

EDITORIAL FORWARD

Successful Qualitative Research in Agribusiness Management: Scope, Concepts and Steps

Agriculture is a complex blend of science and art, encompassing diverse broad areas of crops, livestock, economics and business. These subdisciplines span the spectrum from natural sciences to social sciences and even philosophy. Among these subdisciplines, agricultural economics and agribusiness management play a crucial role in the evolution of agriculture, especially during its transition from subsistence to commercial scale. It's noteworthy that these two subdisciplines originally belong to the realm of social sciences, even though they find widespread application in agriculture, where the predominant background is in the natural sciences.

Academic research plays a pivotal role in transmitting knowledge across generations, serving as the foundation of any discipline (Ahmad, 2016). The research approach of a study can be quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture of both. Quantitative research uses numerical data and quantitative methods such as statistics to find out patterns and relationships, emphasizing objectivity and generalizability towards a certain population. In contrast, qualitative research explores subjective experiences, utilizing non-numerical data collected through tools such as interviews, discussions, and observations to provide deeper insights into human perceptions, attitudes and behavior. Each approach offers distinct perspectives for comprehensive analysis. Essentially, mixed-method research combines methodologies from both approaches. Traditionally, there was a rule of thumb suggesting that natural sciences should use a quantitative approach, while the most suitable research approach for many social and behavioral studies was qualitative (Jaffe, 2015). However, with changing paradigms, and evolving knowledge, attitudes and practices of research, today even research related to natural sciences, tend to incorporate qualitative components (Ahmad, 2016; Bareiss, 2023; Street, 1996; Thomas and Harden, 2008).

The two primary research approaches; quantitative and qualitative, have been adapted in agricultural research. However, the agricultural realm historically favored quantitative research, even in its subdisciplines like agricultural economics and agribusiness management, which, despite being social sciences, exhibit a notable leaning towards numerical analyses and quantitative approaches (Bitsch, 2006; Detre *et al.*, 2011; Peterson, 2014; Place *et al.*, 2007). While this trend is justifiable for agricultural economics, influenced by mathematics and inferential statistics, agribusiness management, with more influence from social sciences, still holds the potential to adopt a qualitative approach for many research studies (King *et al.*, 2010). The field of agribusiness management can play a significant role in driving the progress of agriculture and agricultural research. Balancing the emphasis on both quantitative and qualitative approaches is crucial for fostering comprehensive advancements in agricultural sciences. However, there is a noticeable gap in published agribusiness management research in academia, especially when compared to the research output of other subdisciplines within agriculture. This editorial aims to highlight the potential of using a qualitative approach in agribusiness management research and provides guiding steps for scholars in the process.

Qualitative research mainly focuses on analyzing and explaining social phenomena, aiming to enhance our understanding of the social environment, its dynamics and the reasons behind them. This approach deals with the social aspects of the world, addressing inquiries such as the motivations

behind human behavior, the processes of opinion and attitude formation, the impact of external events on individuals, and the development of cultures and practices – exploring the hows and whys of their evolution (Hancock et al., 2023). Qualitative research is a valuable tool in agribusiness management due to the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the subject. It can be employed to explore the intricate social, economic, and cultural aspects that influence decision-making and operational dynamics in the agribusiness sector. This approach is particularly beneficial in uncovering subjective experiences, social relationships, and the contextual factors that shape agribusiness practices. Qualitative research in agribusiness management contributes to more holistic insights, aiding in the formulation of effective strategies, policies, and interventions that align with the diverse and complex realities of the agricultural industry (King *et al.*, 2010; Peterson, 2014). There are several basic steps to conduct successful qualitative research in the discipline of agribusiness management. Followings are such basic steps.

1. Formulating the research question:

The first crucial step in qualitative research is formulating a clear and focused research question. In agribusiness management, this could revolve around understanding decision-making processes, identifying challenges faced by agribusinesses, or exploring the social dynamics within agricultural organizations. The research question provides a roadmap for the study and can guide the subsequent steps in the research process (Peterson, 2014).

2. Literature Review:

Before commencing data collection, a comprehensive literature review is essential. This step involves examining through the existing body of knowledge to identify gaps in knowledge and refine the research question. Understanding the current state of knowledge in the specific area helps the researcher to contextualize the study and ensures that the work contributes meaningfully to the existing body of literature (Mitchell and Clark, 2018; Peterson, 2014).

3. Selecting the Research Design:

A researcher uses a research design to answer the research question using the empirical data. The common types of qualitative research design options available for agribusiness management include grounded theory, ethnography, narrative research, historical, case studies, and phenomenology. descriptive, correlational, experimental and diagnostic. The choice of design depends on the research question and the depth of understanding required. For instance, a case study approach might be suitable for exploring a specific agribusiness's decision-making processes, while grounded theory could be used to develop a theory from the ground up based on the data collected (Gabay, et al. 2023; Peterson, 2014).

4. Sampling:

Sampling in qualitative research involves selecting participants or cases that can provide rich and relevant information. In agribusiness management, this might involve choosing a range of agribusinesses, farmers, or stakeholders to capture diverse and in-depth perspectives. Purposeful or purposive sampling ensures that participants represent different facets of the agribusiness sector, enhancing the study's depth and breadth (Peterson, 2014).

5. Data Collection:

Qualitative research relies on various methods to collect data, such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis. In agribusiness management research, interviews with key stakeholders, such as agribusiness owners, farmers, and industry experts, can offer valuable insights into decision-making processes, challenges, and organizational dynamics. Observations in agricultural settings and analysis of relevant documents, such as annual financial reports or organizational documents, further enrich the data collection process (Peterson, 2014).

6. Data Analysis:

The heart of qualitative research lies in the analysis of data collected. Thematic analysis, content analysis, or grounded theory approaches can be employed to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the data (Bozkurt and Ozturk, 2022). For such analyses, NVivo software is widely used (Weish, 2011). In agribusiness management research, this step involves systematically coding and categorizing the data to unveil key concepts and understand the intricacies of decision-making and organizational behavior (Mitchell and Clark, 2018; Peterson, 2014).

7. Drawing Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the analysis, researchers draw conclusions that address the research question and contribute to the broader understanding of agribusiness management. Recommendations for practice or policy may also emerge from the findings. These conclusions and recommendations should align with the research question and offer practical insights for agribusiness professionals, policymakers, and researchers in the field (Peterson, 2014; Reay, 2014).

In conclusion, qualitative research is an indispensable tool for unraveling the intricacies of agribusiness management, offering a nuanced understanding of decision-making processes, organizational dynamics, and the socio-economic factors influencing the agricultural sector. By embracing qualitative methodologies such as interviews, observations, and content analysis, scholars can delve into the multifaceted nature of agribusiness, contributing to valuable insights that quantitative approaches alone may not capture. The significance of qualitative research in agribusiness management lies in its ability to inform strategic decision-making, policy formulation, and organizational practices. Therefore, scholars would be encouraged to recognize the complementary role of qualitative research, urging them to integrate these approaches where necessary to foster a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the dynamic realm of agribusiness management.

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Professor H.S.R. Rosairo

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Professor in Agribusiness Management
Department of Agribusiness Management
Faculty of Agricultural Sciences
Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka
Belihuloya, Sri Lanka.

rosairo@agri.sab.ac.lk