The Challenges of Conducting Qualitative Research in Quantitative Culture: Saudi Arabia as a Case Study

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Abstract
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Keywords
qualitative research, qualitative case study, qualitative researchers’ challenges, awareness about qualitative research, case study, Saudi Arabia

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In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), qualitative research methods are infrequently employed, as researchers in the region are more accustomed to quantitative approaches, with a certain hesitancy to embrace qualitative methodology. This research endeavor focuses on exploring the impediments faced by individuals engaged in qualitative research within the Saudi context. To do so, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight doctoral students and employed a qualitative case study design for this paper. Utilizing the MAXQDA software, I also applied thematic analysis to the data gathered from the interviews. The primary findings highlight three significant themes: (a) challenges related to organizational aspects, (b) difficulties stemming from social and cultural factors, and (c) obstacles specific to qualitative research practices. This paper, unique in its contribution to the region, addresses a wide range of issues faced by qualitative researchers to support and enhance their research endeavors. While this study holds relevance for researchers, its significance extends notably to policymakers, academics, and higher education institutions in the KSA.

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Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the challenges that qualitative researchers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) face during the data collection process. Researchers in the KSA have predominantly leaned towards quantitative methods, resulting in what is often described as a “quantitative culture” (Alammar, 2021; Al-Zaidi, 2019). This inclination towards quantitative research observed not only in the KSA but also across the Arab world, is still in its early stages of development, as supported by previous studies (Altwigeri, 2020; Al-Zaidi, 2019; Mohammed, 2020). A reluctance to embrace qualitative research methodologies persists among Arab researchers. A key factor contributing to this reluctance is the prevailing perception that research quality is primarily assessed through a quantitative lens (Alammar, 2021; Al-Zaidi, 2019).

In qualitative research, the methodology provides a unique avenue to delve into complex phenomena that are inherently challenging to quantify (Silverman, 2015). Qualitative research is indispensable, offering a deeper understanding of the subjects under investigation, including human experiences, cultures, beliefs, and individual values (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Munhall, 2012; Wuest, 2012). Qualitative research has distinct advantages, such as gaining deeper insights into phenomena, actively listening to participants’ perspectives, and expanding theoretical horizons (Creswell, 2007). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research does not seek to generalize but aims to uncover nuanced insights from the perspective of specific groups (de Vaus, 2014). Therefore, when qualitative researchers encounter
challenges that hinder a profound exploration of phenomena, the quality of their findings is compromised. These factors underscore the significance of deepening our understanding of these challenges (Holland, 2007; Nicholls, 2009).

Despite a growing body of literature in the Arabic world on the limited utilization of qualitative methodology, limited attention has been given to the challenges faced during the data collection process, hindering the wider adoption of qualitative methodologies in academic publications (e.g., Ababneh, 2018; Al-Ghafiri, 2019; Al-Hanw, 2016a; Al-Rumaidi, 2018; Atari, 2004; Atari & Outum, 2019; Badran, 2013). This study aims to address this gap in the literature by investigating the primary challenges faced by qualitative researchers in the KSA, which often lead them to resort to quantitative methodologies. A deeper understanding of effective qualitative research practices not only streamlines data collection but also better equips researchers to address field-specific challenges. As a lecturer and supervisor working with MA and Ph.D. students, I have observed limited interest in qualitative research among them, with none attempting to employ qualitative methods in their MA dissertations. This observation motivated me to delve into the challenges faced by qualitative researchers, with a specific emphasis on the intricacies encountered during the process of data collection. While qualitative research encompasses various stages, the data collection phase is often a critical juncture where researchers confront unique hurdles. By homing in on this specific aspect, this research aims to uncover insights that can be immediately actionable and beneficial to qualitative researchers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and other culturally distinct contexts. Furthermore, recognizing that cultural background can significantly impact the interpretation of various constructs (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), this study holds broader significance for foreign researchers who may find themselves navigating qualitative research within the specific cultural context of the KSA or similar environments (Voldnes et al., 2014).

The research question is what are the challenges that qualitative researchers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia face during the data analysis process? This paper is organized into five sections. The first provides an overview of the relevant literature, followed by a description of the methodology in the second section. The third section presents the study's findings, while the fourth section delves into the main findings and offers a discussion. The final section draws conclusions and provides suggestions for further research.

**Literature Review**

The qualitative approach failed to generate interest among researchers in the Arab world and experienced unwarranted exclusion (Alammar, 2021; Al-Dhubyani, 2011; Al-Zaidi, 2019). The act of publishing qualitative research in scholarly journals, master's theses, or doctoral dissertations can serve as a vital catalyst in raising awareness and persuading others to adopt such a methodology (Al-Zaidi, 2019; Mohammed, 2020). Notably, the highest proportions of qualitative studies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), were identified in Al-Rumaidi (2018) and Al-Ghafiri (2019) (6.5% and 14%, respectively). Multiple studies affirm that the publication of scientific research in education using qualitative methods is severely limited, often constituting less than 2% of the total publications (Ababneh, 2018; Alammar, 2021; Al-Hanw, 2016b; Albeladi, 2022; Atari, 2004; Atari & Outum, 2019; Badran, 2013; Al-Zaidi, 2019). This aspect assumes significance as my study focuses on graduate students in the field of education.

During my research, I conducted an analysis of articles featured in the Journal of Education and Psychology at King Saud University, one of the most prominent journals in Saudi Arabia. Over the period from 2010 to 2020, encompassing various facets of education, I observed that only four studies, or a mere 1.6% of all publications, utilized qualitative research methods. Al-Hanw (2016b), in a separate study, examined ten Arabic educational journals
published between 2005 and 2014, encompassing a total of 348 articles, and identified that merely 0.86% employed qualitative methodology. The research by Al-Ghafiri (2019), which scrutinized research trends in 93 peer-reviewed articles within the *King Khalid University Journal of Educational Sciences*, revealed that 83% of the research employed quantitative methods, 14% utilized qualitative methods, and 3% employed mixed methods.

As part of the same project, I conducted an examination of 95 master's dissertations at the Islamic University of Madinah spanning the years from 2016 to 2021. Surprisingly, I discovered a complete absence of qualitative methodology within this dataset. This discovery prompted me to embark on an investigation into the challenges faced by qualitative researchers during the data collection process. To provide further context, Almusaa's research (2019) encompassed an analysis of 278 master's and Ph.D. theses published between 2011 and 2015 across four Saudi universities, namely King Saud University, Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, Taibah University, and Qassim University. This comprehensive analysis revealed an overwhelming reliance on quantitative methods, with a staggering 95% of the theses employing quantitative approaches. Similarly, Badran (2013) examined master's and Ph.D. theses in the field of education published at Alexandria University in Egypt spanning the years from 1965 to 2013. His findings were indicative of a prevalence of quantitative methods, leading him to the conclusion that quantitative approaches had firmly established dominance over qualitative ones in the realm of educational research.

In another relevant study, Atari (2004) focused on master's and doctoral theses within the Sultanate of Oman, spanning the years from 1970 to 2002. This investigation demonstrated a notable preference for quantitative methodologies, with the exclusion of qualitative approaches from the research landscape. Furthermore, Al-Rumaidi (2018) scrutinized master's dissertations at Kuwait University between 2007 and 2017. His findings revealed a significant disparity, with a staggering 93.5% of the dissertations relying on quantitative methods, while only a meager 6.5% ventured into the realm of qualitative research.

On the flip side, an examination of studies published globally in the English language, particularly in Western journals, revealed a significant prevalence of publications employing qualitative research methodologies. This comparison serves to underscore the pronounced disparity between research published in the Arab region and Western countries. For instance, when considering studies published in English that employed qualitative methods, the numbers are considerably higher, often reaching approximately 44.5% (Devetak et al., 2010; Gumus et al., 2018). This statistic strongly implies that there is an increased likelihood of acceptance when researchers opt to publish in English-language journals. In contrast, the acceptance rate in Arabic journals tends to be notably lower. Additionally, research conducted in East Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam suggest that qualitative studies are a prominent component of their research landscape (Walker & Hallinger, 2015).

These observations naturally prompt the question: Why is there such a limited utilization of qualitative methodology in research publications from the Arab world? Drawing from my own experiences in conducting qualitative research within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I encountered a multitude of challenges in the field. Consequently, the objective of this study is to shed light on the unique challenges faced by qualitative researchers in the Arab world, enhance the international audience's comprehension of how cultural differences influence attitudes towards qualitative methodologies, and propose strategies to effectively address these challenges.

Qualitative researchers in the Arab world encounter a range of challenges. Limited resources often impede their ability to conduct in-depth studies, while language barriers, particularly in English-dominated academic spheres, hinder communication and data translation. Cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations add complexity, necessitating an understanding of cultural norms and ethical dilemmas. Access to participants can be
challenging, especially in conservative societies, requiring trust-building and adaptation of methods. Data collection and analysis can be time-consuming and require specialized skills and software. Researchers may also face resistance to qualitative methodologies in regions where quantitative research prevails, impacting acceptance and support for their work. Lastly, there may be publication biases against qualitative research from certain regions, limiting the dissemination of findings. These challenges underscore the need for tailored strategies to navigate the unique research landscape in the Arab world and similar contexts.

Qualitative researchers encounter various challenges, including their preparation during higher education (HE) and familiarity with qualitative methodologies. In Ukraine, Baranchenko and Yukhanaev (2013) found a lack of enthusiasm for qualitative research, driven by factors such as tradition, a historical reliance on quantitative methods, philosophical perspectives, limited knowledge of qualitative methods, and misconceptions about their application and reliability. Al-Hanw’s study (2016a) identified three major barriers to publishing qualitative research in Arabic journals: (1a) researchers’ familiarity with quantitative approaches, (2b) the preference for quantitative methods among journal editors-in-chief, and (3c) insufficient emphasis on teaching qualitative research in postgraduate programs, a finding corroborated by Ceglowski et al. (2011).

Qualitative approaches have great potential for exploring human experience and facilitating meaningful learning from it. Atari and Outum (2019) have recommended prioritizing the teaching and training of students in qualitative methodologies, and the responsibility for transitioning towards qualitative research should be shared among journal editors, reviewers, and researchers. Additionally, it's worth noting the scarcity of resources available in Arabic for qualitative research writing and the translation of highly regarded English-language books into Arabic. Based on these findings, it is vital to explore the challenges facing qualitative researchers during their data collection process.

Self-of-the-Researcher

As the researcher, I hold a position as a supervisor for higher education (HE) students and have a background in qualitative research methodology by teaching this subject for HE students, with a keen interest in qualitative research and raising awareness about it among researchers. The motivation behind this research was to shed light on researchers’ lack of interest in qualitative research. I also wanted to provide a clear understanding of the obstacles researchers face when conducting qualitative research and my intentions are to provide solutions to help them overcome these challenges. I hope to make qualitative research more accessible to the next generation of researchers. By elucidating my background, connection to the topic, and intentions, I aim to provide readers with a comprehensive perspective on my role in this study, fostering transparency and facilitating a more informed evaluation of the research findings.

Methodology

Methods and Ethical Considerations

In this section, I will specify the type of qualitative inquiry employed in the study, providing a rationale for selecting a qualitative design in general and the particular qualitative design chosen. I will discuss how these choices align with the research question under investigation, citing relevant literature to support the selection. I will comprehensively discuss how participants were identified and recruited for the study. This will include details on the participant selection process and the reasoning behind these decisions, citing relevant literature
that guided the recruitment strategy. The next section will entail a thorough explanation of each step involved in data generation and collection. I will provide a rationale for each research decision made in this context, supported by citations from pertinent literature. Moreover, I will explicitly define what constitutes data within the study. Next, I will describe each stage of the data analysis process, offering both conceptual and operational perspectives. Each analytical step will be elucidated with examples for clarity. This section will also incorporate citations from the literature that guided the chosen analytical approach.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, I will discuss the measures taken at every stage of the research process. This will encompass a comprehensive exploration of the strategies employed to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings, drawing on relevant literature to support these measures. Finally, I will outline how the results will be organized and presented, explaining how this organization derives directly from the data analysis process. This section will offer insight into the structure of the forthcoming results section, ensuring coherence and alignment with the research objectives. By following this structure, the methods section will provide a clear and systematic overview of the research process, allowing readers to understand the progression from data gathering to analysis and ensuring transparency and replicability in the research design.

The choice of a qualitative approach for this study was driven by its appropriateness in addressing questions related to participants' experiences, meanings, and perceptions, as highlighted by Hammarberg et al. (2016). A qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of these subjective aspects, providing rich insights from the participants' perspectives. Furthermore, within the qualitative paradigm, a case study design was deemed appropriate for several reasons. First, the study was inherently exploratory in nature, aiming to delve deeply into a specific context and phenomenon. Case studies are well-suited for such investigations as they offer a holistic view of the subject under scrutiny (Yin, 2009). Second, the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted online served as the primary data source. Case studies often involve intensive data collection techniques, and in this context, interviews were instrumental in eliciting nuanced, context-specific information. Regarding the specific type of case study selected, it aligned with the research objectives. The decision to conduct an intrinsic case study was based on the desire to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular case for its own sake, without seeking generalizability. This approach was well-suited for exploring the intricacies of the subject under investigation, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the unique case while emphasizing the context and the significance of the specific case itself (Stake, 1994). In terms of ethical considerations, I obtained approval to conduct the study from the ethics committee of the Islamic University of Madinah, ensuring adherence to ethical standards in research. Written consent was obtained from all participants, highlighting the commitment to ethical practices. The implementation of member checking, where participants reviewed interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and alignment with their intended meanings, further bolstered the study's ethical rigor. Additionally, the inclusion of thick descriptions and a review of relevant prior research, as recommended by Shenton (2004), enhanced the study's methodological robustness.

Selection of Participants

To gain a greater understanding of a broader group of people, multiple voices that exhibit similarity, dissimilarity, redundancy, and variety were sought (Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1994). A purposive selection process was applied by sending the invitation by email or WhatsApp to more than 75 Ph.D. Arabic students studied either in the KSA and other Western countries, such as the US, the UK, and Australia, to enable comparisons to be made when examining student experiences and to achieve a negative case study of the students (Emigh,
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The use of purposive sampling was chosen to enhance the study's depth and breadth by including diverse perspectives and experiences. Here's a more detailed explanation of why purposive sampling was appropriate. It allowed for a broader representation of Ph.D. students, not limited to a specific subgroup or those readily accessible, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives from both the KSA and Western countries, including the US, the UK, and Australia, were included in the study. This diversity in student experiences enriched the findings and enabled meaningful comparisons. The invitation contained information about the research objectives, the way it would be conducted, and some criteria for the target participants. Eleven people out of the 75 volunteered to participate in the study.

A total of eight participants, primarily qualitative researchers who were either Ph.D. students or recent graduates, were purposefully selected based on specific criteria: (1a) their status as qualitative researchers who had completed their data collection within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) either they studied in the KSA or in the Western countries; (2b) their active engagement in qualitative research, predominantly utilizing methods such as interviews and observation for data collection; and (3c) their diverse academic backgrounds, spanning fields such as education, business, and social studies. This diverse selection aimed to provide triangulation by incorporating insights from various informants and settings, aligning with Shenton's (2004) recommendations. By using this triangulation technique, it is possible to compare personal experiences and opinions with those of others. Following the contributions of a variety of people, a comprehensive picture of the needs, attitudes, and behaviours of the people under investigation may be created (Shenton, 2004).

The participants were categorized into two distinct cases. The first case comprised individuals who had pursued their master's and Ph.D. degrees within universities in the KSA, totaling three participants. To maintain anonymity, they were assigned the codes S-1, S-2, and S-3. These participants had engaged in gathering qualitative data either during their PhD studies or through published research. The second case were Arabic students who consisted of individuals who pursued their Ph.D. degrees in Western universities, specifically in the UK or Australia, encompassing five participants identified as S-4, S-5, S-6, S-7, and S-8. Notably, two participants from the second case had completed their master's studies in the KSA before pursuing their Ph.Ds. abroad. The rationale for selecting these two cases was to explore whether factors related to the Ph.D. students' preparation programs at their respective universities influenced their experiences and challenges.

Data Collection

I developed the interview protocol using semi-structured interviews as my method. The interview questions were designed to delve into the participant's experiences during data collecting, as well as their issues with culture, organisations, and academic assistance. During the online interviews, I, as the researcher, engaged in real-time observation of participants. This involved closely observing participants' non-verbal cues, body language, and facial expressions as they responded to interview questions. The online platform's video feature enabled this form of observation, allowing me to gain deeper insights into participants' emotional responses and reactions. Simultaneously, I took detailed notes during the interviews. These notes included observations of participants' demeanor, any visible signs of discomfort or hesitation, and noteworthy gestures or expressions that may not be captured solely through audio recording. For example, if a participant hesitated before answering a question, this observation was considered alongside their verbal response to interpret their thought process. These observations were recorded in a systematic and organized manner to ensure accuracy.
Upon analyzing the data derived from these eight participants, the study reached a point of saturation, where in-depth information regarding their experiences and the challenges encountered during the data collection process was revealed. Saturation, as defined by Guest et al. (2020), occurs when new data contributes little or no additional insights into addressing the research question.

Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded in the Arabic language and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber. This transcription process ensured the conversion of the digital audio recordings into written text, enabling further analysis. The choice of utilizing a professional transcriber was made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the textual data.

For the data analysis, I employed MAXQDA software, a widely recognized qualitative data analysis tool, to facilitate a systematic and rigorous examination of the interview transcripts. With the assistance of the MAXQDA software, I was able to organize, code, group codes in order to construct themes, and retrieve data when needed. My approach to data analysis was guided by the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is considered a robust method for identifying and exploring themes within qualitative data. The data analysis process can be outlined as follows, with justifications for each step:

**Familiarization with the Data**

Initially, I immersed myself in the data by thoroughly reading the interview transcripts, rereading, and taking notes. This process allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the content, context, and nuances within the interviews. This step is essential for establishing a comprehensive foundation for subsequent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Building "Initial Codes" Inductively**

Following Morse's (2001) recommendation, I adopted an inductive approach to coding. This means that I approached the data with an open mind, allowing codes to emerge directly from the data without imposing preconceived categories. This approach ensured that my analysis remained grounded in the participants' own words and experiences.

**Identifying Themes**

Codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meanings or patterns within the data. This process involved sorting and organizing the codes to identify recurring ideas or concepts. The themes were developed inductively to capture the essence of the interviewees' experiences.

**Reviewing and Refining Themes**

I thoroughly reviewed the identified themes, examining their content and relationships to each other. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and consolidation of themes, ensuring that they accurately represented the richness of the data.
Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was carefully defined and given a descriptive name to clearly articulate its essence. This step involved creating concise and meaningful labels for the themes, enabling me to communicate the findings effectively.

Linking Themes to Research Questions and Literature

In the final stage of analysis, I integrated the themes with the research questions is what are the challenges that qualitative researchers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia face during the data analysis process and relevant literature. This involved aligning the identified themes with the overarching research objectives and drawing connections to existing theoretical frameworks or prior studies. This integration ensured that our findings were situated within a broader context and contributed to the existing body of knowledge.

Final Report

The culmination of my analysis was the preparation of a comprehensive final report. In this report, I selected vivid examples from the data to illustrate each theme, providing contextual richness to our findings. Additionally, I explicitly linked the identified themes with the research questions, demonstrating how they addressed the core objectives of our study.

Findings

In this section, I present the findings from my data analysis. The findings are organized by unique qualitative distinctions. First, I defined the qualitative distinction. Next, I provided evidence of the qualitative distinction by presenting an excerpt from the participant interview data. Finally, I provided a brief explanation of how the excerpt represents the qualitative distinction.

Organizational Challenges

The meaning of organization challenges refers to challenges the researchers faced in relation to decision-making, inefficient processes to access the field to collect data and limited support either at a university or with a gatekeeper.

Unclear Procedures

All participants from set one- and two-faced challenges related to the gatekeeper. Either the population were students under 18 or adults as administrators or regular employees (e.g., the Department of Education, or the institution, which has the authority to provide an access letter for the researchers) who provided access to the field to gather data. S-8 explained that:

First, there was no clear contact information on the DOE website, either telephone number or email, and I had to use my personal relationship by sending someone to them to take the contact information for the person who was in charge. After that, the communication took place via WhatsApp, following which the approval letter was sent through a personal email, not an email for the DOE. Second, there is also no clear policy for accepting applications for such studies. The DOE director expected a questionnaire as part
of the data collection process. When I explained my research would primarily utilize qualitative methods, such as observations and interviews, resistance arose. Observations and interviews should have structured questions, similar to a questionnaire, before approval was granted. I had to develop these questions in order to get approval. This situation prompts an investigation into the underlying factors that led to this request for a structured data collection approach. It is possible that the director resisted qualitative research methods due to a lack of experience or reluctance. It could be a common concern shared by many institutional heads that need a clear understanding of the research's objectives and expected results before approving it.

The landscape of research methodologies, including qualitative research, is continually evolving. Qualitative research has gained prominence in various fields due to its ability to provide rich and nuanced insights. However, it may still face challenges in terms of acceptance and understanding in some institutional contexts. This situation highlights the importance of ongoing education and communication with key stakeholders to foster a more informed and open-minded approach to research methods, allowing for flexibility and adaptability in addressing diverse research questions and objectives. In summary, the director's request for a more structured approach to qualitative research data collection raises intriguing questions about the factors influencing such decisions. Whether it stems from unfamiliarity with qualitative methods or a desire for clarity and predictability, it underscores the need for dialogue and education around the evolving landscape of research methodologies. This experience serves as a reminder of the importance of advocating for the flexibility and relevance of qualitative research in addressing contemporary research questions.

**Limited Resources in the Arabic Language**

There are a limited number of Arabic books that explain qualitative methods. In contrast, there is much literature in the English language that explains these methods, which can help student conducting research in foreign universities. For example, S-3 confirmed that “my learning of qualitative research was a personal effort—through Arabic books only, and I have no knowledge of the English language, so I found it difficult to understand many of the concepts and techniques of qualitative research.” As S-3 indicated:

Arabic books in qualitative research are not many, and their quality is not high as there is a lack of scientific knowledge compared to English books, and that leads me to face other difficulties when I analyze interviews data as I had not received sufficient training.

This challenge was not present for the case two participants, as they have full access to the rich content written in English.

**Structure of the Academic Program**

Enhancing the understanding of multifaceted research methodologies among higher education students plays a pivotal role in nurturing their research competencies. As reported by all participants in the first case one, none of them had been exposed to any coursework pertaining to qualitative research within their higher education programs in the KSA. Previous research endeavors have affirmed that most higher education programs in the fields of
humanities and social sciences primarily emphasize quantitative approaches (Altwigeri, 2020; Al-Zaidi, 2019; Mohammed, 2020). As S-1 mentioned:

I think that the preparation of researchers at the postgraduate stage is weak, especially in the doctoral stage, where we do not study a qualitative research course, and there is no practical training, just a theoretical explanation only in one lecture.

To conduct a successful interview, researchers must have sufficient training (Hung & Min, 2021).

Every participant from the second case who had completed their studies at Western universities affirmed that they had included qualitative research as a core component of their doctoral program. In contrast, it is important to note that the prevailing academic culture within universities in the KSA predominantly centers on quantitative methodologies (Alammar, 2021; Altwigeri, 2020; Al-Zaidi, 2019; Mohammed, 2020). As S-1 indicated:

In my view, faculty members were not convinced about qualitative research and refused to accept this kind of research methodology and they changed my Ph.D. proposal from pure qualitative to mixed method approach. They judged my proposal from an absolute quantitative perspective such as sample size, validity, and reliability. As an example, when I presented my proposal to the proposal committee about the small number of participants, they commented, “This is a mockery of the scientific research”—with laughter.

Moreover, S-3 confirmed:

There is a tendency against qualitative research among some faculty members in KSA universities, so it is an obstacle for the student or the new researcher to choose qualitative research. It is not prohibited by law, but some faculty members do not encourage students to use qualitative research.

This finding was also confirmed by previous studies (Almusaa:2019, Altwigeri, 2020; Al-Zaidi, 2019; Mohammed, 2020). Conversely, Murtonen (2005) found the US and Finnish students tend to favor qualitative research methods more than other forms of research. This is in line with studies that demonstrate that most empirical articles published in mainstream UK sociology journals are qualitative (Flick, 2015). Additionally, S-5 clarifies, “All my graduation batch mates in the master’s degree choose a quantitative approach, and none of our supervisors mention or encourage us to try the qualitative approach.” This statement is congruent with Albeladi’s (2022) study which analyzed 95 master’s dissertations in the Educational Administration Program at the Islamic University of Madinah from 2016 to 2021; all these dissertations are purely quantitative. On the other hand, in case two, S-7 mentioned:

Most of my study in KSA about the methodology focused on quantitative or quasi-experiment and rarely did we hear as students about the qualitative research. In contrast, when I studied my Ph.D. in the UK the focus was on qualitative, and I studied both qualitative and quantitative.
Lack of Expertise and Consultants

Other challenges that case one participants faced were their university’s lack of expertise and lack of consultants in the KSA. S-2 explained in depth, “There are no guidance or expert advisors in qualitative research at my university and I need an expert to guide me at the first stages.” Thus, faculty researchers play a significant role in making students ready to conduct research (Cotner et al., 2000; Kawulich et al., 2009; Murtonen, 2005). Supervisors are also crucial when supporting students during the process of data collection. Moreover, this finding was supported by Almusaa (2019), who found that one of the reasons for the limited publication of qualitative research in the KSA was the lack of expertise professors at the universities.

Hence, all participants from the first case pointed out that their introduction to qualitative research did not originate from their university's master's or doctoral programs or their instructors; instead, they acquired this knowledge independently. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of participants in the second case.

Lack of Awareness Towards Qualitative Research

The limited interest in qualitative research within the KSA can be primarily attributed to a lack of awareness regarding its significance, a viewpoint supported by Saleem (2022). It is evident that during orientation programs at universities in the KSA, graduate students pursuing master's or doctoral degrees are provided with limited opportunities to engage in and gain practical experience in qualitative research. Almusaa (2019) also contends that there exists a limited awareness of qualitative research among both higher education students and faculty members in the KSA. This limitation may stem from the entrenched tradition of teaching and employing quantitative research methods, a phenomenon akin to the findings by Baranchenko and Yukhanaev (2013).

Social and Cultural Challenges

All participants encountered social and cultural challenges in interacting with interviewees in the field. Research in educational and social settings relies heavily on culture both for content and methodology (Stephens, 2012). Generally, school communities prefer to answer questionnaires over being interviewed, as they can respond on their own time; this idea was confirmed by Almusaa (2019) and Saleem (2022).

The most surprising aspect of this study’s findings is that interviewees were being interviewed for the first time. S-3 confirmed this and stated:

Many participants I interviewed told me this is their first time to do interview for the research purpose, and normally they asked me, “Where is your questionnaire?” as they expected this is the only tool that can be used in research.

The importance of awareness among researchers, HE students, and communities about qualitative methodology and its aim of drawing an understanding of people’s experiences that cannot be accomplished with a questionnaire is one major issue that emerges from these findings (de Vaus, 2014).
Participants’ Fear of their Interview Being Recorded

Another surprising finding of this study was the challenge related to participants’ cultural fear of audio recording interviews. S-1 mentioned:

As you know Saudi society, a conservative society, customs, and traditions can play a significant role. Conducting an interview and recording for a female teacher is not easy at all even when you explain to the participant that the recording will be in a safe place and used only for research purposes.

S-4 added, “The biggest problem I faced when I conducted my interview was recording. Several participants did not accept recording their interview, which made it difficult for me to write everything they said.”

Moreover, administrations may request that interview records be submitted to them, which violates the norms of ethical procedures. S-4 indicated that “after finishing my interview, I asked the administration to provide me with a letter to my sponsor explaining the time range I had spent in their institution, and the head of this institution asked me to submit all the interview records and I refused.”

Gender Segregation

Based on my research background, I encountered challenges when conducting research in single-sex schools, particularly in all-female institutions. This discrepancy can be attributed to the influence of gender segregation. In previous research endeavors, securing permission to visit female-only schools for conducting interviews proved to be elusive. Consequently, I resorted to conducting online interviews with female head teachers, relying solely on audio communication.

Conducting interviews with women in Saudi Arabia presents a unique challenge due to the prevailing social restrictions. In addition to the broader complexities of qualitative research in the KSA, there is a significant gender dimension to consider. The process of gaining access to Saudi schools or public institutions, particularly when interacting with female participants, is not without its difficulties. These challenges often necessitate the cultivation of a personal and trusting relationship with the school staff, which can be a time-consuming and delicate endeavor. This gender-specific aspect adds an additional layer of intricacy to the qualitative research landscape in the KSA, where cultural norms and social dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping the research process and access to participants. Conversely, S-1 stated:

It was very difficult for me as a female researcher to visit a male school and observe or do an interview with male teachers. I asked my brother to help me to arrange the telephone call and doing the interview for me, and none of any male teachers agreed to use video recording in the classroom.

I asked S-1 if the reason for male teachers’ rejection of video recording was attributed to religious reasons. She replied:

No, on the contrary, Islam allows it, and nothing forbids it. On the contrary, the Islamic religion is tolerant. But I attribute it to the customs, traditions, and culture of Saudi society that we are not used to, and it was not acceptable that a woman conducts an interview with a male as I told you.
**Lack of Commitment**

Qualitative researchers also faced the challenge of participants’ lack of commitment towards the researcher and interview time frame and the information they provided. Adler and Adler (2003) explained that the reasoning for reluctant respondents can involve issues of access to the field/data or refusal to provide the requested information. Organizing time for interviews is difficult. Such difficulty can be related to the lack of commitment towards the researcher and not believing there are benefits to participating in the research. S-8 indicated:

> It was very difficult to arrange the time for an interview with teachers in schools. Many times, I visited the schools and stayed all day and came back without doing any interview, even when I had a previous appointment. I wasted the day without doing an interview.

The level of information received from the participants is another challenge facing researchers, as S-3 confirmed:

> Some participants do not focus seriously on the subject of the research, but rather provided side conversations that do not serve the basic idea of the research, and this makes it difficult for me to analyze the data later and answer my research questions.

Additionally, S-1 explained:

> I had experiences with multilabel social groups such as faculty members, teachers, police officers, and normal citizens. Honestly, the faculty members at universities are more professional towards the researchers. Therefore, when the participants have a higher degree, they have more, and less challenge faced me as a researcher.

Such experiences could pertain to the quality of research questions and how they are formulated in sensitive topics, as well as researchers’ training and professionalism. To surmount this impediment, Roulston (2011) advised that researchers allow interviewees to expand on their viewpoints and not evaluate their responses.

**Personal Relationships Are Key**

Finding schools to participate in qualitative research can be difficult in the KSA. S-1 clarified that “A teacher told me, after asking her to participate in the interview, ‘What I will get when I spend one hour doing interview with you, I think nothing’ - with a smile.” A similar response was recorded by S-8: “It was very, very difficult to find a school accepting interviews and observation to complete my data collection stage, and unfortunately I could not do that without my personal relationship.”

He went on to add: “I contacted several schools formally to be accepted, however, there was no response until I contacted some relevant friends to find schools that accepted me to participate.” This kind of social context is referred to as “Wastah,” indicating an implicit social agreement that obligates members of friends or relatives to assist and treat those within the group with favor (Ali, 1996). Situations like S-8’s can make conducting data in the field difficult for those who have a limited social network.
Challenges Related to Qualitative Research

Comparing research methodologies can result in researchers choosing the best methodologies that fit into their research topic and questions. However, participants confronted some challenges such as lack of time, cost, and limitations of computer programs. S-2 explicated their challenges: “First of all, the huge amount of qualitative data that you receive and transcribe, and sometimes some interviews need to be heard twice or three times in order to obtain deep understanding.” This finding is in line with the views of Tessier (2012), who confirmed that for every hour of a taped interview, six to seven hours are required to transcribe the interview.

Additionally, there is a shortage of computer programs that support Arabic-language data transcription, although English-language software is available to assist in this regard (Tessier, 2012). Consistent with existing literature, this study reveals a preference among participants for quantitative methodologies due to their perceived ease of use compared to qualitative methods (Baranchenko & Yukhanaev, 2013). These findings suggest an opportunity for innovation in the development of computer applications that can accurately transcribe the Arabic language to text, leveraging AI and voice recognition technology to streamline this process.

Discussion

In this discussion section, I will address several key elements, including findings in the context of prior research, limitations, surprises encountered during the study, generalizability of results, and implications for stakeholders.

The main question that this study attempts to address is: What challenges do qualitative researchers in the KSA encounter when conducting their qualitative data? This study focused on identifying challenges that doctoral students in KSA encountered with qualitative researchers during the data collection process. It is essential to consider how the findings align with existing knowledge in this domain. While literature has acknowledged the challenges associated with qualitative methodology, this research has contributed by specifically delineating three central themes related to these challenges. These themes encompassed organizational challenges, such as unclear procedures, limited Arabic-language resources necessitating translation, structural aspects of academic programs, scarcity of available expertise for higher education (HE) students, and the imperative need for greater awareness regarding the importance of qualitative research. Additionally, I uncovered social and cultural challenges, including participants’ apprehension about being recorded during interviews, gender segregation limiting information collection, a lack of commitment from participants, and the reliance on personal relationships. Furthermore, my study revealed challenges associated with the qualitative research process itself, notably the time and cost implications due to the voluminous data involved and the limited availability of computer programs supporting the Arabic language.

For organisational obstacles, gatekeepers who lack clear protocols and are unfamiliar with qualitative research are one of the sources of organisational issues. They also lack a clear method for allowing researchers to collect data from the field. In the context of my study, it is noteworthy that the researcher’s relationship with participants can significantly impact data accessibility in qualitative research. Findings indicate that fostering a positive relationship with the staff proved valuable when it came to obtaining information and surmounting obstacles.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between two distinct processes—official permission to conduct research and participant cooperation. This distinction aligns with the insights from studies such as Bogdan and Biklen (2003), Rossman and Rallis (2003), and
Wanat (2008). While gatekeepers' approval facilitates the formal authorization to conduct research, it does not guarantee participants' willingness to cooperate, a unique consideration in our study context within the KSA (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991).

Another finding related to the organizational challenges which is the lack of Arabic books available that discuss qualitative research techniques. On the other hand, there is a wealth of literature available in English that elucidates these techniques, aiding students who are carrying out research in universities abroad. Although self-learning is vital for HE students, there are some limitations, as attempting to learn Arabic books only can be an obstacle. This finding is consistent with that of Mohammed, (2020) and Al-Zaidi, (2019).

In Western academic culture, there is an ongoing trend where qualitative inquiry is gradually assuming a more prominent role in various aspects, including research, pedagogy, and scholarly publications. This evolution, as highlighted by Flick (2015), represents a noteworthy development that has evolved over time and through persistent efforts to establish qualitative research as a legitimate approach. Consistent with the present findings, previous studies have also underscored the prevalent lack of awareness regarding qualitative methods among both professors and higher education students, as noted by Baranchenko and Yukhanaev (2013). Hence, transitioning to a new research methodology and paradigm is a process that requires time and a shift in established practices and perceptions.

The study showed a deficiency of knowledge at the university level regarding qualitative methods. This result is consistent with other study (Ababneh, 2018; Al-Ghafiri, 2019; AlHanw, 2016a; Al Rumaidi, 2018; Atari, 2004; Atari & Outum, 2019; Badran, 2013; Baranchenko & Yukhanaev, 2013) that found that Arabic countries have a lower level of familiarity with qualitative research. It is also noteworthy that their higher education programmes placed a strong emphasis on quantitative research approaches. Baranchenko and Yukhanaev (2013) made a similar discovery on university professors in Ukraine, noting that while they were aware of qualitative research, they tended to focus more on quantitative research.

Regarding the finding about social and cultural challenges, including participants' apprehension about being recorded during interviews, researchers must ensure that participants do not experience distress during the research process (Kolar et al., 2015). The unique individual and cultural contexts of participants significantly influence the level of access, rapport, and trust established between researchers and participants (Hawamdeh & Raigangar, 2014; Stanley & Slattery, 2003). Moreover, it is essential to consider the ethical dimension of participants' autonomy, as it can impact communication between researchers and participants. In collectivist Muslim communities, the concept and practice of individual autonomy differ from Western norms (Lalani & Ali, 2020). The judicious selection of research methods, effective communication, and active involvement fosters trust and respect (Lalani, & Ali, 2020).

Refusing to have in-depth conversations is one of the social and cultural challenges. The observed phenomenon of interviewees' reluctance or hesitance to engage in in-depth discussions, as discussed in Hawamdeh and Raigangar (2014), and the apparent lack of responsiveness during qualitative interviews can be attributed to cultural communication norms. Specifically, within Arab culture, the emphasis on politeness necessitates the utilization of more indirect modes of communication to avoid potential interpersonal conflicts and confrontations that may lead to anger and frustration. This cultural aspect is further supported by similar findings outlined by Wanat (2008), who highlighted that simply gaining access to a research field does not guarantee cooperation. Researchers have also proposed that within Muslim culture, it may be essential for a researcher to establish multiple interactions with participants over the course of the study, as participants may not readily express themselves during the initial encounter (Adamson & Holloway, 2012; Lalani & Ali, 2020).
One of the key conclusions of this study is the dependence on interpersonal relationships to access to the field. This cultural behavior, prevalent in Arab culture, should not be misconstrued as corruption but rather as a reliance on anticipated benefits from social interactions. This concept aligns with the principles of the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that individuals invest effort and engage when they expect to receive present or future advantages from their interactions with others. The debate among researchers regarding whether providing goods, services, payments, or gifts to research participants is beneficial is pertinent here. Gatekeepers, for example, are more likely to cooperate in research endeavors when they receive incentives, and their motivation to participate may decrease in the absence of such benefits (Adler & Adler, 2003; Yeager & Kram, 1995).

Furthermore, researchers often encounter challenges related to interview transcription, which can be a costly and time-consuming process. Saleem (2022) highlights one such obstacle faced by Pakistani researchers: the perception that data collection is more demanding in terms of time and effort, followed by the arduous task of transcribing interviews. Consequently, they tend to prefer working with numerical data, which seems more manageable (Baranchenko & Yukhanev, 2013). Managing large volumes of data for coding and analysis can be daunting for researchers, whereas these challenges are less pronounced in quantitative research.

Implications for Stakeholders

The implications of this research extend to various stakeholders, including policymakers in academia. To address the identified challenges, universities can initiate the development of master's and Ph.D. programs that incorporate qualitative research modules as core components. Furthermore, student handbooks should be enhanced to provide a more balanced perspective that encompasses qualitative research, thereby fostering flexibility and a more holistic approach to research.

Training programs for HE students and faculty members are crucial to equip them with the necessary skills and awareness about qualitative research. The establishment of a third-party entity dedicated to protecting the rights of research participants and promoting qualitative research in Arabic is essential. Saleem (2022) has suggested that this awareness campaign should target educational communities, HE students, faculty members, and scientific journal editors-in-chief. While our study provides promising results, international researchers must expand the qualitative research field within Arabic culture. This can be achieved through collaboration and knowledge sharing among Western and Eastern cultures to better understand the teaching and perception of qualitative research. It also serves as a reminder for international researchers to be prepared for challenges they might encounter during their data collection processes.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the insights gained from this research, there are several limitations to acknowledge. First, my sample size, while sufficient to understand the challenges faced by researchers, was not extensive for each case. Second, future studies should consider gathering perspectives from diverse groups, such as faculty members and teachers in qualitative research. Lastly, this study primarily focuses on challenges specific to qualitative researchers, but some of these challenges may be applicable to other research methodologies, warranting further investigation.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this study embarked on a comprehensive exploration of the challenges encountered by qualitative researchers during the data collection process within the context of Arabic culture in KSA. Building upon the foundations laid in the introductory section, where we highlighted the growing interest in qualitative research in this cultural milieu, I meticulously designed my research methodology to capture the intricacies of these challenges. My methodological choices, as discussed in the methods section, enabled me to gain insights from a diverse range of participants who illuminated the organizational, social, and cultural hurdles that qualitative researchers often confront. These challenges, outlined in the results section, encompassed issues such as unclear procedures, resource limitations, gender segregation, and the crucial need for more awareness and support for qualitative research within academic programs.

Overall, this research underscores the significance of fostering qualitative research within Arabic culture and recommends concrete steps to overcome the identified challenges. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, the aim is to contribute to the growing movement of qualitative research in the region and facilitate a more robust and inclusive research landscape for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. In the evolving landscape of research methodologies, this study serves as a valuable stepping stone towards enhancing the qualitative research experience in Arabic culture while encouraging continued exploration and innovation in this field.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Title: The challenges of conducting qualitative research in quantitative culture: Saudi Arabia as a case study.
Location:
Date/time:
Participant name:
Group:
1- studied HE inside the KSA
2- studied HE in Western countries
Name of the researcher: Abdulrahman Albeladi
My name is Abdulrahman Albeladi, and this shall be an in-depth interview that I will facilitate. This project is aimed to explore your experience of conducting qualitative data during your data collection process within Saudi Arabia. It would be interesting to hear about your story as you are a qualitative researcher. You were selected as an I know you had finished your qualitative data collection process. Your participation is completely voluntary.
As part of the preparations for today's interview, I sent you an introduction letter about this research project and a consent form (to be signed and returned, you can keep a copy for yourself). It is expected that the interview will take approximately 40 minutes to 60 minutes to complete. As the consent form states, the interview will be recorded and used for the research only, and neither your name nor that of your institution will be included in the findings of the study. Your personal information will be fully confidential. The interview transcript will be provided to you after the interview has been conducted so that you can read it and make sure your intended meaning has been accurately conveyed.
Research questions:
1. Can you tell me about yourself?
2. Could you tell me how you would describe your PhD experience gathering qualitative data?
   • Probes, could you please tell me what motivated you to choose the qualitative methodology rather than another?
3. What are the main cultural obstacles that a qualitative researcher in the field must overcome?
4. Which chances are the most crucial for using qualitative research in the Arab world?
5. What challenges did you as a researcher face in terms of data collection and data quality?
   • Probes, explain the challenges.
6. When analyzing, interpreting, and presenting the data, what challenges did you face?
   • Probes, did your university supervisor provide you with support, or did another specific unit assist you?
7. As a student researcher working on a qualitative research project, what organizational challenges did you face?
8. In your opinion, while conducting qualitative research, what advice is crucial for overcoming these challenges?
Author Note

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