Qualitative Research in the World, A Bibliometric Study from Scopus

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HOW TO CITE:
Rivas-Huaman, Rolly (2026). Qualitative Research in the World, A Bibliometric Study from Scopus. International Journal of Special Education, 41(9s), 989-996

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ABSTRACT:
This bibliometric study examines the global evolution of qualitative research from 1951 to 2009, aiming to identify trends in scientific production, key authors, geographical distribution, and leading publication sources. Using Scopus as the primary database and Bibliometrix software for data processing, filters were applied to select 19,125 relevant documents. Results indicate a steady increase in qualitative research output, with significant growth from the 1990s onward, reflecting greater acceptance of qualitative approaches across disciplines, particularly in social sciences and health. Additionally, a small group of highly prolific authors, including Sandelowski, McGrath, and Malterud, have played a crucial role in methodological advancements. Geographically, research is predominantly concentrated in English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, whereas Latin America, Africa, and Asia remain underrepresented, revealing persistent inequalities in scientific visibility and production. Furthermore, the most influential journals in qualitative research were identified, with Qualitative Health Research and Social Science & Medicine leading in publication volume. However, limitations such as the exclusion of other databases and the study's time frame may restrict the identification of recent trends. In conclusion, while qualitative research has gained academic prominence, challenges remain in ensuring equitable knowledge production and dissemination, highlighting the need for strategies that foster greater inclusion of underrepresented scientific communities.

Keywords: Qualitative research, bibliometric analysis, scientific production, research impact, Social sciences.

Introduction

Qualitative research is a methodological approach that studies phenomena in their natural context to understand the meaning people attribute to them, providing an alternative and complementary perspective to quantitative research [1]. This type of research is characterized by the need for methodological, theoretical, and ethical rigor, which allows for capturing human experiences and their meanings in specific situations [2]. Additionally, its applicability has been highlighted in various disciplines, such as urban planning, where it has been used to integrate qualitative methodologies with approaches from social sciences, facilitating a deeper understanding of complex socio-urban dynamics [3].

Currently, qualitative research faces multiple challenges that affect its development and acceptance across various disciplines. First, methodological and ethical difficulties remain an obstacle, particularly in health research, where the validation of qualitative rigor is still debated [4]. Additionally, the lack of structured training in qualitative methods represents a significant barrier for early-career researchers, making it difficult to select appropriate approaches and analyze data [5]. Furthermore, the rise of post-qualitative approaches has generated uncertainty regarding the role of theory and data in knowledge construction, potentially fragmenting the discipline and hindering its epistemological consolidation [6]. Finally, in the context of higher education, limitations in funding, time, and institutional support restrict the application of qualitative research, reducing its impact on the analysis of complex educational phenomena [7].

In recent years, various qualitative research studies have had a significant impact across multiple disciplines, demonstrating their relevance in knowledge generation and policy development. First, a study conducted in Australia analyzed high-impact cases in educational research and human society studies, highlighting the importance of impact literacy in improving the quality and effectiveness of these studies [8]. Meanwhile, an analysis of impact studies in the United Kingdom revealed how differences in language and structure in submitted cases can influence their evaluation, suggesting that greater clarity and argumentative coherence can enhance the perceived impact of research [9]. Additionally, in the field of health, a study conducted in low-resource settings demonstrated how applied qualitative research can significantly improve public health policies and practices in countries such as China, India, and Pakistan, emphasizing the role of collaboration in data collection and analysis [10]. Finally, a study in Canada proposed a new conceptual framework to assess the impact of qualitative research on science, practice, and policy development, stressing the need to recognize critical approaches in measuring academic impact [11].

More specifically, bibliometric studies on qualitative research have enabled the analysis of its development and positioning across various disciplines. In the field of nursing, a bibliometric study in Brazil revealed that the predominant approaches in qualitative research include phenomenology and the use of semi-structured interviews, highlighting their impact on public health [12]. Similarly, an analysis of biomedical literature identified a bibliometric structure in qualitative research, indicating that the most frequently addressed topics include health management and women's health, with studies originating from 76 countries [13]. Additionally, a recent methodological proposal has emphasized the importance of integrating quantitative bibliometric analyses with qualitative approaches to deepen the interpretation of results, utilizing tools such as R Bibliometrix and VOSviewer [14]. Finally, a global analysis of qualitative research in social sciences showed that these studies are primarily concentrated in North America and Europe, with a strong focus on the study of individual experiences, social psychology, and education [15].

The present bibliometric study on qualitative research worldwide has the following main objectives: first, to analyze the evolution of scientific production in qualitative research from 1951 to 2009, identifying trends and growth patterns; second, to determine the most prolific authors in the field and their impact on the methodological development of qualitative research; third, to examine the geographical distribution of academic impact by identifying the countries with the highest number of citations in this area; fourth, to evaluate scientific production by country to understand the concentration and dispersion of knowledge across different regions of the world; fifth, to identify the most relevant academic institutions publishing qualitative studies, allowing for inferences about collaboration networks and methodological development hubs; and sixth, to analyze the scientific journals with the highest volume of publications in qualitative research, providing insight into the main forums for dissemination and debate in this discipline.

Methodology

Bibliometric studies are a key tool in evaluating scientific production, as they allow for measuring

impact, trends, and the evolution of knowledge across various disciplines. Bibliometrics is a branch of scientometrics that employs mathematical and statistical methods to analyze scientific output through academic publications, facilitating the identification of publication patterns, influential authors, and the relevance of scientific journals in a specific field [16]. Furthermore, Passas highlights that bibliometric analysis not only enables the assessment of scientific productivity but is also an increasingly utilized methodology for examining and managing large volumes of scientific data, making it an essential technique in modern research [17].

To achieve the outlined objectives, a bibliometric analysis has been chosen, using the Bibliometrix software as the analysis tool. Scopus has been selected as the database for the analysis. The following procedures have been considered.

On Wednesday, February 19, 2025, Scopus was accessed. As the first step, the keyword "qualitative research" was entered into the search bar, yielding 222,626 documents. As the second step, the document type filter was applied, selecting articles and conference proceedings, resulting in 199,985 documents. As the third step, a time filter was applied, covering the years 1951 to 2009, reducing the count to 19,125 documents. Based on this final set of qualitative research documents, the analysis has begun.

Results

Figure 1 presents the annual scientific production on qualitative research indexed in Scopus, spanning from 1951 to 2009. The trend illustrates a progressive increase in publications, with minor fluctuations in certain years. Initially, the volume of research remained relatively low, suggesting limited academic engagement with qualitative methodologies. However, from the mid-1990s onward, there is a noticeable rise, likely reflecting the growing recognition of qualitative approaches across disciplines. The peak production appears in the 2000s, which aligns with broader methodological shifts favoring qualitative inquiry. The increasing trajectory underscores an expanding scholarly interest, possibly driven by methodological advancements and interdisciplinary applications. The data also indicate that qualitative research gained traction gradually before reaching a sustained momentum in recent decades. Thus, the figure highlights not only the historical evolution of qualitative research but also its solidification as a significant academic paradigm.

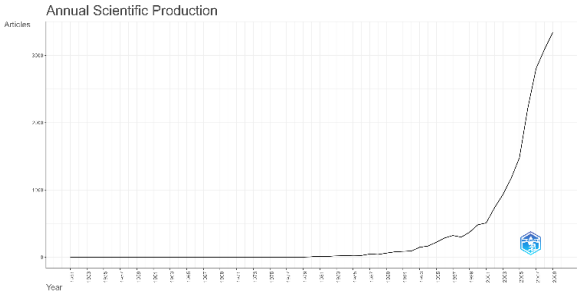


Figure 1

Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Figure 2 identifies the most prolific authors in qualitative research based on the number of documents indexed in Scopus. The distribution reveals that a few key scholars, such as Sandelowski, McGrath, and Malterud, have made substantial contributions, as indicated by their high publication counts. This suggests that these researchers have played a pivotal role in advancing qualitative methodologies and applications. The presence of authors like Ziebland, Rogers, and Fridlund further highlights a diverse academic landscape, possibly spanning multiple disciplines such as health sciences, social sciences, and education. Notably, the variation in publication counts among the top contributors may reflect differences in research focus, collaborative networks, or institutional support. The prominence of these authors indicates their influence in shaping qualitative inquiry, setting methodological standards, and driving its expansion. Overall, Figure 2 underscores the key intellectual figures whose work has significantly impacted the development and dissemination of qualitative research.

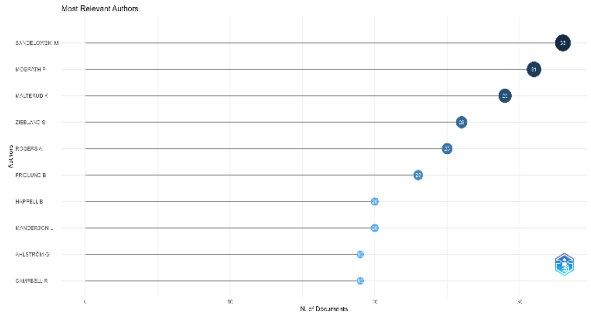


Figure 2

Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Figure 3 presents the most cited countries in qualitative research, highlighting the global impact and influence of different academic systems. The United States leads by a significant margin, reflecting its dominance in research output and the extensive adoption of qualitative methodologies in various disciplines, particularly in health and social sciences. The United Kingdom follows closely, demonstrating its strong tradition in qualitative inquiry, especially in fields like sociology and education. Other high-ranking countries, such as Australia, Canada, and Sweden, indicate the widespread engagement with qualitative research in both English-speaking and European contexts. The presence of New Zealand, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Ireland suggests a robust research culture that values qualitative methods. The citation distribution underscores the geographic concentration of influential research, possibly linked to well-established academic institutions, funding availability, and methodological innovations. Overall, Figure 3 illustrates the international landscape of qualitative research, where certain regions play a crucial role in advancing and disseminating qualitative methodologies.

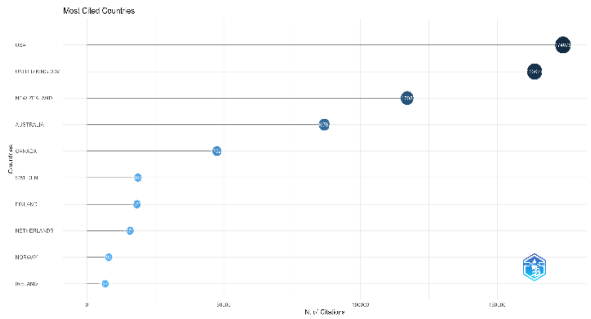


Figure 3

Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Figure 4 illustrates the scientific production of qualitative research by country, providing insights into the global distribution of scholarly output. The visualization reveals that the United States leads in the number of published studies, reaffirming its central role in the development and dissemination of qualitative methodologies. The United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada also exhibit substantial contributions, suggesting strong academic communities that prioritize qualitative inquiry, particularly in the social and health sciences. European countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Finland demonstrate notable engagement, indicating a well-established tradition of qualitative research within their academic systems. The geographic distribution highlights the dominance of English-speaking and Northern European nations, which may be attributed to institutional support, methodological training, and the presence of high-impact journals in these regions. However, the relative absence of other global regions suggests potential disparities in research funding, access to publication outlets, or methodological preferences. Overall, Figure 4 underscores the concentration of qualitative research production in specific academic ecosystems while hinting at opportunities for broader global participation.

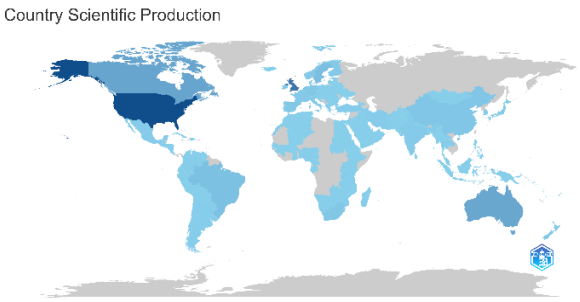


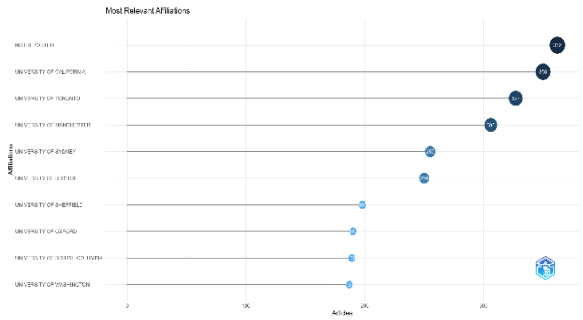
Figure 4

Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Figure 5 highlights the most relevant academic affiliations contributing to qualitative research, showcasing institutions with the highest number of published articles. The University of California

leads the ranking, reflecting its strong emphasis on qualitative methodologies across multiple disciplines, particularly in social sciences, health, and education. Similarly, the University of Toronto and the University of Manchester demonstrate significant contributions, suggesting an institutional commitment to qualitative inquiry and methodological development. Other prominent universities, such as the University of Sydney, University of Oxford, and University of British Columbia, further reinforce the dominance of English-speaking institutions in this research domain. The presence of multiple universities from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia indicates a well-established research culture supporting qualitative approaches. Notably, the "Not Reported" category suggests a number of contributions from independent researchers or institutions not explicitly indexed. Overall, Figure 5 underscores the institutional concentration of qualitative research, highlighting key academic hubs that drive theoretical and methodological advancements in the field.

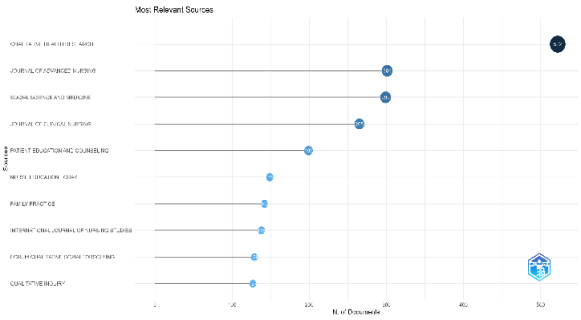
Figure 5



Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Figure 6 presents the most relevant sources for qualitative research, indicating the academic journals with the highest number of published documents in this field. "Qualitative Health Research" leads the ranking, emphasizing the strong presence of qualitative methodologies in health-related studies. Similarly, "Journal of Advanced Nursing", "Journal of Clinical Nursing", and "Nurse Education Today" highlight the significant role of qualitative research in nursing and healthcare education. The inclusion of "Social Science and Medicine" and "Patient Education and Counseling" suggests a broader interdisciplinary application, particularly in medical sociology and patient-centered care. Additionally, "International Journal of Nursing Studies" and "Family Practice" reinforce the prominence of qualitative inquiry in healthcare and medical humanities. Meanwhile, "Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung" and "Qualitative Inquiry" represent specialized qualitative research journals that contribute to theoretical and methodological advancements. The dominance of health-related journals indicates that qualitative research is extensively used in understanding patient experiences, healthcare systems, and medical education. Overall, Figure 6 highlights the central role of specific journals in shaping and disseminating qualitative research across disciplines, particularly in health and social sciences.

Figure 6



Note. Developed by the authors using Bibliometrix software.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained from this bibliometric analysis of qualitative research indexed in Scopus, the study presents certain limitations that must be considered. First, the analysis is limited to documents within the Scopus database, which, although comprehensive, excludes research indexed in other significant repositories such as Web of Science or specialized regional databases. Consequently, this may lead to a partial representation of global qualitative research, especially in non-English-speaking regions, where important contributions might be underrepresented. Second, the time frame analyzed, spanning from 1951 to 2009, limits the study's ability to capture recent developments and emerging trends in qualitative methodologies. Given the rapid evolution of research paradigms and the increasing acceptance of qualitative

approaches across disciplines, excluding more recent publications may overlook critical shifts in theoretical frameworks and innovative applications. Third, the reliance on publication and citation metrics as primary indicators of influence and impact may inadvertently privilege prolific authors and institutions in high-income countries, while potentially overlooking the nuanced contributions of scholars from less visible academic contexts. This inherent bias in citation practices could distort the perceived global landscape of qualitative research, reinforcing existing academic hierarchies. Therefore, while this study provides a robust historical and quantitative overview, future research should consider integrating multiple databases, extending the temporal range, and exploring alternative metrics to achieve a more holistic understanding of the evolution and dissemination of qualitative research worldwide.

Conclusions

The bibliometric study on global qualitative research production has led to six key conclusions, aligned with the objectives and results obtained. First, scientific production in qualitative research has experienced sustained growth from 1951 to 2009, with a notable increase since the 1990s, suggesting a progressive recognition of the importance of qualitative methods across various disciplines, particularly in social sciences and health. This finding indicates methodological consolidation and greater academic acceptance, reflected in the increasing number of publications in indexed journals. Second, a small group of authors has led scientific production in this field, with figures such as Sandelowski, McGrath, and Malterud standing out due to their significant contributions in terms of publications and the establishment of methodological standards in qualitative research. However, this concentration of authors suggests the need to foster greater diversity and participation from emerging researchers, particularly in underrepresented regions. Third, the citation analysis revealed that most of the academic impact originates from English-speaking countries, primarily the United States and the United Kingdom, highlighting the dominance of these academic systems in knowledge dissemination. Nevertheless, the presence of other countries such as Australia, Canada, and Sweden indicates a growing interest in developing qualitative approaches, although asymmetries in visibility and recognition persist in less represented regions. Fourth, the distribution of scientific production by country reaffirmed the dominance of nations with strong academic infrastructure and access to research funding, which explains the higher number of publications in English-speaking contexts and countries with an established tradition in qualitative research. However, the low representation of countries from Latin America, Africa, and Asia suggests structural barriers that limit the inclusion of research from these regions in international databases, underscoring the need for strategies that promote equity in scientific production and dissemination. Fifth, the institutions with the highest output in qualitative research are primarily prestigious universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, including the University of California, the University of Toronto, and the University of Manchester. This finding demonstrates the concentration of knowledge in elite academic centers, implying that access to resources and collaborative networks directly influences research productivity. This suggests the importance of fostering inter-institutional partnerships to strengthen qualitative research in universities from other regions. Finally, the analysis of the most relevant scientific journals for qualitative research publications revealed that the leading sources of dissemination belong to the health and social sciences, with journals such as Qualitative Health Research, Journal of Advanced Nursing, and Social Science and Medicine dominating publication volumes. This indicates that qualitative research has been widely adopted in these fields, although its presence in disciplines such as engineering or the exact sciences remains limited. Consequently, these results highlight the need to diversify publication platforms to expand the impact of qualitative research into new areas of knowledge. In conclusion, this bibliometric study not only confirms the sustained growth of qualitative research worldwide but also evidences persistent inequalities in terms of production, visibility, and impact, posing the challenge of developing strategies that promote greater inclusion and equity in the generation and dissemination of

qualitative knowledge.

Acknowledgment

A special acknowledgment to all the teachers and professors who contributed to my growth as a qualitative researcher. It is my desire to generate new knowledge through qualitative methodology for the benefit of society. Qualitative research considers that there is not just one reality but multiple realities to be explored, which is its epistemological foundation and significance. This bibliometric study is merely a tangible example of the great progress, growth, and strengthening of qualitative research, which is not exclusive to the social sciences but extends to other disciplines such as medicine, physics, accounting, engineering, architecture, and more.

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