

USING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN IDENTIFYING AND DEVELOPING YOUNG TALENTS IN ELITE AMATEUR GOLF IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Qualitative methodology is now used more frequently in sports management research especially in understanding athletes' motivation, beliefs and perceptions. This study aims to provide an overview of applying qualitative methodology to identify, select and develop young talents in elite amateur golf to meet the demands of national and international competitions. By talking directly with participants who are industry experts can give a good understanding of the process of producing top amateur golfers. The participants comprised of seven professional coaches and one official of the national golf body who were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Thus, the researcher is the key instrument in gathering information through semi-structured and open-ended interviewing, to get the range of information such as their views on perspectives and meanings that the participants hold in the area of study. In conclusion, the researcher emphasizes that the qualitative method was suitable to get the data regarding golf development.*

Keywords: *develop young talents, amateur golfers, qualitative inquiry, governing body*

Introduction

The two commonly used research approaches are qualitative and quantitative research methods. According to Flyvbjerg (2006) the choice of methodology should be dependent on the research problem in order to maximize the effectiveness of the study where the value is not dependent on whether it is qualitative or quantitative; instead, the value of the research is the manner in which it is implemented by the people it reaches (Morse, 2020; Chalip, 1997). Creswell (2013) explained that qualitative methods should be used to study complex subjects and topics. Accordingly, there are basically four categories of data, "observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials" (Creswell, 2007 p. 129). In qualitative research, in-depth interviews play an important part. It is also common that qualitative research is used mostly in the social sciences as it is both versatile and flexible, hence this study has adopted a similar approach.

The intent of this paper is to demonstrate the effectiveness of applying qualitative research inquiry as a highly useful approach to identify, select and develop young talents into elite amateur golfers in Malaysia. The aim is to study various aspects of human experience and the primary way to gather stories is by interviewing the right people. The method of collecting qualitative data for this study was in-depth interviews applying open ended questions. In-depth interviews are conversations between the interviewer and interviewee, where the interviewer's main role is to listen carefully to the interviewee and frame questions around interviewee's responses (Draper, 2009). The use of in-depth interviews and open ended questions would require response from the participants rather than merely choosing an option provided. Ultimately, the data gathered would assist the researcher to generate a sports policy designed specifically for golf where stakeholders can apply to produce successful elite amateur golfers for both the national and international levels. With good infrastructure and equipped with better knowledge, this study will hopefully provide the much needed solution to all stakeholders like golf clubs, schools and state associations that are instrumental in producing elite golfers in Malaysia. Also, there is also a need to communicate the findings beyond traditional outlets so the research will have the intended impact (Frisby, 2005, p. 5).

The Malaysian context

There is a growing concern that Malaysian amateur golfers have not performed at international level competitions despite the availability of modern facilities, strong development support from government agencies and the staging of many world class international tournaments in the country. With increased competition at the national and international levels, it has become an increasingly urgent factor for the national governing body (NGB) to increase emphasis on developing successful amateur golfers. To produce world class amateur golfers remains a major problem to the NGB which is entrusted with the development of elite golfers in Malaysia. Majority of the elite players in the national team failed to deliver the expected medals in past SEA Games, Asian Games and many other high profile international events in Asia Pacific. Alarmed by the poor performances, there is now an urgent need to conduct a study to address the situation. There are many possible contributing factors, the likely ones being the lack of effective talent identification and development policies, limited resources at the NGB resulting in poor coordination among the stakeholders and the lack of strategic planning by the governing body. Therefore, this study is timely to explore factors that are critical in identifying, selecting and developing the right young talents into elite amateur golfers who can win both national and international events.

Methodology

A qualitative study does not begin with a hypothesis or a presumed outcome as in the case of a quantitative study. But, a qualitative study cannot begin without a plan (Richards, 2005). Usually, qualitative research begins with 'a question or at least an intellectual curiosity if not a passion for a particular topic' (Janesick, 2000). At the beginning of the enquiry process, the questions were drafts similar to the informal conversational interview concept but later developed more to suit the intended study. In this study it was proven useful during the interview with the president of MGA where the researcher was seeking early information. The interview was important to this study. As suggested by Creswell (2007), good quality questions should invite a process of exploration and discovery. The direction and scope of the questions are critical for an effective study and to collect meaningful and acceptable data. New questions often developed during the interview process or during data collection. The primary strength of qualitative research is the potential to explore a topic in depth (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011). Hence, the use of the semi-structured interview where the interviewer had a schedule of areas to cover was critical to generate the information needed for this study.

Applying the standardized open-ended interviews where participants are always asked identical questions, but the questions are worded so that responses are open-ended (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). To assess the content validity of the interview questions, a copy was sent to three experts on qualitative research for feedback should there be any modifications, additions or deletions to be made. These questions were later tested via a pilot study. Finally, similar line of questioning was applied to the 8 participants who were industry experts. This allowed the participants to contribute as much detail information as they desired on their viewpoints and experiences and allowed the researcher to ask probing questions as follow up. It was a major advantage of using qualitative method and was proven effective as the participants were free to talk about their personal feelings, opinions and experiences. Another strength was the responses from the participants provided a holistic view of the phenomena under study. The researcher also observed that the participants were relaxed, confident and encouraged to express their thoughts on the subject under study. However, there was a small limitation associated with using qualitative where data gathering and analysis was time consuming and expensive.

Informal Conversational Interview with the President, Malaysian Golf Association (MGA)

The study started with an informal discussion with the president of MGA. This was important to the proposed study as the president himself is the chairman of the national team and development under the NGB. Being responsible for the development and performance of the national elite players, he was the right person to provide important information on the current state of the national team and its future plans. The president agreed the interview to be recorded. At the beginning, the discussion was on matters related to the state of golf in Malaysia and as it progressed the president focused on how Malaysia can produce future elite amateur golfers who can perform at both national and international levels. As stated by McNamara (2009) the researcher does not ask any specific types of questions, but rather relies on the interaction with the participant to guide the interview process. It was an informal conversational interview as there was no predetermined set of structured questions prepared by the researcher.

The atmosphere was relaxed which allowed the president to be more open on matters related to current issues faced by the association. There was also flexibility which was beneficial to both parties due to the lack of structure. He also highlighted some current weaknesses of the NGB which gave the researcher a good understanding on the current situation. Towards the later part, the questioning was focused more on the likely steps that needed to be taken by the NGB to produce future elite amateur golfers. He stressed on the importance of having the right criteria in the identification and selection processes.

Also, the need to have expertise like qualified coaches to develop the selected athletes. An important aspect that he was concerned about is the structure of the NGB itself which is not well equipped to embark on the talent identification and development programs. There is no expertise at the NGB and current coordination on training and development programs between the NGB and its affiliates is not too reliable. This initial interview helped the researcher to design the draft interview questions. There was a follow up meeting with the president within 3 weeks of the first meeting where the proposed structure and line of questioning were agreed. The president expressed his appreciation that a study on developing a sports policy for identification, selection and development of young talents specific for amateur golf is to be realized.

Interview Protocol

One of the more popular areas of interest in qualitative research design is that of the interview protocol where interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants' experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Turner III, 2010). The use of interview protocols consisted of not only a set of questions but also a procedural guide to direct the researcher through the interview process in the collection of data. The guide contained explanations why the need to conduct the study, to maintain its confidentiality and also to build rapport with the participants. The interview guide defined the issues the researcher needed to explore, thus building a boundary on the research area. The interview questions were also guided by existing literature in the area of study plus the ones derived from the initial meeting with the MGA president. All the interviews took place at venues agreed by the participants. In all cases they were held in private rooms at the golf clubs where the participants operate that allowed quality recordings of the sessions. The interview guide was firstly reviewed by three experts in qualitative research to ensure they were logical and addressed the intended area of study. The interview questions originated from the research questions, literature and the researcher's sound knowledge of the development process in producing elite golfers.

Pilot Testing

A pilot testing considered important to this study was carried out. The candidate selected is a golf teacher cum coach to some junior players attached to a golf club in Kuala Lumpur. He has similar interests and has the same level of experiences as the participants selected for this study. What was more important was that being a seasoned professional golfer and a coach with vast experience at the national level, he can provide in-depth information needed for this study. As part of his former job as a national coach, he was tasked with scouting, identifying and recruiting young talents to be developed for the national team which was of great help. Knowing the issues prior to the main study will allow changes to be made in order to obtain validity and accuracy in results (Cohen et al, 2000).

The pilot test was conducted face-to-face, recorded and transcribed. This allowed the researcher to review the process, checked the questions were appropriate for the study, helped to refine the interview questions and also had a good flow. According to Kvale (2007), the pilot will assist the researcher in determining if there are flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and will allow the researcher to make necessary revisions prior to the implementation of the study. Lastly and most important, the researcher was confident that the pilot was able to answer the question as to whether a full scale study could be conducted in the way that has been planned. Thus, the pilot study was useful as guidance to ensure the right questions were asked and reliable results obtained.

Participants

According to Morse (2016), the intension of sampling methods are to have maximum effectiveness and validity. With the help of MGA, the governing body for golf in Malaysia, a list of 14 individuals who are currently active in the industry and who by virtue of their knowledge and experience can provide the information needed for the study was compiled. The researcher firstly contacted them via WhatsApp with a short brief as to why they were contacted. This was followed again via WhatsApp a letter of introduction explaining the background of the research and invited them to participate in the interview session. Six potentials included 2 females declined due to their work commitment and tournament schedules. Finally, only 8 participants consented to participate, all male, have vast experience in the field of study and have the characteristics that the researcher needed to complete the study. A formal letter of invitation to participate was sent to each participant.

The participants were selected because they met the criteria of purposive sampling that was necessary for the intended study. As stated by Crossman (2018), purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, selective or subjective sampling where a purposive sample also referred to as expert sample where participants are selected according to predetermined criteria relevant to a particular research. They are industry experts and defined as individuals who are knowledgeable, “information rich” and have special skills. Being experts, they were able to share their knowledge and skills plus their perspectives and insights in the area of study with the researcher. The sample size was not important but the depth of collected data was critical. At the same time, the researcher has adequate subject knowledge and familiar with the participants which helped. It was also important for the study to identify new policy ideas that are needed to enhance the performance of current and future elite amateur golfers. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment chosen by the individuals where they felt at ease.

Semi-structured interviews

In qualitative research, the use of interviews is one of the most commonly recognized form (Mason, 2002). As indicated by Patton (2015), interviews provide the opportunity to collect data from participants without observing their actions. The preparation stage is critical as the interview session will determine whether maximum benefit will be obtained for the proposed study (McNamara, 2009). The questions asked in the interview schedule are to yield as much information about the study phenomena as possible and also to be able to address the aims and objectives of the research (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). In preparation for the interview and basing on available literature, an interview guide was designed to give the interview a structure but still allows for exploration of any interesting matters that may have arisen (Andrews et al., 2005).

The interview questions generally covered three sections mainly introductory and ice breaking, themes from literature and experiences and prompts and probes. More important, participants were told that they were free to talk openly about their experiences, involvement in golf development, factors and criteria they considered critical in the process of identifying, selecting and developing young talents. The same questions were asked to each participant while giving flexibility to the researcher to alter the sequence in order to get deeper information. Flexibility is important and asking new questions is encouraged to gain new information in response to the participant (Bryman, 2008). All the interviews were conducted in English, taped and later transcribed. A copy of the transcription was sent by email to all participants to allow feedback should they think it did not represent their original views. None came back for any amendment within the stipulated time of 14 days.

Interview schedule

A detailed planning of the qualitative interview process to be carried out is important. Participants are given the choice of the interview location to ensure a safe and comfortable environment (Jones, 2015). As a result, each interview was conducted in a comfortable surrounding and free from any distractions. The exact location was agreed by both parties in advance.

Managing the scheduling of the interviews was important as it involved traveling time and costs. For this study, the first interview was carried out on 18th October 2018 in Perth, Western Australia and the final was on 18th June 2019 in Kedah, covering a total period of eight months. In between, two interviews were conducted in Sabah, two in Kuala Lumpur, one in Kedah and one in Melaka.

Data collection

Interviews and data collections took place at times convenient to the participants and at venues agreed by both parties (Tracy, 2019). In all cases the interviews took place at a meeting room in the golf clubs which gave complete privacy. The participants were at ease which allowed the interview process free from any interference. According to Cohen et al. (2007), the right atmosphere will need to be created from the start. All the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. This minimized the writing down notes by the researcher which enabled him to focus more on the process. On average, each interview took around sixty minutes to complete. The process of transcribing the recorded conversation were assigned to experienced research assistants engaged by the researcher. All transcriptions were counter checked by the researcher and corrected where necessary.

According to Sobal (2001), the process of interviewing more candidates will stop when the information is adequate and appropriate where one or more interview will not give additional or further contribution to the study. In the absence of explicit guidelines for determining data saturation in qualitative methodology, the researcher felt that after the sixth interview, no new information or themes were extracted from the last two interviews. However, the point of saturation also depends on the complexity, the resources and time available for the study.

Data Analysis

The term 'analysis' means an act of giving meaning to data or operates as a process of generating, developing and verifying concepts (Corbin & Strauss 2008). This was essentially the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying and categorizing data for the purpose of interpreting the data. The main resources of primary data for this study were obtained via the qualitative interviews with the participants. The first step in the data analysis was to organize and manage massive raw data in each interview transcript including the hand written field notes. It involved examining the meaning of the participants' words or actions and trying to make explicit the knowledge that was in them.

A thematic approach is adopted to systematically identify, organize and offer insight into patterns of meaning across a data set and allow the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2018). According to Charmaz (2000), a coding system will be adopted to organize and sort the raw data themes in the form of quotations from the participants. This process was done manually following Braun & Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Each transcript, field notes and memos were read and reread to identify themes and categories. Codes were used to identify, label, compile and organize the data that were potentially relevant to answering the research questions. Coding will continue until theoretical saturation when no further properties, components or relationships emerged during data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process ended when all the data were fully coded and collated.

The next phase was the construction of themes by identifying areas of similarity and with meaningful patterns. Each transcript went through the same process of content analysis and coded according to the list of categories. Themes related to the research questions formed the major findings of the study. This was followed by the write up of the findings to represent the participants' contribution.

Trustworthiness, Validity and Reliability

In this study trustworthiness can be attained at different stages of the research process. The concept of trustworthiness in qualitative research is emphasized by its consistency, establishing accuracy during the research process and naturalistic in nature while describing information in depth and detail. Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. As a first step, the researcher requested three experts in qualitative research to check the suitability of the interview questions for the study. This led to the interview process which strictly followed the guide. The same semi-structured questions were asked of all participants, and the participants were given enough time to give their responses to each of the questions (Bryman, 2004). All the participants were told that there was no right or wrong answers, only their own truthful words. This meant the participants could talk freely increasing the likelihood of trustworthy answers. Hence, the validity and reliability of the interviews were achieved by applying the standard procedures to conduct the interviews.

An experienced research assistant was also engaged to independently code the data. This ensured that coding was done by an appropriately skilled person. This was followed by a process of counter checking the codes by the researcher to confirm the accuracy. The results showed minor differences between the first and second coding leading to the assumption that the coding for the interview were similar. As suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and consequently adopted in this study the techniques appropriate to test the extent of trustworthiness to which they have been met and implicated are: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability and 4) confirmability.

Credibility

The researcher's background of around fifteen years of personal experiences and industry knowledge of the subject area ensured familiarity on the concept of golf development, its terminology and culture. The pilot also helped to increase the researcher's confidence to conduct the final study. Some of the questions in the interview were structured and standardized which increased the reliability of the data as greater similarity of responses were captured from the interviews. More important, the interview questions were expert checked by a specialist in qualitative study for their suitability and to establish credibility. The specialist was an independent person, a researcher and knowledgeable on golf but not part of the research team. This provided the removal of ambiguities, inappropriate leading questions and highlighting any possible interview bias (Chenail, 2011). It was beneficial in assessing the appropriateness of the interview guide contents in relation to the aims of the study thus contributing to the trustworthiness of the semi-structured interview as a qualitative research method.

Also, the identification and selection process of the eight participants was also important. They are industry experts, members of the only professional body in Malaysia, PGAM and have the right level of experiences of the phenomena under study. The researcher's ability to talk in golf terminology without confusion contributed towards trustworthiness. Hence, the element of trust and cooperation between interviewer and interviewee is strong (Dooley, 2001), adding to the credibility of the study. Also, to ensure credibility in this study the transcripts were transcribed verbatim.

Transferability

Transferability is possible where the researcher provides sufficient detail of the context of the fieldwork where the current environment is similar and the findings can be applied to another setting (Shenton, 2004). In this study, an interview protocol was established and much data were collected through the semi-structured interviews where the questions were prepared in advance. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and the questions were open ended. Data was gathered from each participant not only via the interview but also by the researcher's observations and notes taken during the interview process.

According to Schwandt (1997), validity is how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them. Consistency was achieved throughout the interviews. Leading questions that could influence the responses of participants were avoided. At times, some questions were modified when unexpected themes occur which allowed new themes to emerge. After the interview, the researcher sent a copy of the interview content to each participant to assess whether the interpretations accurately represent his views. This helped to establish validity.

Dependability

Also called reliability which 'is the extent to which measurements are repeatable – when different persons perform the measurements, on different occasions, under different conditions, with supposedly alternative instruments which measure the same thing' (Drost, 2011, p. 106). As explained by Lincoln & Guba (1985), dependability is parallel to the conventional measure of reliability, in that it is concerned with the stability of data over time. The essence of reliability is consistency. According to Pierce (2008), reliability implies that the source of the data and the data per se should be dependable and genuine and therefore the reputation of the source of the data is vital. For this study, the main source of data was from the semi-structured interviews with reputable industry experts and professionals.

The interviewer is the main instrument of data collection and he needs to be skilled and experienced to be reliable and effective. As part of the skilling process prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher had to undergo mandatory training in qualitative research. This was a pre-requisite imposed on students who wished to pursue a post graduate program. Also, the participants' background and values had an important effect on the interview relationships. There was some informal collaboration between the researcher and the participants in the earlier interviews where they helped to produce new questions and informal prompts which were useful in the later interviews. This has helped to gather important information relevant to the study.

All the data were securely protected and the recorded interviews were stored on a digital recorder and were also copied to a password computer where the transcribed files were stored. This ensured that the data will not be tampered with.

Confirmability

After each interview the corrected transcript was provided to the participants via email to certify the accuracy of the content. Feedback was requested within fourteen days on any omissions or additions that should be included before analysis was done. No modification was received from the participants in relation to the information gathered. This not only confirmed the information gathered originated from the participants but also added credibility to the data generated.

Conclusion

A research method is simply a method for collecting data; however, the choice of research method must be aligned with the specific research question being investigated (Bryman, 2008). Good qualitative questions are important tools that can shape a study design and analysis. They are dynamic and multi-directional and tools for discovery, clarity and focus in the area of study. The idea of interviewing the MGA president was beneficial as it provided guidance to the initial line of questioning and design of the interview questions. Purposive sampling method of selecting the pilot and participants determined the quality of information gathered as relevant knowledge from an 'insider perspective' were obtained. To gain the participants' perceptions of talent identification and development in golf effectively, the researcher wanted to obtain and examine their thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences (Stoszowski 2011). The interview data gathered indicated that all the participants provided accurate reflections of their experiences, knowledge, opinions and perspectives in identifying and developing young talents in golf. The proposed sports policy will eventually equip policy makers and stakeholders with the right criteria and most effective processes required to identify and develop young talents into elite golfers who can be successful nationally and internationally.

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