



“Roots of Reluctance”: Exploring the Reasons Behind the Management Undergraduates’ Less Preference for Qualitative Research Approaches. - A Case of Sri Lankan State University

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Abstract

The study was contextually undertaken in the Faculty of Management (FOM) at a State University of Sri Lanka with two objectives: to explore the reasons for the less preference for qualitative approaches and to classify such contextual reasons for a proper understanding that is necessary for practical implications of diverse parties. The key study areas of undergraduates’ perspectives on qualitative research and influences on them when selecting the research approach were majorly subjective. Thus, the philosophical paradigm is qualitative interpretivism. Thematic Analysis was conducted on the data collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 students who belong to a final year from different genders and ethnicities. Purposive sampling was undertaken by the researchers to narrow down the population into samples. The study found four major themes, the impact of the learning environment, the role of supervisors, the impact of the mindset of undergraduates, and the perception of the qualitative research process being the areas of reasons for less preference. This study is one of the initial qualitative explorations on the reasons influencing the choice of undergraduates about their final year research.

Keywords: *Choice of Research, Qualitative approach, Research Supervisors, Management*

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Introduction

Qualitative methods after being introduced by the Chicago School of America into sociology, evolved from marginalization in the early 1900s to a golden age in the modernist era (1950-1970) with the introduction of phenomenology and grounded theory. In the 1980s, qualitative methods diversified with the emergence of case studies, discourse analysis, and feminist analysis, known as the "blurred genres." This led to a crisis of representation, where qualitative methods were criticized for their subjectivity, challenging validity and reliability for which in response reflexive practices were developed, ultimately qualitative methods became their kind. Qualitative research is an alternative approach that was formed in response to challenge scientific, especially within the boundaries of social sciences (Alasuutari, 2010). Qualitative methods are preferred in social science as they bring out novel insights, enable contextual understanding zoom into the fine details as well and zoom out for broader contexts, whereby it makes society and its phenomena precisely understandable, whereas the positivist approach in social sciences have been a failure in the above aspects (Alasuutari, 2010; Ziber & Meyer, 2022; Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

There have been paradigm shifts in many aspects of management, where they are moving more towards diverse, open-ended, integration of qualitative aspects and flexible from being too scientific, merely quantitative, and rigid-hierarchical (Cassell, 2015). Further Lanka et al. (2021) point out that the conception of modern management, built on a quantitative paradigm, is problematic because it ignores the social and human

dimensions and avoids the real voices of diverse stakeholders. Hence all these addresses the necessity of qualitative research in diverse fields of management. Such research will have more real implications for the betterment of the organization and society at large (Bluhm et al., 2011).

Qualitative research has prevailed in the management field throughout its history. For example, as per Zilber et al. (2024), early ethnographies related to managerial work have brought huge insights into managerial experience and practice (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Mintzberg, 1973). Even though there have been reductions in the numbers of qualitative research during the past (before the 2000s). "Gone are the debates over the legitimacy of qualitative methods in our discipline. Gone too are the periodic assessments of the status of qualitative research in our discipline and journals, and the efforts to justify them" (Zilber et al. 2024). Several articles have identified an increasing trend in qualitative research and recognized it as an apt methodology for social sciences, especially management. From being marginalized, now it has become mainstream (Bluhm et al., 2011). For example, Qualitative articles occupied the majority of the Academy of Management Journal board's 'interesting research' list in a recent survey (Bartunek et al., 2006). More qualitative work has been published in top American management journals in the past ten years than in previous years (Bluhm et al., 2011). Hence it is obvious that qualitative research in management and organization studies has been undertaken in high amounts compared to the past. But still in the management discipline of the Asian region, there have been fewer qualitative studies and the dominance

of positivism or quantitative approach continues (Wa-Mbaleka, 2017; Rosario & Wa-Mbaleka, 2022).

Undergraduate research is a research project, that is expected to be completed to achieve a bachelor's degree. Such research is the first research experience of students, especially from the Sri Lankan Education system, where they engage in research for the first time even in the fourth year of their bachelor's degree. Such research is the first learning and experience of them (Sellahewa & Samarasinghe, 2021). Undergraduates are the people, who at their post-graduation, become academic, or independent researchers or are somehow employed in the industry and do research as a part of their organizational requirement or necessity. Whatsoever the future research emerges from the present undergraduates. Then their preference of what approach to research matters a lot. Further, it is derivable that such preference will impact their next research endeavors. Also, on the other hand, as pointed out by Sellahewa and Samarasinghe (2021) research of undergraduates is also if published an original contribution to the discipline. Altogether it is quite obvious that the approach the undergraduates follow in their bachelor's research matters a lot for the entire research trend in a particular discipline.

The Faculty of Management (FOM), State University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) (pseudonym) was established in 2015 with the aim of "Enriching potentials through management education" From 2015, the FOM has been divided into five departments and offering specializations namely Business Finance (BF), Marketing Management (MM), Organizational Management

(OM), Human Resources Management (HRM) and Operations Management (OPM). In the beginning, all specialization courses provided Independent research as an option for all students, but after the curriculum revision in 2019, research became compulsory for the completion of the BBA degree programme. The research methodology subject has been taught in the BBA curriculum during the 3rd year second semester. At the end of 1st semester of the fourth year, students have to present a research proposal, where such proposed research will be conducted during the second semester of the fourth year and the dissertation has to be submitted. So almost (2 semesters) of 8 months of period are given to carry out the research, where one semester is for proposal preparation and the other to conduct the research and submission. Also, in the final year first semester itself, students are released to follow the internship.

As per the statistics (Table 1) of the last two batches (2017 and 2018 [A/L passed out years]) that were passed out from the Faculty of Management, SUSL, which were gathered from the list of supervisor allocation of 2022 and 2023, where from the titles of the research, the following numbers were pointed out and further confirmed by personally contacting the students as well. There were 13% of students who undertook qualitative studies in all specialization areas, whereas 84% of students undertook quantitative researches. This shows that qualitative research has been very less followed in all five specialization areas in the faculty of management, SUSL over the past. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for the less preference for qualitative methodology in the choice of research

in the management arena (all five specialization areas) by the undergraduates of the FOM, SUSL.

The objectives of the research are twofold. First it aims to explore the reasons for the less preference for qualitative approaches. Secondly it aims to classify such contextual reasons for a proper understanding that is necessary for practical implications of diverse parties. As pointed out, when the mainstream of management has also recognized qualitative researches and accepted the crisis of positivism, then the reasons for less preference among the students has to be crucially studied and hence this study possess a significance as it explores it in a timely manner. Secondly necessary steps have to be taken against such reasons for less preference, which can be institutional level decisions or be decisions related to carrying out qualitative researches. Thus, this research also possesses a significance, as it is more change oriented. Finally, this research also possesses a value in social sciences, as it advocates for progressive growth of qualitative methods in social sciences.

Literature Review

Many studies have well evidenced that qualitative research is more apt in the field of social sciences especially management, where it can bring rooted and real understanding. Even though qualitative research remains less preferred, there are no empirical studies, which explored the reasons for such less preference. Theoretically, many studies have been addressing and suggesting reasons for such less preference. Accordingly, two major reasons were identified, the first one deals with the perception of inferiority on the qualitative approach that has been constructed throughout history.

Many studies point out that throughout history qualitative research has been branded as producing soft science, as opposed to scientific and rigorous quantitative studies, which valued statistics and numerical analysis (Bluhm 2011; Taylor & Lindlof, 2013). In social science, where human interactions and discourses are high, qualitative research has been considered second-class research or a preliminary/ initial study to carry out quantitative research after that (Bluhm et al., 2011). The root of this has been the belief that social sciences can be studied in a similar way as natural science and all can be united with a single methodological approach – the hypothetical deductive approach (Kottler & Minichiello, 2010; Cassell & Symon, 2006). Basri (2014) in their studies presented that due to the above perception of “unscientific” and “subjective”, students and researchers are reluctant to employ this qualitative method in their studies. On the other hand, it was also pointed out that even some universities and business schools were opposing the qualitative approach undermining its significance and implications, thereby even if the researcher/ students prefer to do so, they are forced to withdraw themselves by the lack of institutional support. Hoepfl (1997) also identified that when submitting proposals or defending the final thesis, qualitative researchers have to engage in a huge effort to convince the panel of the research committee that the research is legitimate and justify each and every decision within the research journey. But now comparatively such resistance is continuously being reduced, and qualitative studies have become inevitably recognized, yet the historical scars are kept influencing in several

situations (Basri, 2014; Eby et al., 2009).

The second most common reason in the literature was the lack of standards, followable frameworks, or clear objective guidelines to adhere to when doing qualitative research from the proposal stage to data collection, analysis, and write-up (Bluhm, 2011; Cassell & Symon, 2015; Harman et al., 2010). Pratt (2009) terms it a ‘lack of a boilerplate’, where an objectively agreed set of standards and templates writing up qualitative research. Hence such ambiguity automatically creates a fear of doing qualitative research, where everything has to be personally decided, and justified (Lanka et al., 2019). On the other hand, this lack of standards has also influenced publications, where reviewers often find it more convenient to accept quantitative works over qualitative ones (Bluhm, 2011). Many studies pointed out that qualitative works are evaluated in terms of positivist concepts like validity and reliability, whereby a high number of studies have become unqualified ultimately hurdling qualitative research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In response to these, there were frameworks of reflexivity, criteria to ensure rigor and trustworthiness, proposed by many scholars like Lincoln and Guba (2003), they are followed in lesser amount and some scholars have argued against such developments of standards, as they would marginalize alternative perspectives or force normative practices (Pratt, 2009; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012; Symon et al., 2016). All these constructive arguments in the literature are healthy for progress, but unfortunately, they have been indirectly influencing the pursuit of qualitative approaches by many.

On the other hand, another practical reason that could be derived from previous literature is the lack of awareness about qualitative studies. First, as Cassell and Symon (2006) point out there is a lack of knowledge and expertise about the qualitative approach in the management arena. In support of this claim Basri, (2014) presents that familiarity with various methods within the qualitative approaches has been also lacking. Most of the methods like case studies and focus groups are followed and grounded theory, discourse analysis, phenomenology, ethnography, and action research are less familiar (Basri, 2014). In addition, Basri (2014) also pointed out that the teaching of qualitative approaches is biased towards the familiar method or approach of the lecturer, hence panel of lecturers must be appointed to teach research methodology to ensure in-depth knowledge transfer of each method. Hence the lack of awareness among the lecturers, students, and researchers altogether has been a major practical reason behind the less preference for qualitative approaches (Cassell & Symon, 2006; Basri, 2014).

Whereas some studies have pointed out reasons like the requirement of a variety of skills in qualitative research has been a factor behind the less preference, where creativity is needed in the classification of data into logical and meaningful categories, spontaneity is needed in the interviewing process, people skill in having discourses with participants and networking skill in samples identification (Choy, 2014). Furthermore, studies like Strauss and Corbin (1990) presented that the “theoretical sensitivity” of the researcher is crucial to engage in

qualitative research, where it “refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, some studies have suggested that the high requirement of effort and time consumption in data collection and data analysis can also be a reason behind the less preference for qualitative research (Choy, 2014).

On the whole, the previous literature has theoretically pointed out two reasons that are related to the acceptance of the methodology and the inherent feature of the methodology of having no standards. Whereas some practical reasons like lack of awareness, the requirement of broad skills, and higher effort-time taken were also pointed out, they have not been based on empirical first-hand evidence, but rather some indirect suggestions and derivations. Altogether there is an empirical gap and this study aims to fill the lacuna by exploring the real reasons from students, who didn’t prefer qualitative approaches in their undergraduate research.

Methodology

The study was contextually located in the Faculty of Management (FOM) State University of Sri Lanka (SUSL). The key study areas of undergraduates’ opinions or perspectives on qualitative research and influences on them when selecting the research approach or during drafting the research proposal, were majorly subjective. Thus, the epistemological stance of the study is subjectivism. Further, every participant, who was a student from diverse socio-cultural settings had their understanding and interpretations of qualitative research, its usage, and necessity in the

social sciences especially in management, which ensures the existence of multiple realities. Altogether the philosophical paradigm is qualitative interpretivism. All nine researchers of this study are temporary lecturers attached to the faculty of Management across several departments of operations management, human resource management, marketing management, business finance, and Management Studies. They were divided into two groups where first group consisted of 4 members, who worked on introduction, literature reviewing and methodology drafting of the study. Second group consisted of 5 members, who undertook the interviews from 5 diverse departments in the faculty, undertook the data analysis and both groups together discussed and concluded the research. Further, they all are qualitative researchers with a common worldview and alignment towards interpretivism that qualitative approaches will be more apt to study social sciences, especially management as the human aspects of the field are inevitable. Hence these subjectivities may influence the data from participants.

Since the study dealt with the phenomena of choice of undergraduates (unique for every student) and which were contextually about the research that they had to do during their final years of the degree programme in partial fulfillment, there were clear boundaries to consider this choice and especially its underlying reasons for choice as the “case”. Furthermore, this particular area of study needs an in-depth analysis as the underlying reasons arise or are influenced by diverse factors. To perform such a nuanced in-depth analysis, the case study approach

of Stake (1995) was adopted. The study has been an intrinsic case study as it involves a single issue in the workplace and is required to establish trust and rapport with participants, and an exploratory study as it aims to explore the contextual hostilities against workplace romance. The study has been an intrinsic case study as it involves a single issue and requires establishing trust and rapport with participants to identify specific reasons, sometime which can be from the academic community as well; and an exploratory study as it aims to explore the real reasons behind why students were not choosing qualitative approaches. To have an in-depth and holistic understanding, there were multiple units of analysis, which are case (the reasons for non-choice of qualitative research), interactions (between organizational members), and practices (within the organizational culture). The study was also conducted in a non-contrived setting, as it gave more relativity and comfort to the participants to recall and narrate the reasons underlying their non-choice during their 3rd year of the degree program.

The population of the study are the students of FOM, SUSL in particular, the students of the fourth year in 2023/24 (2018 A/L batch), who have finished doing research, defended and submitted the dissertation. The population includes students from all 5 specialization areas and as per the present curriculum of the faculty, research has been compulsory for the completion of degree, hence the total population is a finite number of 43 students

Purposive sampling was undertaken by the researchers to narrow down the

population into samples. The researchers identified the participants. The Instrument consisted of questions in two overarching areas, first about the understanding of qualitative researchers from students and the second about the reasons or perceived reasons behind the less choice of qualitative approaches in the management arena. To ensure credibility, prolonged engagement with the participants throughout the data collection was followed. Additionally, member checking was undertaken, where the summaries of the interviews were verified by the participants. Also, participants' direct quotations are used to add more reliability. Data consisted of experiences, narratives, and opinions of the students. All interviews were conducted in Tamil and Sinhala languages, which are the native languages of both researchers and participants, to ensure the richness of the data and to avoid semantic noises. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Thematic Analysis was conducted in which data were manually coded into 42 codes where open coding was undertaken for unique data and selective coding otherwise. Later the codes were brought into 4 broad themes namely, the impact of the learning environment, the role of supervisors in the research journey, the Impact of the mindset of undergraduates, and the Perception of the qualitative research process.

Findings and Discussion

This study through thematic analysis found four major themes: The impact of the learning environment, Role of supervisors in the research journey, the Impact of the mindset of undergraduates, and the Perception of the qualitative research process.

Impact of the Learning Environment

Learning environments include diverse persons in the setting and learning processes, that take place in the setting. Accordingly, this study has found influence from persons (peers, seniors, and lecturers) and lack of awareness in the learning process as reasons for the less preference for qualitative research by students.

Influence from Persons

It was found three of the people who influence certain undergraduates which are peers, seniors, and lecturers.

Influence from Peers

The academic community comprises peer groups, seniors, and lecturers, who closely engage with undergraduates. As university life represents a new and unfamiliar environment for undergraduates, they share things with their colleagues and influence each other in several decisions including the choice of research approach. Students shared that “Everyone goes on the trend- doing quantitative” “When most people do it- we also tend to do it, it gives confidence” “Most of the finance people have chosen quantitative, so I thought that would be easy if we go by the or known path.”

This study found herd mentality of students when choosing the research approach, where the students adopted the choice of a larger group (quantitative approach) without rationally or personally evaluating. The reasons for such a mentality are fear of the unknown (qualitative path- as less followed) perceived low risk and perceived easiness.

Influence from Seniors

Seniors are crucial members, who themselves are an example for the juniors, and this has been reflected in the choice of research approach as well. Students pointed out that going in the path and advice of seniors were less risky “*Seniors can be asked for help, if we do quantitative research*” and “*Seniors' quantitative research can be used as a template*”. Students also strongly believed the opinions of seniors about qualitative research “*Qualitative is hard and quantitative is easy*”. The interesting part is none of the seniors who said qualitative as hard, did qualitative research or had good exposure and experience in qualitative research. Hence such unexperienced mere opinions about qualitative research are also a reason for less preference. In addition, QN MM 3 shared

“A smaller number of seniors, I think 2 people... did qualitative research and they are not propagating qualitative approach as well, they did it and that's all. No product will sell without marketing you know.”

First, this points out that there is a comparatively less number of seniors, who did qualitative research and this itself is a demotivating factor. When there are no exemplary seniors, juniors won't take risks to enter into a new field. Secondly, even those who did qualitative research were not engaged in promoting the interesting aspects, benefits, and significance of qualitative management research.

Influence from Lecturers

Not only peers and seniors, but lecturers in the faculty also influence the choice of students, where students are influenced by the lecturers in a panel of

evaluations, by the lecturers who taught research methodology, and even by some opinions of random lecturers. QN BF 2 expressed that how contradictory opinions and guidance confuse the students and demotivate them to navigate through qualitative approaches.

“Each lecturer has a different opinion. at the proposal stage a lecturer in the panel says one thing, then during the progress presentation, another lecturer says a different thing, and in severe confusion, my friend changed from qualitative to quantitative.”

QN MS 1 shared another important point that,

“There are a low number of qualitative researching lecturers in the faculty itself, then how can we expect more students to select a qualitative approach, who need consistent support and guidance from lecturers”

Hence this study highlights that not only students are less preferring qualitative approaches, but also lecturers in the management faculty. This concludes that either lecturers should increase research in qualitative approaches or they should at least allow, motivate, and guide students towards qualitative research to increase qualitative management research.

Lack of Awareness in the Learning Process

Qualitative research requires a solid understanding of problem identification, question formulation, methodology design, and data collection and analysis techniques. However, a lack of awareness about qualitative research, as evidenced in Cassell (2006) and Basri (2014), can cast doubts on the research process and create fear around qualitative

approaches. This study has identified certain factors contributing to the lack of awareness among students.

Students pointed out several biased teachings that happened during research methodology.

“It was taught in the second semester of the third year, which acts as a foundational knowledge. “I was not taught thoroughly about the qualitative approach in the research methodology subject. because the quantitative approach was given priority.” “Only 2 lectures out of 13 were allocated for qualitative approach”. “Lessons did not cover the qualitative data analysis or software related to it.” “There was one guest lecture for qualitative”

Hence it is quite obvious that when the foundations of qualitative research are not given equal priority like the quantitative approach, where some aspects like data analysis and software usage have been neglected, which ultimately leads to fear of the unknown. One or two days of qualitative quota-based teaching will never give students a clear picture and may lead to fear of the unknown when making choices. This finding confirms the findings of Basri (2014) that teaching qualitative research by a non-experienced person in the approach will be biased. QN BF 2 pointed out the result (lack of awareness) of such biased teaching in a genuine way,

“To be honest, before this interview, only I asked my friend what is qualitative research. She said she also didn’t have a clear idea but explained some basics. Many of the people in my circle are like us, either have no idea or very little idea about qualitative research”

On the other hand, some students pointed out that qualitative research has been taught as a higher advanced methodology, that is not understandable with common sense, (unnecessarily abstruse).

“Research seems an advanced thing to do, and is taught like that as something very unrelatable, so we cannot link with it, especially when teaching Qualitative research.” “The teaching of Qualitative research felt like it is hard for undergraduates”

Qualitative research must be practically taught in a simplistic way that is understandable and relatable, rather it is taught as more theoretical and abstract, hence students construct an “advanced image” on it, ultimately, they have felt they lack awareness about it. Findings of Cassell (2006), pointed out that several skills relating to qualitative research have to be included in teaching. This study further highlights whatever is taught must be taught practically and simply so that students can relate to it.

Role of Supervisor in the Research Journey

The role of a supervisor in the research journey is crucial, especially for first-time researchers and they contribute as a mentor, teacher, and facilitator throughout the overall process. Supervisors’ perception of qualitative research, their desire to publish the research, their dominance throughout the research, and their unfamiliarity with qualitative research were reasons behind the less preference for the qualitative approach.

Supervisor’s Perception of Qualitative Approach as Inferior

It was observed that most undergraduates got engaged with quantitative research based on their supervisor’s opinions regarding the quality of qualitative methods. It is obvious from the statement of QS MS 2 that

“The supervisor continuously says that Quantitative is superior to qualitative as it is full of math and stats, which are scientific ways of doing things. Quantitative has wide recognition and acceptance. So, I was not motivated to continue with my desire to do a qualitative study.”

Through terms of “wide recognition and acceptance,” supervisors tend to transmit risk and ambiguity concerning qualitative research, which creates a fear of getting involved. Another student also expressed that “the supervisor said quantitative is better than qualitative and worthy.” ‘Worthiness’, ‘superior’, and ‘better’ are terms, that are potent enough to impact the choice of undergraduates, who view supervisors as experienced, knowledgeable, and mentors for them. So, if the supervisor has an inferior perception of qualitative research, then automatically students get influenced, not necessarily accepting the qualitative approach as inferior, but at least withdrawing themselves from doing qualitative research. Studies like Eby et al. (2009) have highlighted the ongoing resistance and non-acceptance of qualitative research. The findings from this study also confirm this trend, as supervisors have been perceived by students as examples of such non-acceptance.

Supervisor's Desire to Publish the Research

Ultimately, the majority of supervisors' goal is to publish the student's dissertations including their names, where the dissertations not only serve for the student but also as a publication count for the supervisor, who is serving in academia, where they need publications for their career development. QN BF 2 stated,

"Supervisors rather than directly forcing, indirectly say and influence in changing the research for their desired area, desired methodology, because when it is published under them (If), then their desire is satisfied."

Thus, it seems that supervisors nudge students toward their preferred methodology rather than considering the student's interests. Another student also highlighted that *"when publishing the research under them in conferences, supervisors guide us how to defend, because they have experience"*.

Hence it is quite derivable that supervisors feel confident when the study is in their comfort zone (familiar methodology, familiar topic) to guide the students during publications, which ultimately benefits them as well. The phrase, "publish under them" has been repeated, which denotes that students also think the research belongs to supervisors and undergraduates are assisting. Hence this study poses a serious question, is it an independent research dissertation of the undergraduate? or of the supervisor? Studies like Lessing (2011) reflected the supervisors' unwillingness to take responsibility for students' research projects, but this study found the opposite where supervisors have taken too much responsibility as it has benefits for them.

Supervisor's Dominance

In the research supervision of undergraduates, who are first-hand researchers, the supervisor should give advice, suggestions, and guidance, but this study found the dominance of supervisors as pointed out by many interviewees, where the students are held like puppets in the hands of supervisors, where the ideas and knowledge of students are undervalued and even the research process didn't make any new learning to the students, rather than learning how to abide the supervisor. QN MM 3 expressed,

"Most of the time, we were pushed by supervisors, I had an idea for qualitative research when I went and shared it with the supervisor, and I was questioned like a VIVA on how, where, and why. Then I realized qualitative would be hard and followed a quantitative approach."

Here it is quite clear that the information asymmetry and the intellectual arrogance have been dominating the novice ideas of students, which should have been welcomed and shaped accordingly rather than demotivating and shattering the confidence, ultimately creating a meaninglessness towards researching. Such dominance also pushes the students towards a perceived less risky and easy option of quantitative approach as pointed out by one student,

"We don't have the courage to go against the supervisor, so we choose less risky option - quantitative, which can be done by merely watching YouTube videos"

Supervisor's Lack of Familiarity with Qualitative Research

Many researchers lack familiarity with all methods of qualitative approach and

holistic understanding of it, due to its diverseness, continued evolving nature, and lack of objective standards as pointed out in Basri, (2014). Thus, this study points out as per the statements of students, that rather than directing the students to learn things, supervisors tend to direct the study towards their familiar approach – the quantitative approach. QN MM 1 said, “Supervisors” knowledge of a particular approach is indirectly forcing students to take that approach. Furthermore, QN-HM-3 also pointed out the same “supervisor suggested to do in quantitative approach as she is an expert in quantitative approach”.

Students are encouraged to select a research methodology that fits the supervisor’s knowledge regardless of the student’s capacity level to learn qualitative methodologies. Karunananda (2000) also pointed out that a good supervisor has to have a significant researching experience in a particular approach. This study similarly underscores this perspective, suggesting that supervisors align their experience with the chosen approach, subtly guiding students toward the expected methodology.⁴

Impact from the Mindset of Undergraduates

This study found the mindset of undergraduates as another important theme, which consists of personal traits and fixed mental attitudes or disposition of undergraduates like a marks-oriented mindset, inability to balance work and research, doing research for the sake of doing, and laziness and lack of confidence.

Marks Oriented Mindset

This study has found that undergraduates, who are doing research

are highly influenced by their marks-oriented mindset because the research dissertation is allocated marks (6 credits out of 120 credits) in the degree program. QN HRM 2 shared a frank opinion,

“If there is no time or marks allocated, and only the intention is doing good research, I would have chosen qualitative, because, in Human Resource Management, I know it is a qualitative approach that is more apt and would give real data.”

This shows that students are well knowledgeable about the significance of the qualitative approach, but still, the constraints (marks, time) and their mindset towards those constraints have influenced their choice. Further students shared openly “GPA cannot be maintained, if I take too much risk, thus following the easy approach of quantitative.” “I needed results for the dissertation because I was on the border towards first class. So...” Hence this study strongly presents that the marks-oriented mindset of undergraduates has been influencing their choice as well, where deliberately they are going for options, where they could easily get good marks, not thinking about their learning or meaningfulness or the significance of the research to the discipline.

Inability to Balance Work and Research

In addition, this study found that students lack multitasking ability, where they are unable to balance internship and research together in one semester, which is also a genuine concern. “Internship and research together create more pressure, so following the quantitative approach was easy” QL MM 2 pointed out the reason that work and research need different

mindsets, where both are not incompatible. Hence students have preferred the quantitative approach, where they could even finish it at the last moment (as they stated). Studies like Cassell (2018) and Ferguson and Gordon (2019) have also pointed out that time taken in qualitative research is comparatively high and the findings from this study add to the literature that such time taken also creates a reluctance to follow the qualitative approach.

“Research and Internship are tough. Even one/ two subjects and research are okay. The internship needs a different mindset, research, and subject needs a compatible mindset.”

Doing research for the Sake of Doing

Next, it was important to find in the study that the majority of the students have done the research for the sake of doing so, hence they avoided taking new, unknown, time-consuming, effort-requiring path, rather they followed the easiest, and known path- quantitative approach. *“I did the research just for the sake of doing”* *“We have no idea what we did as research”* and *“Many of us only complete our research to fulfill degree requirements”*. In detail QN OPM 2 openly stated,

“We want to finish the research not to create some changes to society or business, we know.... eh even I know my quantitative research is entirely fake and pointless, but who cares? Just finishing is needed.”

Students prioritized finishing the research and they were not interested in bigger aspirations hence they avoided the qualitative approach. In addition, this study points out the inefficiency of a structured education system and the dangerous social constructs behind

education, where most students are not keen on creating or exploring new ideas. Further, this study strongly points out that when there are two options of research choice, then students with the above mindsets would go for the easy option not for the meaningful option and that’s also another reason for less preference of the qualitative approach.

Laziness and Lack of Confidence

Another mindset of undergraduates that was identified is laziness. Students shared *“Entire university assignments are a last-moment work only”* pointing out that qualitative research cannot be completed at the last moment. Also, Students feel that the qualitative approach needs more effort to think and read a lot, which the undergraduates are not interested in, which also underscores the laziness *“We don’t have much to think if we do quantitative approach, data analysis is over in few mouse clicks (referring to SPSS)”* Qualitative study requires continuous reading and learning, but many students found it as stressful, hence they preferred the quantitative approach.

Another key insight highlighted from the data analysis is the lack of confidence among management undergraduates to undertake a qualitative approach. They believe that it is hard to be a qualitative researcher at the undergraduate level. *“Most of us believe that at the undergraduate level, qualitative is harder”* Because they believe they need a higher level of self-directed problem-solving skills and interpretation skills. Studies like Choy (2014) and Hoepfl (1997) suggested the need for several skills to do qualitative research, but they also pointed out that such skills can be learned easily. Furthermore, participants emphasized that the absence of defined standards or guidelines in qualitative research leads

them to a sense of uncertainty and uneasiness during the research process. *"No standards for qualitative research, which is very hard for most people."* This finding reiterates the studies of Pratt (2009) and Lanka (2021), where such a lack of standards has been creating fear and ambiguity for novice researchers.

Undergraduates' Perception of the Qualitative Approach and its Process

Undergraduates have different perceptions, (mental process of recognizing and understanding to make sense of something) about the qualitative approach itself and it has been influencing their choice. Further qualitative research process is a long process, which includes several activities, where most of the students perceived three major activities data collection, data analysis, and writing up as difficult and have also been the rationales behind the less preference for qualitative research.

Perception about the Qualitative Approach

This study discovered that few reasons were identified by students that correlated with their inclination towards a specific research philosophical stance or their critique of the qualitative approach in the management discipline. However, QN OPM 2 shared, "I think the qualitative approach is very biased and subjective, and how to check if the data are valid and reliable, so I don't align with it." Another student said, *"How subjective things can create changes to the business or society, I don't find a point there."*

This stance reflects the clear view of some management undergraduates who prefer the quantitative research approach due to objectivism their

reluctance to do interpretations, and their unwillingness to accept alternative methodologies. Further, a substantial number of students shared that the scientific way of doing things supported by mathematics, statistics, and quantitative analysis is the correct approach. This signifies an inherent inclination towards the quantitative research approach, which provides statistical validations, thereby ensuring validity and reliability. On the whole, there is still a prevailing perception among a few management undergraduates that the qualitative research approach is biased and is being judged based on the positivist concepts of validity and reliability as evidenced by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000).

Perception of the Data Collection Process

The study has found data collection process of qualitative research has been perceived by students as taxing and time-consuming, especially field work arranging and interviewing. First, students have felt hard about finding the interviewees *"Finding respondents for the data collection was difficult"* *"Contacts are important to do qualitative research"*. It has been identified that students had fear about finding interviewees especially when the study setting is somewhere not familiar. Students who have fewer connections and inability to get connected have avoided the qualitative approach. These findings affirm Choy (2014), who also pointed out that networking skills are crucial for qualitative researchers, and in the lack of such skills, people avoid doing qualitative research. Not only finding interviewees but arranging for interviews, scheduling has been perceived as difficult, where students have to physically visit the places, and

find out common times for interviewees and themselves. Some pointed out the cost related to such field visits as well.

Data collection through interviews is one of the most significant steps in qualitative research and many students have shared that they are not comfortable with doing interviews, because they perceive they lack skills relating to interviewing someone. QN BF 2 pointed out,

“Some people have developed talent of interviewing from their childhood but some like me- introverts don’t have such skills, which creates a fear to choose qualitatively”.

This study reveals that the majority of students show little keenness for acquiring interview skills, which are often learned through hands-on experience. Once they conduct their initial interview, they naturally become more comfortable. However, many students, upon hearing about the necessity of interviews, exhibited hesitance towards choosing a qualitative approach, which was also pointed out by Choy (2014) and Cassell (2018) that the need for interview-related skills has been a major fear for many novice researchers.

Perception about Data Analysis Process

This study interestingly found certain reasons related to the data analysis process of the qualitative research, that many students who followed the quantitative approach have openly confessed the data manipulation they have done, where some have altered values to get normality, some have altered significance values to get the expected results, some have themselves filled the questionnaires or added data set using chat GPT and other AI mechanism. Students have felt that with

such ease of data manipulation, quantitative data analysis is easy and qualitative data analysis is somewhat complex. In addition one student pointed out “On one day before submission, I finished the whole research” Hence such perceived easiness and ease of doing manipulations made the students (with mindsets discussed in theme 3) prefer quantitative approach over qualitative approach.

On the other hand, this study found that SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) has been a crucial reason behind the choice of students. Manually doing regression would be taxing, but with software like SPSS, it has been a work of few mouse clicks, making the data analysis of quantitative approach easy. *“Decided to do quantitative research, because of SPSS availability” “Using SPSS, today itself he could finish the data analysis”*

Conversely students were not aware of NVivo software, which can be used to coding in the qualitative research, which also makes qualitative researches much easier. *“I did not learn about the qualitative data analysis software properly in the research methodology subject” “workshops related to SPSS and AMUS software took place, nothing related to qualitative aspects.” “No, I am not aware of this (NVivo) software”.*

Hence this study concludes that the lack of awareness about NVivo and the popularity of SPSS may have been a crucial technical reason for the perception of qualitative data analysis as difficult leading to less preference of qualitative research.

Perception about Write-up Process

Write-up in qualitative research has been perceived by students as daunting, especially by those unfamiliar with academic writing. *“In qualitative research, we have to write and explain a lot”*, This underscores that students have been not accustomed to academic writing from school days or even in the first three years of their bachelor’s degree, which leads to perceived difficulty. QN-HM-1 shared the reason that

“Academic writing is hard, as we didn’t even do our 1st year, 2nd year, and 3rd year assignments in academic writing format. Qualitative research needs more academic writing, so avoid it.”

On the other hand, it is further found that academic writing is not only an issue in writing up rather English literacy has been a factor of fear. *“English has been a barrier to an extent”* and *“translation of interviews to English will be hard”*. These ideas ensure that the majority of undergraduates selected the quantitative approach due to the requirement of academic writing and higher English literacy in the write-up stage of the qualitative approach. Studies like Medway (2002) and Wang (2013) pointed out that the write-up of qualitative research has been challenging for even skilled writers and this study added that such write-up toughness continues to demotivate novice researchers into qualitative research.

Conclusion

Overall, the study identified four major themes that influence the less preference for qualitative research in the FOM SUSL. Firstly, the learning environment, which consists of

influences from academic communities (peers, lecturers, seniors), along with the lack of awareness among students that arises during their learning process, has influenced the undergraduates. Further, the supervisors, who are crucial persons in the research journey also influence the choice via their inferior perception of qualitative research, their dominance, their desire to publish the research with personal benefits, and their lack of familiarity with qualitative research. On the other hand, the undergraduates’ mindsets like laziness, marks-oriented mindset, inability to balance work and research, and doing research for the sake of doing also impact the choice. Finally, the undergraduates’ perception of the qualitative approach itself and the perception of different processes like data analysis, data collection, and writeup, also influence the choice of undergraduates of FOM, SUSL. (Refer to figure 2).

This study offers empirical evidence of how institutional forces in the learning environment (peers, seniors, lecturers) shape individual behaviors and decision-making processes within educational settings, adding nuance to existing theoretical frameworks especially as a refinement to institutional theory of Scott (2005).

On the other hand, this study signifies a commitment to promoting critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire within management education especially it advocates for more conscientization of undergraduate researchers as emphasized by Kincheloe et al (2011) that encourages students to critically reflect on the dominant research paradigms, such as positivism.

As an exploratory study, this possesses more practical implications. First, this study aware several parties like students, lecturers, and researchers about the less preference and marginalization of the qualitative approach in the bachelor's degree programme, even though universally qualitative research has been emerging in numbers and being recognized in research communities in align with Cassell and Symon (2006) and Basri (2014).

Furthermore, this study urges supervisors, senior colleagues, peers, lecturers, and other relevant stakeholders from FOM, SUSL to refrain from actions or behaviors that may discourage students from choosing qualitative research methods. Equally, this study recognizes and points out the influential power such parties possess, which can be positively used to motivate students towards qualitative approaches aligning with Karunananda (2000) highlighting the features of good supervisor. Thirdly, this study strongly points out the lack of awareness prevails about qualitative research, not only among students, but also among lecturers as well, hence this study recommends awareness programs and workshops about qualitative research and its significance in the management discipline. Further specifically addresses proper knowledge dissemination to the undergraduates during the research methodology course (MGS 3299, MKT 3299, HRM 3299, OPM 3299, and ACF 3299) of the BBA degree programme. This study also poses serious questions about the development of certain non-constructive mindsets of management students about higher education and equally questions the dominance of the supervisors and the manipulations that occur. Finally, this study in FOM SUSL

itself is an initial step to advocate for the expansion of the qualitative approach in the management arena especially in the Sri Lankan context.

As a limitation, the study only focused on the reasons for the less preference for qualitative research from the perspective of students. The opinions of students about supervisors, lecturers, peers, and the learning environment were solely from the standpoint of students, potentially introducing biases. Therefore, the study recommends further research involving diverse parties to explore their perspectives and confirm or reject the opinions of students. Additionally, further qualitative studies documenting and analyzing the journey of students who follow the qualitative approach would be valuable in challenging stereotypes and misconceptions regarding qualitative research and generating interest in the qualitative approach.

Author Contributions

Authors were divided into two groups where first group consisted of 4 members, who worked on introduction, literature reviewing and methodology drafting of the study. Second group consisted of 5 members, who undertook the interviews from 5 diverse departments in the faculty, undertook the data analysis and both groups together discussed and concluded the research.

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Tables and Figures

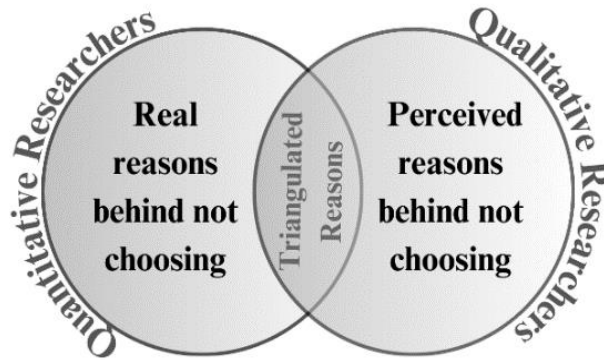


Figure 1: Triangulated reasons
Source: Author Compilation

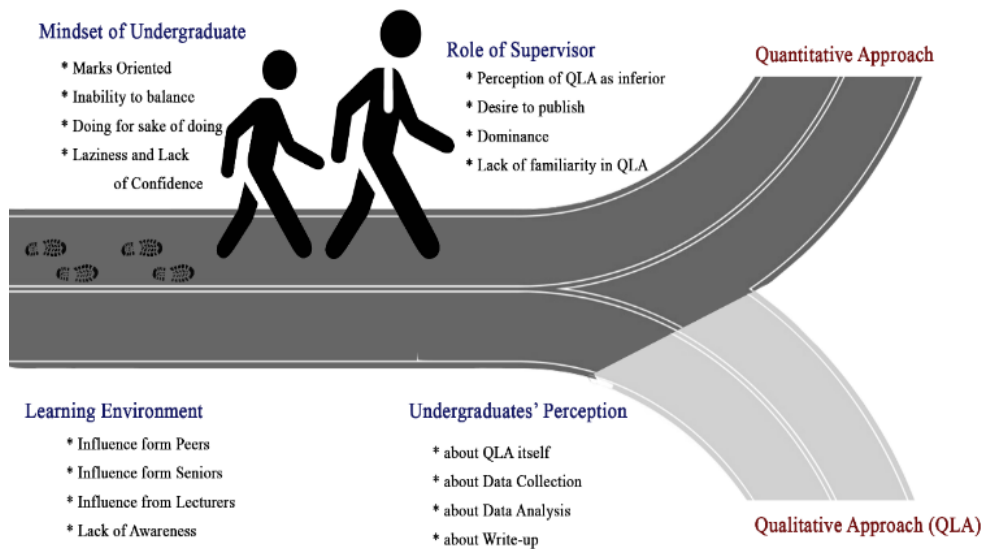


Figure 2: Concluding diagram
Source: Author Compilation

Table 1: Choice of Research

Specialization area	2017 batch		2018 batch		Total
	Qualitative	Quantitative	Qualitative	Quantitative	
MKT	6	25	5	25	61
HRM	4	30	8	27	69
OM	1	18	5	20	44
OPM	8	30	4	24	66
BF	1	44	1	46	92
Total	20	147	23	142	332

Source: List of Supervisor Allocation of 2022 and 2023

Table 2: Number of Samples

Department / Specialization	Qualitative	Quantitative	Total
Marketing Management	2	5	7
Business Finance	1	4	5
Operations Management	1	4	5
Management Studies	2	3	5
Human Resource Management	2	3	5
Total	8	19	27

Source: Author Compilation

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