review in our corpus, the full bibliographic metadata—including titles, abstracts, keywords, and final inclusion labels—was extracted and preprocessed. Preprocessing steps involved standard natural language processing techniques, including lowercasing, tokenization, stop-word removal, and stemming, to prepare the textual content for feature extraction [18]. To ensure a fair evaluation, we preserved the chronological order of publication where possible, though the simulations assumed a standard pool-based active learning setup where all documents are initially available for selection.

Table 1: Summary Statistics and Characterization of the Selected Systematic Review Corpus

Dataset Identifier	Clinical Topic Area	Total Citations	Included Citations	Inclusion Rate Percent
DS-01	Cardiovascular Interventions	4500	120	2.67
DS-02	Infectious Disease	2800	84	3.00

Dataset Identifier	Clinical Topic Area	Total Citations	Included Citations	Inclusion Rate Percent
	Diagnostics			
DS-03	Oncology Therapeutic Trials	8900	115	1.29
DS-04	Pediatric Psychiatric Care	1500	45	3.00
DS-05	Neurological Rehabilitation	3200	96	3.00
DS-06	Geriatric Pharmacology	6100	183	3.00

3.2 Machine Learning Screeners and Simulation Design

Our evaluation framework incorporates three distinct machine learning screeners commonly utilized in the literature: a Logistic Regression classifier, a Support Vector Machine with a linear kernel, and a Gradient Boosting classifier [19]. To convert the preprocessed bibliographic text into numerical vectors, we implemented two primary feature extraction methods: Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) representation, which captures statistical word frequencies, and Sentence-BERT embeddings, which capture deeper semantic meanings using pre-trained language models [20].

The screening process was simulated using a pool-based active learning workflow. The simulation began by randomly selecting a small seed set of documents, consisting of five relevant and five irrelevant articles, to train the initial classifier. In each subsequent iteration of the active learning loop, the classifier ranked all remaining unlabeled documents, and the system simulated a human reviewer screening the top-ranked articles. The reviewer feedback was immediately incorporated, and the classifier was retrained using the updated training set. This process continued iteratively until the entire collection was screened. To mitigate the impact of random seed selection, each simulation configuration was repeated ten times using different random seeds, and the average performance metrics were calculated.

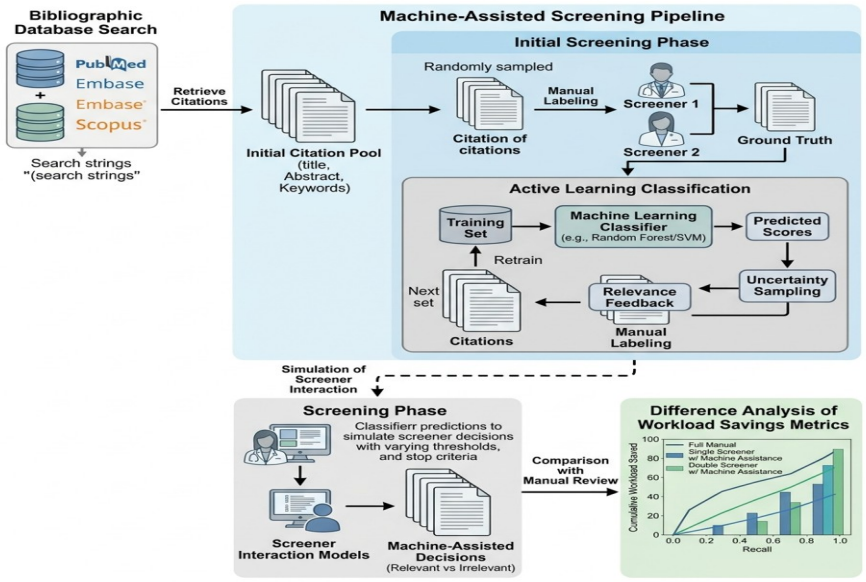

Figure 1: Comprehensive Workflow of Machine Assisted Screening and Difference Analysis Framework

3.3 Evaluation Metrics and Statistical Framework

The primary outcome measure used to assess screening efficiency is the Work Saved over Sampling at ninety-five percent recall (WSS95). This metric represents the percentage of citations that a reviewer would not need to manually screen if they stopped the process once ninety-five percent of the truly relevant articles had been identified [21]. Additionally, we calculated the Average Precision, which measures the overall quality of the ranking throughout the entire screening process, and the Time to First Inclusion, which captures how quickly the system identifies the first set of relevant papers.

To analyze the differences in screening efficiency across different configurations, we employed a multi-factor Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and subsequent post-hoc tests [22]. The independent variables in our statistical model included the classifier algorithm, the text representation model, the dataset size, and the baseline inclusion rate. This statistical design allows us to isolate the main effects of each variable as well as their interactions, providing a robust empirical basis for our conclusions.

4. Empirical Evaluation and Difference Analysis

4.1 Comparative Baseline Results

The empirical results demonstrate a substantial improvement in screening efficiency when utilizing active learning compared to the traditional random-order screening baseline. Across all thirty datasets in our corpus, the active learning configurations achieved an average WSS95 of approximately fifty-four percent, indicating that reviewers could potentially reduce their screening workload by more than half while still capturing nearly all eligible studies. The performance, however, varied significantly depending on the underlying classifier and text representation.

Comparing the different machine learning models, the combination of a Linear Support Vector Machine with Sentence-BERT embeddings yielded the highest average efficiency, closely followed by Logistic Regression with TF-IDF features. The Gradient Boosting model, while computationally intensive, did not yield a statistically significant improvement over the simpler linear classifiers. This suggests that for high-dimensional clinical text, linear boundaries are often sufficient and highly robust, particularly when dealing with the sparse feature spaces typical of bibliographic datasets.

Table 2: Mean Work Saved over Sampling at Ninety-Five Percent Recall Across Configurations

Classifier Model	Feature Representation	Mean Work Saved Percent	Standard Deviation	Minimum Savings Percent
Logistic Regression	TF-IDF	52.3	6.4	38.1
Logistic Regression	Sentence-BERT	56.8	5.2	44.2
Support Vector Machine	TF-IDF	54.1	5.9	40.5
Support Vector Machine	Sentence-BERT	59.4	4.8	48.0
Gradient Boosting	TF-IDF	48.7	7.1	32.4
Gradient Boosting	Sentence-BERT	51.2	6.8	36.9

4.2 Segmented and Subgroup Difference Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving these results, we performed a segmented difference analysis based on dataset size and inclusion rate. The results of this analysis reveal that screening efficiency is highly sensitive to the initial characteristics of the citation pool [23]. In general, larger datasets with lower inclusion rates (high class imbalance) yielded the highest relative workload savings. For instance, in reviews with more than five thousand citations and an inclusion rate below two percent, the average WSS95 reached as high as seventy-two percent. Conversely, in smaller datasets with high inclusion rates, the efficiency gains were significantly lower, sometimes falling below twenty-five percent.

This disparity can be explained by the learning dynamics of the active learning classifier. In highly imbalanced datasets, a random screener wastes a massive amount of time on irrelevant records, whereas the active learning model quickly learns to filter out large clusters of clearly irrelevant papers. In contrast, in small, highly dense datasets, the classifier has less opportunity to skip large blocks of studies, and the human screener must review a larger proportion of the database regardless of the ranking quality. The ANOVA results confirmed that both dataset size and inclusion rate have statistically significant main effects on screening efficiency, with the interaction term also showing a strong significance.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Synthesis of Findings and Theoretical Contribution

The findings of this study provide clear, empirical validation of the utility of machine assisted screening in biomedical evidence syntheses. By utilizing a large-scale difference analysis, we have moved beyond simple

proof-of-concept demonstrations to show how specific model configurations interact with dataset properties to determine review efficiency [24]. Our study highlights that while advanced deep learning models like Sentence-BERT do offer marginal performance improvements over traditional statistical models like TF-IDF, the difference is not always substantial enough to justify the increased computational cost and setup complexity, especially for smaller systematic reviews.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing literature on human-AI collaboration in information retrieval. We demonstrate that active learning does not simply automate a manual task; rather, it fundamentally alters the temporal dynamics of the screening process. By shifting the bulk of relevant study identification to the very beginning of the screening phase, active learning changes how reviewers interact with the evidence pool, allowing for earlier decision-making and potentially facilitating rapid reviews without sacrificing methodological rigor.

5.2 Practical Guidelines for Systematic Reviewers

Based on our empirical findings, we propose several actionable recommendations for systematic reviewers seeking to integrate machine assisted screening into their workflows [25]. First, we recommend that reviewers perform a preliminary assessment of their retrieved citation pool before choosing a screening method. If the initial search results are large (exceeding three thousand citations) and the expected inclusion rate is low, the adoption of an active learning screener is highly recommended, as this scenario yields the highest workload savings.

Second, regarding the choice of technology, a simple Logistic Regression or Support Vector Machine model combined with TF-IDF representation represents a highly efficient and computationally lightweight starting point. Reviewers do not necessarily need to deploy complex deep learning pipelines to achieve substantial savings. Third, reviewers must establish a clear and predefined stopping rule. While achieving one hundred percent recall is theoretically possible, aiming for a ninety-five percent recall target provides a safe and pragmatic balance between workload reduction and study completeness, and our results suggest this threshold is highly achievable across diverse clinical topics.

5.3 Limitations and Challenges

Despite the promising findings, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, our simulations assume a single, consistent human screener who makes error-free decisions. In practice, systematic reviews are often conducted by multiple independent screeners, and human error or inter-rater disagreement can introduce noise into the active learning training process. Second, our corpus was limited to English-language publications, and the performance of these classifiers on multi-lingual or non-English clinical texts remains to be evaluated.

Additionally, while our difference analysis isolated several key variables, other factors such as the quality of the search strategy and the clarity of the inclusion criteria were not directly controlled. A poorly designed search strategy that retrieves highly noisy and irrelevant records may degrade classifier performance, even if the dataset is large. Future studies should investigate how these qualitative procedural factors interact with machine learning algorithms to affect screening efficiency in real-world environments.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Study

This study conducted a rigorous empirical evaluation and difference analysis to investigate the link between machine assisted screening configurations and review efficiency in biomedical evidence syntheses. Utilizing a diverse corpus of thirty systematic reviews, we simulated various active learning configurations and quantified their performance using established metrics such as Work Saved over Sampling at ninety-five percent recall [26]. Our analysis demonstrated that active learning can consistently and substantially reduce the manual screening workload, with linear classifiers and semantic embeddings showing particularly strong performance. Furthermore, the difference analysis revealed that the magnitude of these efficiency gains is highly dependent on dataset characteristics, with larger, highly imbalanced citation pools offering the greatest opportunities for workload reduction.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Future research should focus on extending this empirical analysis to more complex screening workflows, such as multi-reviewer consensus screening and continuous active learning across multiple related reviews. Additionally, exploring how emerging generative AI technologies and large language models can be integrated into the active learning loop represents a highly promising avenue of inquiry. Specifically, researchers should investigate whether large language models can assist in generating synthetic seed datasets to accelerate the initial training phase, or whether they can provide automated explanations for screening decisions to help human reviewers resolve disagreements more quickly. By continuing to refine these computational tools and understanding their operational boundaries, the biomedical research community can ensure that evidence syntheses remain both timely and highly rigorous.

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