

## Teaching Insight

## Issues and Challenges of Qualitative Research Methods Education in Communication

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## ABSTRACT

The current research undertook in-depth interviews with 13 undergraduates majoring in communication to explore how they understood qualitative research methods and how they perceive the value of the methods after taking a qualitative research methods course. Thematic analysis of the data showed that students identified in-depth interviews as valuable tools that provided honest answers from the people of interest. Students came to understand the strengths and uniqueness of each data-gathering method with their perception changed after taking the course. However, they still found qualitative research methods to be difficult and challenging. The findings suggest that contextual factors negatively influenced the students' evaluation of qualitative methods; nonetheless, participants still wanted to learn qualitative methods well to boost their skills for the job market. Interviews also revealed that the knowledge and skills in quantitative research methods influenced students' understanding and evaluation of the methods. Based on these findings, the current study suggests ways in which instructors could strengthen qualitative methods courses to gain more leverage in undergraduate programs. Topics for follow-up studies are suggested and their implications are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

qualitative research methods, research education, communication curriculum, research methods education in higher education

With the recent technological developments that have come about with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the ability to collect and analyze a large quantity of data has become a core competency for many jobs; individuals with knowledge and skills in data analytics are in high demand in many industries, including communication.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, qualitative research methods, albeit its ability to analyze and find

<sup>1</sup> The Fourth Industrial Revolution refers to a new era of information and communication technology (Schwab, 2016).

meanings and insights from datasets, is being under-used, or even disregarded, in academics and society (Chung, 2015; Frey & Botan, 1988; Frey et al., 1998).

Along with quantitative methods, qualitative research methods are appropriate for addressing communication problems in both research and practice (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Grunig, 2013; Jensen, 1991; Lowery & DeFleur, 1988; Smeltzer, 1993). However, qualitative methods are not taught as much as quantitative methods are in undergraduate communication programs (Frey et al., 1998; Jang, 2021); research method courses in communication tend to focus on quantitative methods (Frey & Botan, 1988; Frey et al., 1998; Jang, 2021). While scholars are making significant efforts to vamp up communication curricula to reflect social changes, thereby equipping students with the skills needed to work in the field upon graduation (Han & Moon, 2016; Park et al., 2017), such changes and diversity are not being matched by research methodology courses.

Owing to the influence of the academic and social climate that places more emphasis on quantitative methods, students tend to consider quantitative methods more “important,” “standard,” and “good or better” than qualitative methods (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021). As students engage in qualitative methods courses with such a mindset, course instructors must begin the semester by addressing these prejudices and biases (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021), which leads to unnecessary time spent in a tight course schedule. In addition, students’ lack of understanding of qualitative methods may result in a low level of motivation to learn them in the first place (Caulley & Denzin, 2009; Dyrhaug, 2014).

Such biases toward qualitative methods may influence future communication professionals, even after they graduate from university. If they have a negative perception or bias toward a particular method, they might not use it, even when appropriate or necessary, which may result

in inaccurate identification of a problem, leading to ineffective or even inappropriate solutions. Such a cycle could increase unnecessary costs in the problem-solving processes for organizations (Grunig, 2008; Grunig & Grunig, 2003). Therefore, it is critical to introduce diverse methods, allowing students to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each approach and enabling them to graduate with the basic understanding and competencies of both research methods. However, few studies have examined the issues of qualitative methods in communication education.

To adequately develop and strengthen qualitative methods curricula and course materials, it is important to examine the current situation from various aspects. Among them, it is important to examine students’ perceptions of qualitative methods and understand the barriers they encountered while taking a qualitative methods course. Instructors need to understand the influence of the course on correcting students’ biases and preconceived notions about qualitative methods. In addition, it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of qualitative methods courses, whether students understand the value of such courses, and whether they have acquired the right skills to conduct qualitative research.

The purpose of the current study is to explore how undergraduate students perceive and interpret qualitative research methods. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of communication curricula in specific and in research methods in higher education in general. Although the current study investigates students majoring in communication, the findings may be transferable to understand other social science disciplines or other social contexts in which quantitative research methods are more valued than qualitative research methods (Murphy et al., 1998).

## Qualitative Research Methods and its Pedagogy in Higher Education

Qualitative research methods differ from quantitative research methods in terms of their ontology and epistemology. The ontology of qualitative research methods—that is, how they view the nature of reality—is that of multiple realities; reality is socially constructed and intersubjectively interpreted, as individuals give meaning to a phenomenon (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Stake, 1995). An understanding of multiple realities can be acquired through interpretivist epistemology. Hence, to investigate phenomena that have been underexplored, qualitative researchers are immersed in groups to explore, describe, understand, and explain their realities (Blaikie, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Reese, 1980). To achieve these goals, they asked “why” questions and adopt an inductive approach (Goddard & Melville, 2004; Wolcott, 1995).

Qualitative research methods have been widely used in social science disciplines, including sociology, education, communication, business, psychology, political science, and international development, as they deal with human interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dyrhaug, 2014; Jang, 2021; Morrow & Smith, 2000). Examining and gaining an in-depth understanding of how individuals make meaning of social phenomena is particularly important in these fields. However, even in this discipline, there has been a dearth of research emphasizing the value and specific methods of training students in qualitative research methods (Caulley & Denzin, 2009).

Despite the significance of research knowledge and skills in social sciences, qualitative research is rarely discussed in college classrooms (Earley, 2014; Wagner et al., 2011); very few textbooks or teaching materials are available for teaching qualitative methods for college students (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulley & Denzin, 2009; Dyrhaug, 2014; Jang, 2021; Wiggins & Burns, 2009).

Although some textbooks on qualitative research have been published from a methodological perspective, there has been limited research on teaching qualitative research methods, particularly for undergraduate students. As undergraduate students’ level of critical thinking is different from that of graduate students, teaching qualitative research methods should be different for these two student groups (Dyrhaug, 2014).

Scholars have pointed out the importance of creating pedagogical culture in which “exchange of ideas within a climate of systematic debate, investigation and evaluation surrounding all aspects of teaching methods” (Wagner et al., 2011, p. 75) is accomplished. When teaching qualitative research methods, “students should be exposed to philosophy of science and epistemology debate related to qualitative research” (Wagner et al., 2019, p. 12) as a paradigm that not only guides but also explains and explicates specific qualitative research methods (Matta, 2022). Hence, beginning with “rigorous introductory course” (Poulin, 2007, p. 436) in their first year, students need to be introduced to a qualitative research methods course throughout the curriculum (Wagner et al., 2019).

Researchers have suggested various approaches for teaching qualitative research methods. Some scholars have argued for a problem-based learning approach, because it enhances the learning process by allowing students to integrate it in their research projects (Dyrhaug, 2014; Wiggins & Burns, 2009). Others have pointed out the need for a student-centered typology in which students’ needs are at the center of a pedagogical decision. This could be implemented by providing more opportunities to practice analysis rather than learning the theoretical or philosophical aspects of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Jang, 2021; Nind & Lewthwaite, 2020). Regardless of the specific typologies in teaching qualitative research methods, suggestions have been made in different approaches (e.g., from the perspective of learners or teachers, or philosophical ones), all of which

call for further examination and discussion of this topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulley & Denzin, 2009; Dyrhaug, 2014; Jang, 2021; Wagner et al., 2011; Wiggins & Burns, 2009).

### Qualitative Methods in Communication

Recent studies have underscored the importance of using qualitative research methods in communication, namely in mass media, public relations/advertising, health and business communication. The demand of qualitative research methods has grown in communication areas due to its “meaning paradigm” (Lowery & DeFleur, 1988, p. 455) characteristic. Researchers have increasingly recognized the limitations of hypothetico-deductive methods and quantifiable answers in some research questions (Jensen, 1991, p. 1), and consequently, turned to an alternative methodology. Furthermore, within recent socioeconomic contexts, namely postmodern age and information society, qualitative approaches have been considered as a new scientific means to cope with the new form of social reality (Jensen, 1991). For example, researchers and practitioners in business communication have recommended using qualitative methods along with quantitative methods to understand “true nature” of business communication and “feel” the needs of business practitioners (Smeltzer, 1993, p. 192). In public relations, a field that seeks to identify the opinions, expectations, experiences, and motivations of the key stakeholders by “communicat[ing] with people rather than *to* audiences” (Daymon & Holloway, 2010, p. 10), the use of qualitative methods is recommended. In advertising, scholars propose the use of qualitative methods to understand cultural meanings imbedded in advertisements (Chung, 2015; Lears, 1994) as well as different types of qualitative methods (e.g., accompanied shopping) to better understand consumers’ purchasing behaviors (Lowrey et al., 2005). In health communication, qualitative

methods have been found to be effective in understanding issues that are complex, sensitive, concerned with process, or when new ideas or creativity are needed in examining patients and making treatment decision making (Britten, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 1995).

With its various methodologies, including but not limited to field observation, content analysis, and the Delphi technique, scholars have used qualitative methods to capture the psychological/emotional states of various individuals, groups, organizations, and nations in differing communication contexts (Grunig, 2013; Hwang & Kang, 2004). With the growing use of qualitative methods, communication scholars have recognized the status of qualitative methods has also risen.

Teaching research methods course in communication discipline have long been regarded vital with much emphasis on quantitative research methods. For instance, in a survey that examined research methods in communication education in the U.S., more than a half of institutions were found to offer communication research methods courses; among the institutions that did not offer methods courses, 25 percent of them were considering offering the course in the near future (Frey & Botan, 1988). However, in the same survey, most of the instructors who taught research methods courses found to spend very limited class periods on qualitative methods (Frey & Botan, 1988). Although a few decades have passed since the study, the increase of qualitative methods courses is minimal.

In a survey that examined the status of qualitative research education, only 7.4 percent of the institutions taught qualitative methods as a separate course in communication undergraduate programs whereas 27.3 percent of the programs offered quantitative courses as a separate course (Frey et al., 1998). In a more recent study, 95 percent of the participating communication educators said that research methods courses were in their curriculum with 90 percent as a required

course; however, most of these courses were general research methods courses, not focusing on qualitative research (CPRE, 2018).

Scholar argue that pedagogy in teaching qualitative methods in communication programs is much underdeveloped. First, textbook on qualitative methods in communication are scarce, thereby those who teach the course need to rely on the textbooks from other disciplines such as nursing and education. Second, researchers pointed out the negative perception on qualitative methods among communication educators as an issue in undergraduate curriculum (Frey et al., 1998); thus, it is necessary to change the educators to achieve pedagogical equality amongst diverse research methods (Frey & Botan, 1988; Frey et al., 1998).

Previous studies showed that students had several inaccurate preconceived notions about qualitative methods due to lack of understanding and in-depth exposure to the particular method (Jang, 2021; Poulin, 2007). In a study that examined undergraduates who have taken qualitative methods course, students held a notion that qualitative method relies on intuition and is unsystematic in comparisons to quantitative methods, therefore, less reliable and scientific (Jang, 2021). In addition, studies showed heavy influence of quantitative research (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021, 2022; Poulin, 2007); from research methods courses, students learned that qualitative methods were used to “assist quantitative researches” or “to develop survey questionnaires.” They tend to apply what they learned in quantitative methods to qualitative methods; they adopted “reliability” and “objectivity” as evaluation criterion, repeatedly using the terms such as “hypothesis” or “generalize.” They also identified qualitative research to be “too vague” or “too subjective” in comparison to quantitative research, which led to the bias that qualitative methods was inferior quantitative methods (Jang, 2021, 2022; Sandelowski, 1986; Shepard et al., 1993).

## Use of Qualitative Methods in the Field

One of the main reasons for communication undergraduates to learn qualitative methods is that the methods is frequently used in practice. In the areas such as public relations and advertising where students can join the field immediately upon graduation, students are expected to be equipped with the skills and basic understanding of the methodology to put in to practice. For instance, in public relations, qualitative methods are used to monitor and analyze media to analyze and identify the meanings and insights in news reports (Audrey, 2017; Phillips, 2017; Schmitz, 2012) or to obtain in-depth understanding of and insights from opinions in open survey questions regarding an organization’s products/services (Audrey, 2017; Phillips, 2017). In advertising, qualitative methods can be used in accompanied shopping to understand consumers’ purchasing behaviors (Lowrey et al., 2005). Thus, research skills have been identified as one of the top ranked skills desired for hiring advanced-level practitioners (Han & Moon, 2016; Stacks et al., 1999).

For these reasons, practitioners maintained that educators should to pay more attention to the research components in curricula (DiStaso et al., 2009). However, despite the growing demands to equip students with the necessary research skills, there is insufficient problem recognition in academia. Preparing students with proper research education so that they can adequately address communication problems in various communication fields (e.g., public relations, health, media) is not only important but also necessary as the environment becomes more complicated (CPRE, 2018).

Responding to calls by educators, scholars, and practitioners to examine the effectiveness of research methods courses, the current study examines university students who have undertaken a qualitative methods course to understand their perceptions and understanding

of the value of qualitative methods. To explore these areas, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1. How do undergraduate students, after taking a qualitative research methods course, understand the value of qualitative research methods and why?
- RQ2. What influenced students' perception of and attitudes toward qualitative research methods?

## METHODS

This study used an inductive approach to explore how undergraduate students majoring in communication interpret the methodology and its value. Qualitative methods aim to “get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12); thus, the qualitative method was deemed appropriate to understand personal meaning-making processes and to explore the aforementioned research questions.

### Interview Sample

The researchers interviewed thirteen (Male=7, Female=6) participants using purposive and snowball sampling methods. All interviewees were college students attending two 4-year universities in South Korea; and those who had taken a qualitative research course were qualified to participate.<sup>2</sup> The participants were either juniors or seniors (ages between 20 and 28), as they could only take the methods course starting in their third year. All interviews were conducted using Zoom or Webex, and the interviews were led by a researcher who has advanced training in

qualitative research methods and approximately 10 years of experience in leading interviews.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used to ask questions about participants' thoughts and experiences regarding qualitative research and the courses; questions such as “Have your thoughts on qualitative methods changed after the course, and if so, how?” were asked. The data gathering process was discontinued with 13 interviews as saturation point, that is, stage in which new information no longer brings fresh insights to the research question, was reached around interview 7 and 8 (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Saunders et al., 2018). Each participant was given approximately \$20 for their participation, and all interviews ranged from 40 to 70 min, with an average of approximately 50 min. After completion, the interviews were transcribed using Naver's CLOVA Note application. All interviews were conducted in Korea and quotes were meaning translated to English for reporting purposes.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis (TA) method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). One of the key strengths of TA is its flexibility, as it does not belong to a specific philosophical approach; therefore, it can be used in various disciplines and research approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

TA is divided into the following six steps, and the researchers followed each phase of the analysis process to analyze the data. First, for the *familiarization with the data* process, the researchers read the whole transcription analytically, critically, and actively to find meaning and used the notetaking technique. During the *coding* phase, words and phrases relevant to the research questions were identified as codes and

<sup>2</sup> In one of the universities, qualitative research was taught in “Data analysis” class; in another university, the course title was “Qualitative research,” and it was added to the curriculum in 2019.

both semantic and latent codes were identified. In the third step, *searching for themes*, the researchers searched and identified themes. In the fourth phase, *reviewing themes*, the researchers examined each theme against the data and codes to ensure that they were consistent with the data. In the fifth stage, *defining and naming themes*, the researchers examined and revised the names of each theme so that each theme presented a clear and convincing meaning. Finally, in the *writing up* stage, the researchers wrote each theme by presenting a vivid narrative of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). The researchers also engaged in self-reflexivity to prevent a subjective view of the research topics or participants from interfering with the interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

## RESULTS

### Understanding of Qualitative Research Methods

RQ1 explored the undergraduate students' perception of the value of qualitative research methods after taking a qualitative research methods course. The findings showed that participants found qualitative research methods to be rigorous but difficult; they came to understand the strengths and uniqueness of each technique. Hence, the participants perceived that conducting interviews and analyzing data were difficult and challenging. More specifically, they repeatedly mentioned that the data analysis process was "challenging" and "difficult" due to its "vagueness." However, despite the difficulties, the participants appreciated and enjoyed the varying techniques of qualitative research methods such as the interview and field observation, as they enabled the researcher to find "honest answers" and "unconscious behaviors" of interviewees.

### Rigorous and Difficult

Interviews revealed that students had misperceptions about qualitative methods prior to taking the course, which changed greatly after learning the methods. First, the participants understood qualitative methods as a tool that only professionals used for practical research purposes. One student said, "Before taking the course, I thought qualitative research was a very specialized method that only professionals can use. But after learning [the method], I realized that it's quite accessible. I thought we can only use the quantitative methods, but now I can use both," admitting that she had a "biased perception about usability about qualitative methods."

However, after taking a qualitative methods course, some students realized that the methods were quite burdensome, especially compared to quick and easy methods of gathering quantitative data. In addition, participants the difficulty of in-person meetings for interviews, because they had not had much experience of face-to-face meetings with strangers, not alone interviews. Recalling her interview assignment, one student said, "Before my first interview, anxiety was building upon the interview. I got so nervous." Even though the interviews were successful, students still felt that meeting a stranger for an interview was challenging. Others also discussed the inconvenience of face-to-face meetings due to the time required to physically reach the interview site. The participants perceived that quantitative methods required much less resources because it does not involve travel to interview sites.

Some students found data analysis to be overwhelming. One of the students said, "Data analysis is solely the responsibility of the researcher, which concerned me a lot... what if I might not analyze the data correctly?" Similar experiences were shared through the interviews. As per the TA, one participant said, "Identifying important themes was a challenge. My partner and I had to discuss a lot about our data, and luckily we

found common themes. But it was really hard.” Participants also described the data analysis process “vague” or “difficult.”

Lastly, the participants were still questioned the objectivity of the qualitative approach. One of the participants said, “We interviewed only one person, and I wasn’t sure if that particular participant’s experience was applicable in understanding others.” A participant who had interviewed four persons for an assignment commented that he was not sure if his analysis was objective and unbiased. Some other participants still held strong doubts about the objectivity of their results and overall research methods even though they used the techniques to minimize researcher bias, such as memoing and self-reflexivity.

### **The Strengths and Uniqueness of Each Technique**

The interviews revealed that students appreciated or even enjoyed the data-gathering process of qualitative research methods. A number of students stressed the importance and usefulness of the interview method to understand target audiences or publics. One student said, “I think understanding consumers is the key in the industry, and the interview method can really help understand and analyze consumers properly.” That is, students perceived interviews to be an effective tool to have a good understanding of consumers and to improve a company’s products/services.

Participants evaluated observation as a valuable method as well. One student observed customer service at a Starbucks store for a field observation assignment for approximately 3 hours. He said, “It was so much fun to just watch people come and go, order drinks, and interact with staff. I had always visited that store, but it was my first time just observing people there. Everything seemed different, and I learned so much from it.” He explained that observing the employee-consumer interactions from a distance provided him with a new insight into customer relations and services.

Similarly, another student who was interning at a company that developed smartphone applications said, “I think the observation method can really be useful in the field. I can observe how consumers use our application and analyze it to enhance the UI index.”

As per focus group interviews (FGIs), students mentioned the value of interactions among participants, which prompted them to share experiences during the interview process. The students felt FGs could bring out the necessary answers that researchers look for through group dynamics and wanted to have a more in-depth understanding of this method in comparison with other data-gathering methods.

As such, after learning qualitative methods systematically, students understood how each data-gathering method would be used to find solutions for different situations. They valued each method for its uniqueness and strength, as each could bring important information about the research target under examination. The students also discussed how, regardless of the data-gathering methods, the qualitative method shed light on the “why” aspect of the research topic, which was something that quantitative research methods could not do.

The findings of the interviews showed that students appreciated the value of honesty found in the in-depth meaning making process. According to the participants, interviews “provide in-depth answers” about the research topics so that they “could obtain a good understanding of the participants.” In a similar vein, one interviewee said, “I think people talk more honestly in interviews... whereas they can lie [about themselves] in a survey.” For these reasons, qualitative methods were considered more suitable for sensitive issues, eliciting frank answers from interviewees. One participant added that in-depth interviews could reveal the unconscious rationale behind behaviors, saying, “We buy things unconsciously when they are inexpensive. We cannot catch such a point through surveys.”



Acknowledging the value of the interview process, students opened-up about how they conducted interviews and compared their experiences with what they had learned in class. One student said, "Prior to the course, I used to conduct a really short interview with my friends just to get the answer I needed for assignments." Other students provided similar answers in that their interviews used to be only 3-5 min long, where they would just fish for the answers that they wanted to hear so they could confirm their hypotheses with quotes in their assignments. One student explained that in the past he included interviews in the assignment because "It looks better if there are interview data along with survey data."

### **Perceptions of and Attitudes toward Qualitative Research Methods**

RQ2 examined what influenced the students' perception and attitudes towards qualitative research methods. The findings revealed that contextual factors had negative influence on the evaluation of qualitative methods. The participants found the value of quantitative methods after the "exposure" to qualitative research methods in the midst of the society and education that placed a more emphasis on numbers. Yet, regardless of the social environment, the participants still wanted to learn qualitative method because they believed that it could give them a "competitive edge" in the job market; students thought that this unique but rare skill would be useful in the industry.

### **Contextual Factors That Negatively Influence the Evaluation of Qualitative Methods**

The participants perceived that there was more

emphasis on quantitative research methods than on qualitative methods in the surrounding environment. Students thought the media and society placed more value on "big data," "numbers," and "statistics" over texts and meaning. One student said, "People easily trust something presented in numbers."

Interviews showed that the students were influenced by their peers as well. One student said, "My friends told me how important it was to learn quantitative methods... so, they were like, 'why do you take that course?'" Students said that their friends were interested in learning statistical programs such as SPSS and Python, because such skills were expected to give a competitive advantage in the job market. Since employment was a major concern among university students, students tended to learn statistical analysis programs for jobs.

Relatedly, students discussed quantitative research methods were more available than qualitative methods. One student said, "There are much more quantitative research methods courses in our curriculum." Another participant also said, "I learned about surveys and quantitative methods since high school, but this was the first time I ever learned qualitative methods." In fact, to all participants, the qualitative methods course that they took was the very first and only qualitative course. Thus, most participants had no previous exposure or opportunities to learn qualitative methods prior to the particular quantitative methods course.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Competitive Edge in the Job Market**

Despite the above factors that had negative influence on the learning qualitative methods, participants still wanted to learn qualitative methods because they witnessed the usefulness of the methods. A student who was interning at a

<sup>3</sup> In both universities, the quantitative research methods course was required in the sophomore year and the qualitative research methods course was an elective offered in either the junior or senior year.

company mentioned that he found the usefulness of the qualitative methods while working. He added, "I didn't understand the usefulness of qualitative methods while I was taking the course, but now I think about it, and I know that it can be used here. So, I want to further develop my skills."

Some students regretted not learning more and wanted to have more practice in class. One student said, "I think there was about [an] 8:2 ratio in terms of theory and practice. I would prefer 6:4 ratio with more practice." Students wanted to have more confidence and experience in making the research methods their own skills and be able to use them confidently on their own at work, so that the method could really be their competitive edge.

## DISCUSSION

The finding showed that students did not fully understand the value of qualitative research methods even after taking a qualitative methods course. Even though they understood the value, they came to appreciate it after having practical experiences such as internship. Several external and internal factors were found to influence in shaping students' understanding of qualitative research influenced. Externally, the participants were largely influenced by the environment; the society placing more value on quantitative research methods (e.g., numbers and statistics) (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021; Murphy et al., 1998), the curriculum offering more quantitative research methods courses than qualitative research methods courses (CPRE, 2018; Frey & Botan, 1988), peers being more interested in taking quantitative research methods tools, and undervaluing qualitative research methods were found to influence participants' perception of the value of qualitative research methods. Internal factors, which were the issues that arose from the courses or from the students' own experiences, included much needed time, effort, and money to conduct qualitative research, researcher-

dependent answers to the research questions, and the lack of enough practice to gain confidence (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021). The course-related factors negatively influenced participants' perceptions of the methodology. Moreover, the disadvantages of the methodology, such as the need for more time and resources, were found to intersect with participants' negative experiences while taking the course, thereby leading to the perception that qualitative research was difficult and challenging.

Findings extend previous researches in that despite factors that discourage them from learning (e.g., biases social environment) (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Jang, 2021), once they learned the methodology, they came to enjoy and appreciate unique parts of the methods (e.g., in-depth interviews) and understood their usefulness and importance. Therefore, they came to regret not having acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to confidently engage in independent research using qualitative methods. Analysis of the data implied that participants held inconsistent perceptions of qualitative research methods. Whereas the students enjoyed some parts of the methods (e.g., in-depth interviews) and understood their usefulness eventually, they did not acquire sufficient knowledge and skills to be confident enough to use qualitative research methods by themselves. In addition, while they still thought that qualitative research methods skills under their belt would give them a competitive edge in the job market, they were aware of the fact quantitative research was preferred to qualitative research. Therefore, they are constantly juxtaposed with experiences, thoughts, and perceptions of the two methodologies.

The inconsistent perceptions may be attributed to a lack of understanding and exposure to qualitative research methods. As participants had more exposure to qualitative research methods, as previous scholars suggested (Matta, 2022; Poulin, 2007; Wagner et al., 2011, 2019), they tended to compare the strengths of quantitative research

methods with the weakness of qualitative research methods. Owing to their lack of knowledge and understanding of qualitative research methods, a single experience heavily influenced their perception of the methodology and interest in further education (Matta, 2022; Wagner et al., 2019).

These findings showed the importance of learning environment and the influence society, the industry, the higher education program, and peer groups on teaching and education. Thus, the following pedagogical suggestions are made to overcome the negative influence of external and internal factors. First, it is necessary to understand the contextual factors and the environment the students are facing (e.g., limited exposure and knowledge about qualitative research in their program, society, and media); researchers and educators need to be mindful of providing positive experiences to first-time learners. As the participants pointed out, undergraduate students are unclear about the philosophy and epistemology of qualitative methods; and find the method challenging, needing more practice. Those who teach qualitative research must consider these aspects when planning courses. Second, educators need to stress the importance of mixed methods in solving practical problems and offer more qualitative research method courses or sessions to help students overcome the bias that quantitative research methods are the only option (Wagner et al., 2019).

The interviews showed that the participants experienced spillover effects from the quantitative research methods course they had taken prior to the qualitative research methods course. Students often applied quantitative methods to assess qualitative methods. For instance, they wanted to confirm generalizability from their data; yet, as qualitative methods seek transferability to measure the ability “to transfer working hypotheses between different settings” (Murphy et al., 1998, as cited in Johnson & Waterfield, 2004, p. 123). The participants were unsatisfied

that they could not generalize the finding to understand the population. These constant comparison between the two methods may be attributed to students having more experience and learning of quantitative methods.

As findings show that previous knowledge on qualitative methods has a strong influence on qualitative methods’ learning processes, future studies need to examine the extent of this influence in addition to the influence of external factors (e.g., media, peers, and society), personal experiences and previous course experiences. Also, in the classroom, those who teach need to be mindful of the strong influence quantitative methods have on students, thereby spend more time to discard the biases and doubts students have toward qualitative methods (Braun & Clark, 2012; Jang, 2021) and stress the differences between the two methodologies in terms of the view on reality/philosophy/evaluation criteria (Sandelowski, 1986; Shepard et al., 1993). Moreover, as the findings indicate, students need more skills in order to use qualitative methods properly; instructors are advised to focus on strengthening students’ practical skills. For example, securing sufficient time for iterations of data analysis will help students analyze the data by themselves along with ample feedback to build their confidence (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Lastly, researchers suggested offering a qualitative methods course early on so that students would have more opportunities to apply the methods in other courses (Poulin, 2007). The findings indicate that preconceived notions about qualitative methods and the level of difficulty are significant elements for effective teaching and learning of qualitative methods among undergraduate students. When developing a qualitative research method course, educators should be mindful of this fact and come up with course contents that provide students with more practical experience and acquire more skills (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Jang, 2021; Wagner et al., 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In today's society, communication problems have become more complex, and those who work in the communication related areas must be equipped with various tools and skill sets to solve them. Therefore, choosing a quantitative research method even when a qualitative research method is more appropriate would not only be ineffective but could also lead to inaccurate solutions to a problem (Grunig, 2008; Grunig & Grunig, 2003). Therefore, scholars, instructors, and practitioners need to address the misperception that communication majors/entry-level practitioners have about qualitative research methods; second, they should provide more opportunities for them to learn qualitative research methods properly so that they can identify strengths and weaknesses to select the optimal method for their situation. Having more experience, knowledge, and understanding of qualitative research methods would enable junior communicators to freely choose one method over the other (or use mixed methods) without much bias. Although the current research only examined undergraduates in communication programs, the findings can also be transferable to understand undergraduates in other social science disciplines, as well as graduate students in communication programs who share similar social and program level (e.g., curriculum, peers) contexts (Murphy et al., 1998).

The current study stresses not only the importance of qualitative methods but also the importance of using appropriate methods to solve problems. Perhaps the mixed-method approach, which is more comprehensive and appropriate for examining complex situations, may be more suitable in many cases. As the public is becoming more conscious of social issues and responding to how organizations address issues concerning them, organizations today need to have more information and analytical skills to understand various publics; thus, candidates who have strong

research skills in both methodologies would be an asset to the organization. Comprehensive research methods education is needed to equip communication majors to be field ready.

The current study has some limitations. The researchers tried to recruit participants from more than two universities; however, as the home pages of communication programs do not have up-to-date lists of all courses, it was difficult to identify programs that offered qualitative methods courses. Thus, researchers tried to focus on students' perceptions of qualitative methods that were common across institutions rather than the content of the materials taught in each class and focused on engaging in the meaning-making process in-depth to gauge students' evaluation of the particular method. Although the students were from different institutions, regardless of what they learned and how they learned (i.e., online or offline), there were no differences in how they understood the methods. Moreover, the devaluation of qualitative methods undoubtedly occur in other social science disciplines. Although this study was unable to examine other studies, future studies could examine the situation across disciplines.

Qualitative research methods have continued to advance over time. Computer programs, such as Nvivo, or transcribing programs, such as Google Voice, ExpressScribe, OTranscribe, and CLOVA Notes, make the qualitative research process more convenient. However, ways to further ease the data collection and analysis processes require more technological development to lower the entry barrier for new and novice researchers, who may be more comfortable using computer programs to take notes or analyze data. In addition, as younger generations find face-to-face interviews somewhat difficult, scholars must consider ways to overcome such challenges by finding more effective ways to conduct online interviews.

Most importantly, current qualitative methods courses need to reflect on their limitations and strengthen course materials so that undergraduate

students will have a better understanding and skills after the course and can make informed decisions when choosing a method to solve real communication problems. Overcoming their biases, recognizing the value of qualitative methods, and having both sets of skills could allow them to be the “thinking hearts” of organizations.

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