

Dominant Elements in Research Methods among Communication Students in Two South East Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

Research writing and presentation are academic activities that require serious and adequate attention among scholars in Nigeria. Against this backdrop, this study set to ascertain the dominant research methods adopted by Mass Communication students in two Universities in South East Nigeria. The study adopted content analysis as a research method in analysing the manifest contents of B.Sc. project works completed and submitted to Mass Communication departments of the two universities. The study was anchored on individual differences theory. Findings reveal that survey research method and purposive sampling technique dominate the methodology and sampling procedures adopted by the students while frequency table and Taro Yamani's sample size determination formula dominate the data presentation technique and means of sample size selection respectively. The researchers conclude that there is lack of diversification in the application of research methods and other research elements as deduced from the students' submitted undergraduate projects. It is therefore recommended that the students should learn to use multiple methods and procedures in the execution of undergraduate research projects.

Keywords: Research, Methodology, Elements, Dynamism, Sampling, Undergraduate project, Nigerian universities.

Introduction

Based on its nature and ability to unravel mysteries around the world, research has been an integral part of human existence (Wrench, Maddox, Richmond and Croskey,

2008). For different reasons and quests to solve different problems, people engage in research activities with a view to exposing the unknown. The quest for ultimate reality (Asika, 2010) therefore gave birth to research (Nwodu 2017; Nwodu and Nwodu, 2011). The kind of research herein this study referred, is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d) cited in Wrench, Maddox, Richmond and Croskey (2008) as “studious enquiry or examination; especially: investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical applications of such new or revised theories or laws”.

The import of this is that research is a rigorous exercise that is planned, systematic and scientific in nature with a view to exposing new facts towards problem solving in human society (Wrench, Maddox, Richmond and Croskey, 2008; Okeke Olise and Eze, 2010; Nwodu 2017). It is a thorough exercise that can determine the success or failure of any campaign, programme or project (Agbanu, 2011).

Drawing from the above expert views, research is among the basic learning areas in universities and all degree awarding institutions and colleges around the world. This makes it an indispensable aspect of study in the academic sector. By implication, every student of every university or degree awarding institution is set under compulsion to embark on research at least once before graduation from the institution.

As a systematic activity (Nwabueze, 2011), research writing is directly linked to a specific means of engagement dependent upon the type of research (Nwodu and Nwodu, 2011). Based on this ground, there are different research methods, styles of data presentation and sample size determination formula for different types of research and data analysis (Nwabueze, 2011). This view supports an earlier position held by Ogbuoshi (2006) that choice of research methods are directed by the nature of the research to be engaged in.

However, research can be qualitative, quantitative or both (Neuman, 2003; 2014; Wrench, Maddox, Richmond and Croskey, 2008; Nwabueze, 2011; Nwodu, 2016; 2017). Unfortunately, different scholars have different views when it comes to the type of research method to adopt (Asika, 2010, p. 2). In communication and media studies, Wimmer and Dominick, (2003, p. 308) identified only two broad categories of research- the print media research and the electronic media research. This classification may not be adjudged to be perfect because it failed to encompass public relations and advertising research which are equally viable areas of interest in communication and media studies.

Drawing from the views expressed above, there have been various kinds of research methodologies in communication and other social science disciplines. These methods includes but not limited to participant observation, survey research method, the focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, phone interview, non-participant observation, content analysis, textual and visual analysis etc. These methods have

different advantages as well as shortcomings in research and therefore are best applied at different points in time, all dependent on the type of research. By way of triangulation for the purpose of encouraging precision, two or three of these methods can be integrated in a study (Agbanu, 2014; Owuamalam, 2014; Nwodu, 2017).

Moreover, there are several means of selecting sample size in both communication and other social science research (Nwodu, 2006; 2017). Various means of sampling techniques also abound in communication studies. It is pertinent therefore, to state that there are diverse research methods, techniques for data analysis and sample size determination formula. Drawing from the above position, it is imperative for students of mass communication to be equally diversified in their application of these methods and other research techniques. It is against this background that this study is set to examine the dominant research methodology, data presentation style, sampling size determination formula and techniques among mass communication students.

Statement of the Problem

Personal observation reveals that diversification in research methodological application is tilting towards limited methods. This poses the question: do the lecturers in their institutions restrict themselves to these methods and techniques of data analysis? From this observation, it seems like some of the research methods are hardly applied in students' project writing. Poor diversification of research methods and other research elements is a serious danger to the success of academic research engagement in the near future. To support this personal observation with empirical facts, a study of this nature, becomes important. Moreover, studies in communication and media researches had over the years neglected the students' use and application of research methods and various research elements that guide research writing and presentation. This study therefore provided empirical information to the uses and application of research methods and various other elements in media and communication research. In view of this, this paper posits that there is a need for dynamism in teaching and learning research methodology and several other controlling elements in research writing. Based on this view, this study examined the dominant research methodology and other elements in research projects works conceptualised and executed by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU) students for a period of three years spanning from 2015 through to 2017.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following research objectives

1. To ascertain the dominant research methodology used by UNN and COOU undergraduate students in writing their projects.
2. To ascertain the sampling technique mostly used by UNN and COOU

- undergraduate students in writing their projects.
3. To find out the dominant sample size determination formula that is rampant among UNN and COOU undergraduate students.
 4. To find out the dominant data presentation techniques common among UNN and COOU undergraduate students.

Research Questions

The researchers posed the following questions to serve as guides to achieving the above research objectives

1. What is the dominant research methodology used among UNN and COOU undergraduate students in writing their projects?
2. What is the sampling technique mostly used by UNN and COOU undergraduate students in writing their projects?
3. What is the dominant sample size determination formula rampant among UNN and COOU undergraduate students?
4. What is the dominant data presentation technique common among UNN and COOU undergraduate students?

Significance of the Study

This study recalls the need for diversification in teaching and learning of research among lecturers and students using the two select universities as the premise for the study. Concentrating on one or two specific research methods or elements in research writing, no doubt is limiting the academic development of the future generation. Producing a well grounded set of students that can be capable of sustaining the system in future forms the basic outcome of this research. Unfortunately, many lecturers and students alike may not have observed the influence of high concentration of research writing methods in some specific areas; this study exposes the impending danger of such act to academics.

Second, this study explored the academic need for diversification in application of different research writing methods and techniques of sample size selection and data presentation among Nigerian undergraduates. It also challenges the lecturers to remember that the students are brought to school to learn all the methods and techniques in research. With this study's recommendation in place, the problem of poor research performance among postgraduate students in Nigeria is addressed. This is because, postgraduate studies have encountered a strong setback in Nigeria following poor research performance among students, a lacuna that was created by both the lecturers who failed to expose the students to all the required research methods and techniques and the students who chose to remain academically dormant by strongly refusing to improve. Finally, this study provides the needed literature in this area of communication studies for future research.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study covers only undergraduate project works done in UNN and COOU. The period of the study spanned from 2015 to 2017. Any other project work written beyond these three years were not covered in the research neither did the study cover postgraduates research works of any of the universities. In respect of the fact that this study was based on two universities only, the findings emanating from it cannot be generalised on the entire Nigerian universities system. Its recommendations will also be specific to the areas covered by the study. Unfortunately, not all the number of research projects of the students of the institutions was accessible at the time of data collation for the study. Owing to the nature of both universities library, the projects did not correspond to the number of graduates from the universities within the years under study. This may be as a result of poor record keeping or non-compliance among students to submit their project works for documentation at the departmental library. Once again, there are so many universities in south eastern Nigeria, so these selected universities may not be perfectly adjudged right to represent the entire universities in zone. These pose a serious challenge with regard to the generalisability of the findings and thus serve as the major limitation of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Individual Differences Theory of mass communication. The theory as propounded by Melvin Defleur and Everette Denis in 1970 posits that different individuals behave in different ways on consumption of a given media message. The theory originated from expositions and laboratory experiments on behaviours of classical conditioning learning differences and attitude formation in the late 1950s and 1960s. The proponents of the theory argue that each of us has unique psychological traits that result in our reacting differently to media messages (Bitner, 1989, 376, in Udoakah & Olise, 2009).

Agbanu (2014) argues that, “the individual difference theory stipulates that individuals have unique qualities which make them react or behave differently when exposed to certain stimuli. In his words, no two human beings think or behave alike. Individual differences account for some inconsistencies in attitude-behaviour relationship while some people think and act the same way, others show inconsistency in their thought and action”. In a similar reaction to the position of individual differences theory, Nwabueze (2014) asserts that “audience members think, feel, perceive, behave, and respond to stimulus differently.

With these therefore, students' use of research methods and other research elements in the execution of their B.Sc. research project is dependent upon what they were given in the class room. No one can divorce the fact that what the students are given inside the classroom is a product of their lecturers' attitude and personal behaviour which is motivated by their individual differences. Individual differences will make a lecturer to choose to always feed his or her students with specific research

methods and data presentation year in, year out while others remains unattended. Equally, these students operate at different level of understanding which as well influences their choice of research elements and methodology of executing research works. Their level of differences in psychographic characteristic informs their intellectual operation, which invariably influence their attitude and opinion in selecting research methods and other elements which satisfy their predetermined objective usually controlled by their already set goals.

In relating this theory to the current study, the students' choice of research methods and other elements in research execution is highly determined by the individual person who selects, train them as lecturers and themselves who chooses the one he or she is more conversant with all in respect to his or her intellectual level of operation. Meanwhile, it is pertinent to recall at this juncture that one man's meat is another man's poison. The choice of research methods to use among the students is a factor of what the students are exposed to in the classroom environment. Not all individuals understand things in the same way and manner. It was in the power of the last paragraph that the relevance of this theory in this study was premised.

Review of Literature

Conceptualisation of research among students is a hard nut to crack. Many still view research as a mirage. We argue in this paper that research is never complete without a method and certain other elements through which it is systematically executed. This view lends credence to the position held in Kerlinger cited in Wimmer and Dominic, 1987, p.8) that research is a systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomenon.

The import of the position above is that students should understand research to mean more than opening the pages of newspapers (Agbanu, 2011) or finding meanings of words in the dictionary (Nwodu, 2006; 2017; Nwodu and Nwodu, 2011). As a controlled process, research follows a particular pattern for its actualisation. This pattern through which a research work is carried out is chiefly controlled by the method of its execution. The empirical nature of research equally suggests that research must be backed up by visible and concrete evidence to support the claims made in the findings as may be produced at the end of the work. This quality challenges the researchers and the lecturers to establish the idea that their work followed a given scientific order. Inculcating all the above features in a research work makes it stand the test of time and critics.

The relationship between the qualities of research as established above to this study is that without proper understanding of what research is, students may end up embarking on a journey to nowhere. Unfortunately, ignorance controls many a students' view on research writing and conducting. While embarking on a research work, it is pertinent for the researcher to probe into what he or she is trying to find.

This gives the desired focus that a researcher needed to have while on the journey to problem solving. It must be clear the problem a given research outcome is going to solve, otherwise the essence of the study is killed (Omachuonu, 2017). Through this way, research creates room for additional knowledge (Merriam, 2009; Fakunle cited in Obafemi, 2015, p.3).

In the face of the current situation in the academic industry, the fact is that research writing is gradually getting outdated as many a student finds it difficult to embark on it. The reason for this is multifaceted but this study is set to examine it from the available research elements that the students were exposed to in their university days.

Need For Direction in Research Writing

It is not enough to embark on a research venture. A lot of things have to be taken into consideration while going into research business. Poor research guidance, wrong choice of research methods, techniques of data analysis and so on contribute to low research quality rampant in our system. While citing Emunemu (2009), Nwakpa (2015) affirms that the quality of research being carried out by Nigerian academics has been adjudged to be of low standard, when compared to their counterparts in other parts of the world. In his reaction to the above situation, Ajayi (2009) has earlier stated the need for Nigerian lecturers and all that are in the academia to strive to develop the prerequisite skills that can help them embark and complete sound research works that can provide verifiable empirical answers to the problems of the society. Providing research outcomes that can provide interpretations to different social and natural phenomenon in the country will make the country's educational system take its pride of place in the international community.

Often times, researchers end up with the wrong and unacceptable research findings. The reason for this is not far-fetched. They may have used the wrong choice of research elements. *According to Amy (2007)*, good tools make for good work. Even if a craftsman came up with the most ingenious design in the world, he could not complete it without the help of the right instruments. So is the case with research. If due attention is not paid to methods, scholars run the risk of not accomplishing their great ideas.

For Nigerians to be conversant with the necessary research methods and techniques there is the need for their lecturers to extend their height of teaching and provide them with the different research methods and techniques. Diversification of their teaching skill will be the only way to combat over concentration of research works on some few research methods and techniques. Previous studies have explored the epistemological frictions among various methodological approaches (Erzberger and Prein, 1997; Weaver, 1998). Some kept tabs on methods used in academic publications (Cooper, Potter, and Dupagne, 1994; Kamhawi and Weaver, 2003; Lowry, 1979; Perlof, 1976). Some examined research methods instruction in

undergraduate programs (Bolding, 1996; Denham, 1997; 2003; Frey and Botan, 1998; Stacks and Hickson, 1991). These show the importance of research methodological approaches to the conceptualisation and execution of research. The fact that the students of this period are not exposed to different kinds of research methods and techniques of data interpretation calls for diversification.

The Concept of Research Method in Communication Studies

Several media scholars have over the years equipped their students with different media research methods based on their personal and academic disposition. This position brought about acceptance and rejection of certain research methods among media scholars. Among research methods available to a communication researcher are the survey research method, the content analysis research method, the ethnography, observation and mixed method which means the combination of two or more in a research work to enhance precision of research outcome (Owuamalam, 2014; Agbanu, 2014; Nwodu, 2017).

It is pertinent at this stage to state categorically that every individual lecturer has preference for a particular research method over the other and this one way or the other influence the content of what they give to the students and what the students know about research at different point in time. Several research methods exist as well as techniques for data interpretation and sample size determination formula. Among these research methods are survey, participant observation, content analysis, visual analysis, ethnographic method, focus group discussion, interview etc. All these methods apply to different research works based on its nature and objectives.

Undergraduate Research Writing and Presentation outside Nigeria: A Brief Exposure

Around the world, research has been an integral part of every academic discipline and a perfect sustaining factor to virtually all of them. It is against this fact that research writing and presentations were made the echelon of all disciplines and thus qualifying students for the awards of different degrees from different schools of thought in the world over. This part of the study was designed to expose the readers to the views held about research in countries other than Nigeria.

Unlike what obtains in Nigeria as a country, education in other countries of the world is well grounded in philosophy, practice and expectations. It is not news among Nigerian scholars that students in US and various other countries get a certain level of incentive that sustains them through their stay in the universities. In developed countries of the world like USA, Canada and United Kingdom, the students are well financially mobilised to study. This encourages commitment to educational goals and expectations. This may have also informed the reason for which Nigerians move abroad for their studies whenever the opportunity presents itself.

The release of research grants to students in the western world had served as

bait for the students to struggle to indulge in serious research and make good number of dollars for themselves and their universities of affiliation. This follows the position of Stack (2010) that research in the western world is sustained by grants which makes the researchers feel like being acknowledged in the society. In the Nigeria, a researcher is a time consumer who ends up not meeting up with his financial responsibilities. To a large extent, this had discouraged many scholars from taking up research as a profession.

In another development, the ratio of students to lecturers in some countries is better than what obtains in Nigeria. Considering the academic engagement, the lecturers see the situation here as being stressful. The level of technicalities observed in undergraduate studies is basically controlled by the target of the supervisor who dictates what is acceptable and what is not. This was captured in the **Burger and Louw** (2014) where they concluded that research writing in undergraduate is a reflection of the supervisor's training or expertise in a particular area.

In this vain, the researchers urged supervisors in South Africa to always live up to their supervisory responsibilities especially when their students are engaged in research activities as that tell more about the personalities than what they wear. Based on this, researchers around the world should be at home with the business of researching and developing a positive academic relationship between supervisor and supervisee. The import of all this is that research in Nigeria is neglected by the students, the government, the institutions, and the supervisors. This has to change if Nigeria must attain and appreciable level of development through higher education.

Method of Study

This study applied the content analysis research approach to gather data. The use of this method was justified by its ability to expose the researchers to the manifest contents of research works done within the period under study. The population of the study is all the total number of undergraduate research projects completed and submitted to the Department of Mass Communication of the select Universities within the period under study. Based on the information obtained from the departmental library there are 430 students in COOU and 352 students in UNN making a total of 782 students in all. However, it is pertinent to state that the choice of these two universities makes the study focused but limits its analysis to only the project works completed and submitted to the Departments. It does not expose the researchers to what obtains in other Universities not covered in the study. The implication of this is that the findings of this particular study could easily be generalised beyond this context.

Moreover, of the 782 projects works submitted to the two Universities, the researchers purposively selected 70 research works in each year for the three years under study and that makes a total of 420 research projects. The criteria for the selection of these project works were based on the proper assembling of the research

work and application of the elements used in the study. Research project works that are not properly organised with the reasons for choice of elements well stated were discarded. With respect to the level of compliance to format and technicalities in research, the best 70 research works found in each of the three years were selected for the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

All data collated in this study were presented in frequency tables and percentages and analysed. The frequency distribution tables are presented below to highlight certain salient outcomes of this investigation:

Table 1: The dominant research methodology used among the students of UNN and COOU

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Survey research method	218	51.9
Participant Observation	0	0
Focus group discussion	50	11.9
Content analysis	152	36.1
Total	420	100

Source: Researchers' content Analysis, 2018

From the figure above, it has been observed that the most dominant research method rampant among students is survey research method which controlled an overwhelming population of the studied project works, accounting for 51% of the sample under study. Participant observation came last. This means that the students are not exposed to this kind of research method or are not encouraged to undertake it.

Table 2: The sampling technique mostly used by UNN and COOU students

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Probability sampling technique	118	28%
Non-probability sampling technique	248	59%
Systematic sampling technique	29	7%
Cluster sampling technique	25	6%
Total	420	100

Source: Researchers' Content Analysis, 2018

The information above shows that of all the kinds of sample size selection techniques available for communication scholars, the dominant sample size selection techniques is the Non probability sampling technique which controls an overwhelming number of projects works examined in this study with 248 works accounting for 59 percent of the total population of the study followed by the Probability sampling technique with 118 projects works accounting for 28 percent of the total population. With this table, the cluster sampling and the systematic sampling techniques are being neglected among media scholars.

Table 3: Dominant sample size determination formula among UNN and COOU students

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
John and Cobzy	151	36
Taro Yamani	227	54
Topman's formula	42	10
Total	420	100

Source: Researchers' content Analysis, 2018

A look at the frequency table above demonstrated that of the 420 project works subjected to this textual analysis, 227 works accounting for 54 percent were conducted using the Taro Yamani sample size determination formula. This figure is very significant as only 42 works were conducted with Topman's formula. From here, the individual difference of the individual students' researchers comes in to play. It cannot be taken for granted that two individuals do not understand something the same way and in the same manner. This corroborates the views of the individual differences theory which states that individuals have unique qualities which make them react or behave differently when exposed to certain stimuli (Agbanu, 2014). In his words, no two human beings think or behave alike and in that same way, it is hard for two or more individuals to understand a particular concept at the same time and in the same way. On this same reason, no two lecturers teach the same thing the same way. Each individual teach the way he or she understands a concept which is mostly controlled by what he or she knew about the concept.

Table 4: The dominant data presentation technique common among UNN and COOU students

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Use of frequency tables and percentage	374	89
Use of pie charts	29	7
Use of Bar charts	17	4
Others	00	0
Total	420	100

Source: Researchers' content Analysis, 2018

From the table above, the researchers found that the students mostly report their research findings using frequency tables and percentages rather than pie charts and bar charts. The implication of this is that their knowledge of analysis and presentation is only limited to frequency tables more than any other statistical presentation format.

Discussion of Findings

A look at the dominant research method above shows that the most common method used in the project work content analysed was the survey research design. The finding shows how conversant the lecturers and the students are to the research method. The partial use of other research methods demonstrated the students' low level of diversification in their use of research methods.

Undoubtedly, while deciding the research method to be used in carrying out research works, there is the need for the researcher(s) to consider the nature of that research. This was captured more vividly in (Ogbuoshi, 2006) where he states that the nature of research work to be executed is the determining factor for the choice of the research method. In order to stick to the research scope, we did not go into details looking at the various methods used against their topics in order to examine level of synchronisation with the concepts and constructs under investigation. Moreover, it could be pertinent to state that the individual traits in the students and their lecturers alike. This accounts for the reason why two lecturers are not teaching the same ways neither were they teaching the same thing at the same time even if they were teaching the same course.

The second research question proved that the dominant sampling technique used by the students is the non probability sampling technique. This technique according to (Nwodu, 2017) has certain advantages and as well some disadvantages which can make it useful at time and complicated at another time. The interpretation here is that there is the need for the students to be exposed to the various advantages and disadvantages of these research sampling techniques for the sake of actualising the needed precision required in the exercise. If good tolls actually lead us to good destination, choice of research elements for the sake of academic business and empirical fact finding should be well guided (Amy, 2007).

It is therefore our submission that the lecturers should ensure effective application of every research element in order to expose their students to the dangers of arriving at the wrong answer after a tasking effort. What is the destination of academic research in the light of this noticeable concentration of research works on few research methods? This shows that efforts must be put in place to address the issue with serious alacrity.

On the third research question posed for the study, our empirical data revealed that “audience members think, feel, perceive, behave and respond to stimulus differently (Nwabueze, 2014). The proponents of the theory argue that each of us has

unique psychological traits that result in our reacting differently to media messages (Bitner, 1989, p.376 in Udoakah & Olise, 2009). This is not limited to only media messages; it also transcends the interpersonal and group communication which normally takes place in the classroom environment. Actually, their choice of research elements as found in this study cannot be divorced from their individual differences. The fact that some of the students used other means of selecting the sample size for their studies presupposes that some of the lecturers did their work to some extent. Agbanu (2014) argues that, “the individual difference theory stipulates that individuals have unique qualities which make them react or behave differently when exposed to certain stimuli.

On the fourth research question, our empirical analysis demonstrates that it is certain that not all kinds of data yield to the same kind of interpretation. While using a research method that call for qualitative analysis, it will be scholarly wrong to subject such work to quantitative analysis. Nwodu (2017) provides media scholars with different data interpretation techniques that can be used to analyse different kinds of data in different kind of research.

Empirical findings from the field study revealed that the students are more conversant with the use of tables and simple percentages in data presentation and analysis. The few individuals who used the other means of data presentation demonstrated that understanding of the terms and concept and this varied from person to person. This finding supports earlier media scholars' views on individual differences theory that people of different faces and individual traits approach same issues in different ways and that this is usually predetermined by their original personal attitudes and perception gained over time (Udoakah & Olise, 2009; Nwabueze, 2014; Agbanu, 2014; Nwodu, 2017). This erodes the principle and advantages that diversity in research bring.

Conclusion

From the data collected and analysed above, the researchers conclude that there is more to do in the teaching and learning of research writing and data presentation in the select Universities to accommodate diversification in the system. For this to be achieved, the student as well as the lecturers in the select Universities should be alive to their responsibilities in view of the fact that whatever that is worth doing is worth doing well. The researchers also summed that there is parochial choice and application of research methods, sample size determination formula, sampling technique and data presentation styles among UNN and COOU undergraduate students. It is our submission also that this kind of attitude in the institutions is not diversification friendly. All efforts must therefore be geared towards ensuring students are trained in the various aspects and methods of data gathering and presentation in the social sciences, arts, and the humanities.

Recommendations

Based on the field data obtained and analysed, the following recommendations are made to advance the course of research trajectories in the higher institutions of learning:

First, lecturers in the select institutions should try to diversify their teaching of research methods to enhance exposure to different methods of carrying out research among the students.

Second, lecturers and students should pay more attention to sampling techniques in research writing and presentation as that gives the work a better direction and understanding.

Third, we also propose that proper attention should be given to the sample size determination formula so that the students will be exposed to different means of determining their sample size from any kind of population both definite and indefinite. This is because not all populations yield itself to one sample size determination formula.

Fourth, different kinds of data presentation techniques such as the use of pie chart, histogram, bar-chart, etc should be inculcated in the students by their lecturers to encourage diversification in data presentation.

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