

# CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BACHELOR THESIS IN DENTISTRY, SATISFACTION AND MOTIVATIONS OF THE STUDENTS

## Características de las tesis de licenciatura en Odontología, satisfacción y motivaciones de los tesisistas

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the characteristics of undergraduate theses, satisfaction and reasons for choosing a topic of study.

**Materials and Methods:** Cross-sectional study that included two populations, theses and thesis students who were able to support their work from 2015 to 2021 in the Faculty of Dentistry of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (Lima, Peru). Documentary analysis was used at first to record bibliometric data. The survey was used in a second stage to collect information related to the reasons why the thesis students chose their topic and the degree of satisfaction.

**Results:** A total of 269 theses were examined. The theses corresponded to more women (n=142; 52.8%). All had a quantitative approach. The cross-sectional/descriptive design was the most frequent (n=207; 77%). Of the 114 respondents, the majority of them indicated that their thesis topic decision was influenced by a faculty member outside of their advisor (n= 26; 22.8%). A total of 49.1% of thesis students were in complete agreement about what they had learned about research at the end of their thesis.

**Conclusions:** The undergraduate theses evidenced to be developed mainly by women, most of the thesis students were satisfied with the elaboration and execution of their academic work; it was evidenced that the thesis topics are mainly influenced by a teacher different from the thesis advisor, this indicates that the advisors should be more conscious when guiding the student and influencing the thematic, methodological and writing decisions together with the advised.

**Keywords:** *Dental Students; Motivation; Academic Dissertations; Satisfaction.*

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Describir las características de las tesis de licenciatura, satisfacción y motivos para la elección de un tema de estudio.

**Materiales y Métodos:** Estudio transversal que incluyó a dos poblaciones, las tesis y a los tesisistas que lograron sustentar sus trabajos desde el año 2015 al 2021 en la Facultad de Odontología de la Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (Lima, Perú). Se utilizó el análisis documental en un primer momento para registrar datos bibliométricos. La encuesta se utilizó en un segundo momento para recabar información relacionada a los motivos por los cuales escogieron su tema los tesisistas y el grado de satisfacción.

**Resultados:** Se examinaron 269 tesis. La mayoría de ellas fueron realizadas por mujeres (n=142; 52,8%). Todas tuvieron un enfoque cuantitativo. El diseño transversal/descriptivo fue el más frecuente (n=207; 77%). De los 114 encuestados, la mayoría de ellos indicó que la decisión de su tema de tesis fue influida por un docente ajeno a su asesor (n= 26; 22,8%). El 49,1% de tesisistas estuvo totalmente de acuerdo respecto a lo aprendido sobre investigación al culminar su tesis.

**Conclusión:** Las tesis de licenciatura evidenciaron ser desarrolladas principalmente por mujeres, la mayoría estuvo satisfecho con la elaboración y ejecución de su trabajo académico; se evidenció que los temas de tesis son influenciados principalmente por un docente diferente al asesor de tesis, esto indica que los asesores deben ser más conscientes al momento de guiar al estudiante e influir en las decisiones temáticas, metodológicas y de redacción junto con el asesoramiento.

**Palabras Clave:** *Estudiantes de Odontología; Motivación; Tesis académicas; Satisfacción.*

## INTRODUCTION

Dentistry programs have implemented formative research strategies as a way to encourage the formation of Research skills in students. One of the strategies is the elaboration of a degree thesis in which the student must develop a research project and support his findings.<sup>1</sup> In the Peruvian context, since 2014, the preparation of a thesis in the university system is mandatory to obtain the professional title of Dental Surgeon. The purpose of the thesis is to form Research skills in students and that these serve them for professional performance through critical thinking, information search, evidence-based practice and data analysis.

Some Peruvian national studies indicate that the preparation of a thesis isn't easy and it is mentioned that few students managed to complete it satisfactorily; the presence of personal, academic and institutional limitations that hinder its elaboration is evident.<sup>2,3</sup> While some international studies mention that successfully completing a bachelor's thesis depends on several factors, including the choice of a topic that motivates the student, choice of a suitable supervisor, having presented previous research experiences, presenting independence with the study and self-motivation.<sup>4,5</sup>

At the same time, writing a thesis requires the development of new skills associated with understanding a large volume of information, critical analysis, and developing an academic writing style. This means that many students need adequate guidance; mainly when selecting a methodological approach or a study

topic that is viable and that allows the student to achieve the necessary learning regarding their research training.<sup>5</sup> Included as key factors: choosing a subject that satisfies the thesis student and having a good relationship between student and supervisor, as it has been seen that this relationship is key to successfully completing the degree thesis.<sup>6</sup>

Student personal satisfaction has been suggested as an indicator of the quality of supervision, due to the highly personalized nature of the advising process. Student satisfaction may include satisfaction with the student's own role, satisfaction with his own rate of progress, satisfaction with her supervisor, etc. In particular, dissatisfied students are less likely to finish their thesis.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it is important to assess how satisfied the students are either with the process of writing and preparing their theses or with the supervision of their work.

The bachelor's thesis is part of the research culture of an institution, so it is expected that its promotion will make it possible to train more critical students with better skills when they decide to start a postgraduate studies. Basic research competence and a passion for research begin to develop at the undergraduate level.<sup>8</sup> Undergraduate education can offer students research experiences and increase their engagement in research after graduation.<sup>9</sup>

However, not all students are interested in research and very few give it relevance, show real interest and find its usefulness in clinical practice.<sup>10</sup> Some studies indicate that there are difficulties in motivating oneself in research,

finding meaning in the thesis and choosing a motivating topic; this due to investigative inexperience or ignorance of the processes.<sup>11</sup>

In the Peruvian dental context, the bachelor's thesis represents the last academic work of the undergraduate degree to obtain a professional title; before this work, students combine practical, preclinical, clinical learning and theories related to research, methods, statistics, epidemiology, literature search, among others. All these activities serve the student so that they can identify a topic that motivates them and allows them to carry out research together with an advisor, which depending on the university can be imposed or the thesis student has the option of choosing it. The influence of the elaboration of a university thesis in the field of dentistry has not been sufficiently studied, unlike antecedents that exist in Nursing, Medicine, Business and Education.

There is also the gap as to whether or not this academic work allows for transfer to evidence-based practice. In this sense, the present study is justified because it is important to start studying the degree thesis that the students have been producing and the degree of satisfaction that the thesis students have with the chosen topic and with the completed process. This information supports the decisions of the authorities and modifies policies/regulations that favor the thesis student. In this way, the present study had the objective of characterizing, based on bibliometric indicators, the degree theses that the students of the Faculty of Dentistry supported, as well as describing the reasons why they chose their thesis topic and how satisfied they are with their work.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive/cross-sectional study was de-signed whose populations were: initially, the undergraduate theses supported in the Faculty of Dentistry of the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos from 2015 to July 2021 and that were found in the Cybertesis repository of the university <https://cybertesis.unmsm.edu.pe/handle/20.500.12672/13>, total of 269 theses were identified; and in a second moment, the thesis authors of the works identified in the first population.

The first part included a documentary analysis of the theses that indicated belonging to an undergraduate student, excluding theses that did not present their full access. A researcher was in charge of reviewing the repository. A data collection sheet was prepared where the information was collected. The file was reviewed by three expert teachers in bibliometrics and was submitted to a pilot test that involved 15 theses; in this test, corrections were made to the categories of analysis and the presentation of the collection sheet.

The collection sheet form presented the following categories: name of the thesis student, sex (female/male), year of support, focus of the thesis (quantitative, qualitative and mixed), design of the thesis (clinical trial, cohort, experimental (*in vitro*/animals), cases and control, cross-sectional/descriptive, quasi-experimental, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, action research, other design), location of execution (faculty (clinics), faculty (laboratories), hospitals, schools, community), unit of study (adults, adolescents, children, adolescents

and children, the elderly, animals, bio-materials) and subject matter.

Data collection was involved in three stages:

**1. Initial reading:** the researcher identified the titles of the thesis, its accessibility and possible exclusion criteria; at this stage, the presence of the thesis student's name, the date of support and the summary of the work were verified.

**2. In-depth reading:** which involved the reading of summary, methods, and results of each thesis to identify the methodological design, the approach, the analysis unit, and the disciplinary theme.

**3. Filling, coding and systematization:** a data-base was created in Excel with the categories of the collection sheet, in which the findings in each thesis were recorded.

The second part included contact with the students. From the names of each thesis, information was sought to contact them through cell phone numbers, social networks and email. In this second part, the survey technique was used through three questions:

1. *What were the reasons that allowed you to choose your thesis topic?*

2. *Are you satisfied with what you have learned while preparing your thesis?* and

3. *Would you recommend doing a thesis to acquire investigative skills?* A total of 114 graduates responded to the survey. The survey questions were adapted from the Fernández-Cano *et al.*,<sup>12</sup> study and validated through expert judgment who considered translation and linguistic adaptation.

The questionnaire was sent online along with a cover letter and request to participate in the study. The graduates were contacted through their digital social networks (mainly Facebook) and some through their institutional emails, which remain active after graduation. The survey was designed to take no more than five minutes to complete.

Data was collected by a researcher and tabulated in the MS Excel 2003 program (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, USA) and analyzed with the IBM SPSS 21 statistical package. Frequency tables and distribution graphs were used for the analysis of each qualitative variable. The study did not require approval by an Ethics Committee since it used publicly available supported and published theses as study material. The invitation to graduates included information about the study and a paragraph where the respondent voluntarily agreed to participate and gave their consent by responding to the survey. We also emphasize that the data collected was anonymous. Only the authors had access to the questionnaire data, which was stored in encrypted files.

## RESULTS

A total of 269 theses were described. The year 2017 had the highest frequency of theses (n=67; 24.9%). The theses were carried out mostly by women (n=142; 52.8%). All had a quantitative approach. The cross-sectional/descriptive design was the most frequent (n=207; 77.0%). The majority of theses were executed in the environments, classrooms and laboratories of the faculty (n= 103; 38.3%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the theses carried out during the period 2015-2021.

Characteristics		Frequency (%)
Year of support	2015	52 (19.3)
	2016	42 (15.2)
	2017	42 (15.2)
	2018	51 (19)
	2019	43 (16)
	2020	4 (1.5)
	2021	11 (4.1)
Sex	Female	142 (52.8)
	Male	127 (47.2)
<b>Total</b>		<b>269 (100)</b>
Approach	Quantitative	269 (100)
	Qualitative	0 (0.0)
	Mixed	0 (0.0)
Thesis design	Transversal/Descriptive	207 (77)
	Experimental ( <i>in vitro</i> /animals)	56 (20.8)
	Quasi-experimental	5 (1.9)
	Clinical trial	1 (0.4)
	Cohort	0 (0.0)
	Cases and controls	0 (0.0)
Execution location	Faculty (Laboratories)	103 (38.4)
	Hospitals	70 (26)
	Faculty (Clinics)	50 (18.6)
	Colleges	23 (8.6)
	Private clinic/institution	17 (6.3)
	Community	6 (2.2)
Analysis unit	Adults	155 (57.6)
	Kids	41 (15.2)
	Biomaterials	41 (15.2)
	Teenagers	11 (4.1)
	Adolescents and children	11 (4.1)
	Microorganisms	11 (4.1)
	Animals	5 (1.9)
	Seniors	0 (0.0)

**Table 2.** Main reasons that influenced the choice of thesis subject.

Criteria that helped you choose your bachelor thesis subject	n (%)
A teacher other than my advisor influenced my choice of subject.	26 (22.8)
My advisor influenced my choice of subject.	20 (17.5)
A course specifically inspired interest in my subject.	18 (15.8)
The seminars/exhibitions of an undergraduate course influenced the choice of my subject.	14 (12.3)
An external seminar/exhibition/congress to the courses inspired interest in my subject	14 (12.3)
A news/article/reading influenced the decision of my thesis subject	10 (8.8)
A contest/clinical table/poster inspired my thesis subject	9 (7.9)
I did an internship/exchange/or scholarship that allowed me to choose my subject	3 (2.6)

**Table 3.** Responses related to the satisfaction and recommendation of the degree thesis.

Questions	Totally agree	Partially agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partially disagree	Strongly disagree
I am satisfied with what I have learned about research by completing my bachelor's thesis	56 (49.1)	25 (21.9)	15 (13.2)	10 (8.8)	8 (7)
I would recommend doing and completing the bachelor's thesis to acquire research competence	46 (40.4)	36 (31.6)	14 (12.3)	8 (7)	10 (8.8)

19% of theses were related to the subject of orthodontics and maxillary orthopedics (n=51), 48 (17.8%) to oral rehabilitation, 33 (12.3%) to dental education and 28 (10.4%) to periodontics.

A total of 114 students were surveyed, obtaining a response rate of 42.4%. Most indicated that the decision of their thesis topic was influenced by a professor other than their advisor (n= 26; 22.8%) (Table 2). Almost half (49.1%) of the students were in complete agreement regarding what they had learned about research at the end of their thesis; while 40.4% fully agreed in recommending conducting a thesis in order to acquire research skills (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

The bachelor thesis (end-of-degree project) represents the last academic work carried out by a student in order to obtain an academic degree or professional title in the university stage. Its completion depends on personal, institutional, academic and supervisory factors.<sup>2</sup> The thesis is perceived by

the students as a complex process, it is often challenging and can contribute to the appearance of anxiety and frustration in the student; it can even cause the degree to be extended or it is decided to withdraw from the study program.<sup>13</sup>

Characterizing the theses from the bibliometric point of view allows a diagnosis to be made of what is being researched in a Institution, as well as identifying thesis students who can capture their experiences through surveys or interviews. The present study focused on describing the characteristics of the theses supported in the period 2015-2021 of a dental school and surveying the thesis students about their satisfaction with the thesis and the reasons why they decided their study topic.

The number of theses found varied over the years, being inconstant. During the period 2020-2021 (context of the Covid-19 pandemic), the lowest number of supported theses was evidenced. This may indicate that the pandemic and the state of emergency affected the thesis processes or that few students were able to sustain themselves during this



period. Regarding the methodological design of the theses, it was evidenced that most of them had a cross-sectional/descriptive design with a quantitative approach. No theses with a qualitative approach were identified, unlike in the study by Fernández-Cano *et al.*,<sup>12</sup> in which they predominated.

This finding is striking because in Dentistry it is necessary to investigate the experiences and perceptions of patients, relatives, dentists, teachers and students; this is achieved with qualitative designs that allow involvement with the study unit.<sup>14</sup> One possible reason may be the fact that students have studied quantitative methods for almost the entire degree, because these methods have clear objectives defined a priori and because collecting quantifiable data is relatively simple compared to collecting qualitative data in the field of Dentistry.<sup>15</sup>

Another factor could be the training of teachers who, for the most part, could have completed master's or doctoral theses with the quantitative approach. It should be noted that the training and experience of teachers influences how they teach<sup>16</sup> and, therefore, they could affect students' choice of methods. In addition, qualitative methods are considered to be more complex because students have not received qualitative training during undergraduate, and the objectives are perceived to be less well defined, finding that the design of qualitative data collection tools is complicated and time consuming.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the theses were carried out in the academic environment and in adult patients. The predominance of proposals based on

the facilities of the faculty (laboratories and classrooms) can probably be explained by the greater number of hours of practice that students carry out in them, as opposed to activities in hospitals, clinics, schools or the community. Although a large number of cross-sectional/descriptive and experimental (*in vitro/animal*) studies were found, few clinical trials and no cohort and case-control studies were found. Although clinical trials, systematic reviews and intervention studies are important and necessary,<sup>18</sup> qualitative designs that allow deepening the experiences of patients as well as justifying decisions according to theoretical models should not be left aside.

However, one must keep in mind that the choice of methods should be determined by the objective of the study and not by the predilections or training of the investigator. This suggests that there is a predilection for certain designs and some research priorities are being left aside, such as the study and understanding of symptoms that allow the development of prevention strategies, health promotion and disease prevention, improving self-care strategies for the prevention of periodontal disease and dental caries, technological innovations in Dentistry and dental education. This suggests the need to contemplate changes in the requirement of thesis topics so that students can design and carry out research proposals in accordance with these priorities.

The participants chose their thesis topic mainly because of the influence of professors and advisors. The work of the thesis supervisor (advisor) is fundamental, since he

will be the person who will guide and serve as a model for the thesis student to complete his research work. Several studies agree that the relationship with the supervisor is a key process to learn and complete the thesis, there is also evidence about how the attitude and performance of an advisor can facilitate or become a problem for the thesis student.<sup>13, 19</sup> This is important because some studies indicate that the relationship with the thesis supervisor is key in the thesis process,<sup>20</sup> on the other hand, the communication and support of the supervisors are correlated with the academic performance of the students, in addition to improving the satisfaction of the thesis student.<sup>21</sup>

Other studies such as the one by Fernández-Cano *et al.*,<sup>12</sup> indicate that the choice of topic is based mainly on the interests of the student; Lundgren *et al.*,<sup>22</sup> report that, due to the time and effort that a thesis requires, students prefer topics with which they have a prior connection. Orbegozo<sup>23</sup> shows that when students can choose their research topic autonomously, internal motivation and intrinsic interest in academic activities are increased. Other authors highlight that internal motivation is an effective way to achieve good performance.<sup>24</sup> In fact, students in higher years and postgraduates indicate that a greater intrinsic motivation achieves a better perception of learning.<sup>25</sup> Therefore; it is probable that both the motivation of the topic and the initial support of the advisor when choosing a topic can favor interest in the thesis and what can be learned from it.

In the choice of the thesis topic, the interests

of the student must prevail and not the impositions of the advisor or the system; as this diminishes the leadership abilities of the student.<sup>26</sup> This could be influenced by the research lines of a study program that often imposes thesis topics. Caution should be exercised with this model as it could limit the investigative tradition or culture that one tries to establish in the program. You must choose to give the student freedom to choose the topic that motivates him the most and allows him to acquire basic research competence.

In the present study, the majority of thesis students agreed with the learning obtained at the end of their theses. The findings are similar to the study in which satisfaction with the acquisition of research skills was reported. Although there is satisfaction after completing the thesis, the limitations that students may have during the entire research process and that can demotivate the thesis student, cause the student not to finish the thesis, abandon it or constantly change the subject, should not be neglected. These limitations must be considered by the study program in order to avoid them or prevent them from altering the student's learning process. To achieve this, it is recommended that the advisor and the program commit to the student guide, reorienting the topics towards the main priorities of the community and clinical practice, implementing research-related learning strategies from early stages such as reading clubs, research seedbeds, posters, clinical tables, etc.

Although the present study characterized the theses as well as the motivations and satisfaction of the thesis student, it should be



noted that it had as limitations the use of an “ad hoc” survey that requires a more exhaustive validation process and that includes other elements such as attitudes towards research. The low survey response rate could raise questions about the representativeness of the data; however, the difficulty in accessing thesis students in person meant that this rate could be higher. It is advisable to replicate this study in other faculties other than Health Sciences as well as in other universities to obtain comparative data.

An exhaustive comparison with other studies carried out in Dentistry could not be made due to the lack of precedents in this field. Even so, the present research offers an overview of the main characteristics of undergraduate theses that can provide a baseline for future research.

## CONCLUSION

The undergraduate theses were carried on mostly by women, most of the theses' authors were satisfied with the preparation

and execution of their academic work; it was evidenced that the thesis topics are mainly influenced by a teacher other than the thesis advisor, this indicates that advisors should be more aware when guiding the student and influence thematic, methodological, and writing decisions together with the advisor. It also indicates that students show little autonomy when choosing their topics and, consequently, said choice is not based on their motivation but rather responds to the suggestions of third parties, primarily a professor who is not their advisor.

There was a preference for the quantitative approach and, within this, non-experimental studies, leaving aside qualitative studies, which have been gaining recognition in the dental community and are useful for feeding educational and preventive programs. More than half of the students were satisfied with what they have learned about research by completing their bachelor's thesis and would recommend it to acquire research skills.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

**Castro-Rodríguez Y:** Conceptualizó la idea del estudio, realizó la curación de datos, realizó el análisis formal, realizó la investigación, adquirió los fondos, desarrolló la metodología, administró el proyecto, obtuvo los recursos, visualizó el trabajo, redactó, revisó y editó el trabajo.

**Huamán-Aguilar L:** Conceptualizó la idea del estudio, realizó la curación de datos, realizó el análisis formal, realizó la investigación, adquirió los fondos, desarrolló la metodología, administró el proyecto, obtuvo los recursos, visualizó el trabajo, redactó, revisó y editó el trabajo.


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