

EDITORIAL FORWARD

The relevance of qualitative approaches in agricultural research

Our journal receives a large number of manuscripts to be considered for publication. We understand through the perusal process that the bulk of them are from the area of crop sciences, livestock production and allied fields that have used quantitative approaches such as experiments as the research strategy. Quite a handful of manuscripts fall in to the areas of agribusiness, agricultural economics and extension that have used qualitative strategies such as survey. There is a deficiency of utilizing other research strategies in current research.

There are other qualitative strategies that researchers can adopt to achieve the objectives of a particular research study. Some common such strategies are; experiment, survey, archival analysis, ethnography, action research, narrative inquiry, and the case study. This paper attempts to explain the relevance of qualitative research in agriculture.

What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a methodological approach used to explore and understand the complexities of human behavior, experiences, and perceptions. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analyses, qualitative research emphasizes the collection and analysis of non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis. In broader terms, qualitative research serves as a valuable tool for understanding human phenomena in diverse fields. It facilitates an in-depth exploration of individuals' perspectives, motivations, and behaviors, offering rich insights into the intricacies of social interactions and cultural contexts. Through methods like open-ended interviews, participant observations, and thematic analysis of textual data, qualitative researchers can uncover hidden patterns, meanings, and relationships (Beverley and Elizabeth 2023).

Qualitative approach acknowledges the subjective nature of human experiences and seeks to capture the complexities that quantitative data alone may overlook. Further, qualitative research is used to meaningfully explain a certain behavior or phenomenon. By embracing flexibility, reflexivity, and contextuality, qualitative research enables researchers to probe into the depths of human experiences, generating nuanced understandings that contribute to knowledge advancement and informed decision-making across various disciplines (Jaffe, 2015) especially in relevant areas in agriculture.

The importance of qualitative research in food and agriculture

Qualitative research holds significant importance in the domain of food and agriculture due to its ability to uncover the multifaceted human aspects inherent in agricultural systems. By delving into the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors influencing farming practices and the behavior of farming communities, qualitative methods like interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic studies offer specific insights. These insights extend beyond mere data points, providing a deeper understanding of farmer decision-making processes, community dynamics, and consumer behaviors. Such understanding is crucial for devising effective agricultural policies, sustainable farming practices, and food security initiatives that resonate with local contexts (Detre *et al.*, 2011).

Moreover, qualitative research fosters participatory approaches, engaging stakeholders at various levels of the food supply chain. By acknowledging the diversity of perspectives and experiences, qualitative inquiry empowers communities and fosters co-created solutions to complex agricultural challenges. Therefore, qualitative research serves as a cornerstone for inclusive, contextually relevant agricultural development efforts that prioritize the well-being of both people and the planet (Bitsch, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative methods can be used to supplement quantitative findings.

Branches of agriculture that are more relevant for qualitative research

Qualitative research finds relevance across various branches of agriculture, offering valuable insights into multifaceted dimensions of the field. In agricultural economics, qualitative methods elucidate farmers' decision-making processes, market behaviors, and socio-economic challenges, informing policy and intervention strategies (Bitsch, 2006). Agribusiness management benefits from qualitative inquiry by understanding consumer preferences, supply chain dynamics, and organizational behavior within agricultural enterprises. Agricultural extension relies on qualitative approaches to engage with farmers, assess knowledge gaps, tailor educational and training programs to local contexts and cultural practices to shape-up agricultural landscapes. Rural sociology employs qualitative methods to explore community dynamics and social structures (Detre, 2011).

Agricultural psychology delves into farmers' attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral patterns, aiding in the design of effective behavioral interventions and mental health support systems. Furthermore, agricultural communication and media utilize qualitative research to analyze media use, information dissemination, and stakeholder engagement strategies, enhancing communication effectiveness in agricultural contexts. Overall, qualitative research enriches understanding and decision-making across diverse branches of agriculture, contributing to sustainable and inclusive agricultural development (Gabay, Hackett and Hayre, 2023).

Commonly used methods in qualitative research in agriculture

Qualitative research in agriculture employs various methods tailored to capture the complexity of human interactions within agricultural systems. One commonly used method is in-depth interviews, which allow researchers to explore farmers' perspectives, experiences, and decision-making processes. Focus group discussions gather insights from diverse stakeholders, fostering interactive discussions on issues related to agriculture. Ethnographic research involves immersive fieldwork, observing and participating in socio-agricultural activities to understand cultural norms and practices, and social dynamics. Participant observation enables researchers to witness agricultural practices firsthand, uncovering implicit knowledge and behaviors (Peterson, 2011).

Content analysis of documents, such as agricultural policies and community publications, provides valuable context and understanding of broader socio-economic factors influencing agriculture. Additionally, case studies offer detailed examinations of specific agricultural phenomena within their real-world contexts. By employing these diverse qualitative methods, researchers in agriculture gain rich, context-specific insights into the intricate socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dynamics shaping agricultural systems, informing evidence-based policies and interventions for sustainable agricultural development (Bozkurt and Ozturk, 2022).

Use of software for analysis of qualitative data of agriculture-related research

Qualitative data is often complicated. Software for the analysis of qualitative data is a new development. These software offer powerful platforms for analyzing qualitative research data in agriculture-related studies. Their intuitive interfaces and robust analytical tools enable researchers to manage, organize, and analyze large volumes of qualitative data efficiently. With features like coding, theme identification, and visualization tools, such software streamline the process of uncovering patterns, themes, and relationships within complex datasets. By facilitating systematic data exploration and interpretation, software empower researchers to derive meaningful insights that inform evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation in agricultural development. Their versatility and user-friendly interfaces make them valuable tools for researchers seeking to maximize the rigor and depth of their qualitative analyses in agricultural research (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

Recommendations for qualitative research in agri-food systems

Recommendations for qualitative research in agri-food systems involve embracing interdisciplinary approaches to address complex challenges. To begin with, researchers should prioritize participatory methodologies, involving farmers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the research process to ensure relevance and co-creation of knowledge. In addition, employing mixed-methods approaches can enrich understanding by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data, providing comprehensive analyses. Furthermore, fostering collaborations between

academia, industry, and civil society can facilitate knowledge exchange and application, enhancing the impact of research findings on policy and practice (Peterson, 2011).

Additionally, researchers should emphasize longitudinal studies to capture changes over time and assess the sustainability of interventions. Moreover, ensuring cultural sensitivity and context specificity in research design and implementation is essential for meaningful engagement and equitable outcomes. By following these recommendations, qualitative research in agri-food systems can contribute to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems that address the diverse needs of stakeholders while safeguarding environmental and social well-being (Detre, 2011).

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