

Ten markers of quality in designing and publishing qualitative tourism research

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The use of qualitative research methodologies in tourism is growing; however there are concerns over the quality and rigour of some studies and the way they have been written up and justified to audiences. This research note presents ten common problems with qualitative research that the authors have encountered while reviewing journal articles and examining theses, with the aim of stimulating discussion as to what constitutes good qualitative research and how best to present qualitative findings in a tourism context. Issues covered include the consideration of philosophical underpinnings, detail about the methodological approach, reflexivity, sampling, the use of thick description, the importance of creating a narrative and demonstrating the trustworthiness of the study.

Keywords: *methodological approach, paradigm, trustworthiness, sampling, thick description*

INTRODUCTION

While the volume of qualitative research within tourism has been growing over the past decade, there are question marks over some of its quality. The aim of this research note is to identify a series of common problems with this type of research which relate either to the way that the research has been designed and carried out or the way that the study has been explained, justified and presented to readers. They are not meant to be exhaustive, but are merely those that we have encountered on a regular basis as reviewers of journal articles and examiners of theses within tourism that are based on qualitative research. It is hoped that this research note will be a starting point for discussion.

All of the points raised, we feel, are germane to published qualitative research across the board; but we have oriented them towards tourism research, mainly through citation of published studies in the tourism literature, to illustrate what we regard as some examples of good practice in the field. These references are not exhaustive, and we acknowledge there is a solid body of methodologically sound work across tourism studies that has not been cited here. In addition, we acknowledge there is a difference between writing a thesis and writing a journal article in terms of the depth of methodological analysis that can be covered, although we argue that, even within the constraints of writing a journal article, a detailed discussion of methodology is imperative.

1 CONSIDERATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Some researchers present a clear rationale for why they have undertaken qualitative research for their particular study but fail to engage with or provide details of its

philosophical underpinnings. In particular, the paradigm – or worldview – of research is often not mentioned. While there are tight word limits imposed for most journal articles, we feel that it is essential for researcher(s) to at least provide a brief outline of their research paradigm for the reader. Paradigms have been likened by Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 26) to a ‘net’, in that they contain ‘the researcher’s epistemological, ontological and methodological premises’. We like to use another metaphor – that of the foundations of a house. Without a solid structure to build on, what is created may lack substance and consistency. The selection of a paradigm within which research is conducted has important implications for the research design and the actions taken by the researcher, including the way that findings are presented and interpreted (Creswell/Poth 2018; Jennings 2007).

For example, those conducting research based on a social constructivist or interpretivist paradigm are generally trying to stand in the shoes of those who they study, and are open to a multiplicity of views rather than looking for a single truth or reality (Guba/Lincoln 1994). Examples of studies that have provided a statement of the constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm used in the research are Matteucci and Filep (2017) and Tucker (2020). A pragmatist paradigm, on the other hand, is concerned with achieving a practical outcome, and this more flexible approach can incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data. See, for example, the mixed-methods study by Magrizos et al. (2021) or the work of Vongvisitsin and Wong (2021: 3), where pragmatism ‘guided [their] study towards empirical inquiries to solve problems in different circumstances of actions’. The researcher’s views about the nature of truth under the pragmatist paradigm are therefore fluid, depending on what they are trying to achieve from the research (Creswell/Poth 2018; Jennings 2007). Failing to understand these different underpinnings can lead to contradictions in what is being presented. Thus, some researchers acknowledge that employing qualitative research allows them to explore multiple perspectives, but then use strongly positivist language, such as explaining that they are aiming to ‘measure’ or ‘demonstrate’ something. They appear to be looking for a single answer to a problem, which suggests a worldview that is inconsistent with a qualitative approach. Others praise qualitative research approaches for the ability to explore rich nuances of language, yet subsequently stray into counting and documenting the number of times something is said by participants, which again reflects a more positivist outlook on research. Being clear about the paradigm up front and making sure that the research has been carried out and presented in accordance with that paradigm helps avoid these inconsistencies.

2 DETAIL AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Another common concern with published qualitative research is that it appears to have been carried out in the absence of a methodological approach. Creswell and Poth (2018: 65) argue that these studies are less ‘sophisticated’ than those which use a clear methodological approach, as the latter allows the researcher a way of ‘organizing ideas that can be grounded in the scholarly literature of qualitative research’. As with a research paradigm, a methodological approach is based on particular philosophical underpinnings, which guide each step of the research design, including the writing-up phase. The five most popular approaches, as identified by Creswell and Poth, are narrative analysis, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology and case study research, and each has its own research traditions. Adopting a methodological approach requires the researcher to understand its philosophical and disciplinary

roots (Jennings 2001). Some examples of well-articulated methodological approaches in the tourism literature are: Tomassini et al. (2019), illustrating the use of narrative analysis in their study of small tourism businesses; Matteucci and Filep (2017) in their application of grounded theory to research on tourist experiences of flamenco dancing in Spain; and Gao and Wu (2017), who present a case study of rural tourism in Yuanjia Village in China.

The selection of an appropriate methodological approach will depend on the type of research problem being considered. If the purpose of the research is to study another culture, then ethnography might be appropriate. Thus, Tucker (2020) employed ethnographic techniques during fieldwork that stretched over 25 years to study women who were working in or running tourism businesses in Göreme, Turkey. Conversely, if there is a focus on the lived experience of a group of people, where each shares the experience of the other, then a phenomenological approach makes sense, illustrated by Yoo et al.'s (2016) study of the travel experiences of individuals accompanying their partners to a conference. The paradigm within which the researcher locates themselves is also relevant when considering the right methodological approach to adopt. For example, a grounded theory study may suit those who situate themselves within a post-positivist paradigm as it may allow for a very systematic and structured approach to their qualitative research, particularly when it comes to the processes for data analysis (see Strauss/Corbin 1998). A study that is based on a clear paradigm and methodological approach has the right structural underpinnings, and many of the decisions that need to be taken by the researcher in the design of their study become obvious as a result.

3 EVIDENCE OF REFLEXIVITY

A good qualitative study acknowledges the position of the researcher within their research, yet few researchers typically discuss reflexivity when writing up the findings of a study. Reflexivity is the 'process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher ... coming to know the self within the processes of research itself' (Guba/Lincoln 2000: 183). This includes placing on the record the researcher's background with respect to the study, their values, pre-knowledge and any reason that might have inclined the researcher to pre-judge what they might find and for which they should account. Tracy (2010: 842) argues that reflexivity should be a feature of all stages of the research process. For example, she observes that 'self-reflexive researchers examine their impact on the scene [when gathering data] and note others' reactions to them', as well as when they write up findings: 'Self-reflexivity encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings.' Tracy refers to this as an example of sincerity in a researcher and, in turn, an element of the trustworthiness of a study. Recent articles in a tourism context that clearly highlight the reflexivity of their authors include Pung et al. (2020), Ma et al. (2020) and Hollas et al. (2021).

4 DISCUSS METHODOLOGY IN A LOGICAL ORDER

In writing up how the research was designed and undertaken, it is important to present this in a logical order, which will be roughly chronological. This is an orderly way to structure a comprehensive narrative about the methodology employed in a study, and is in line with the expectations of the reviewers and readers. The point behind such a

layout is to better allow another researcher to duplicate, critique and understand how the research was conducted. To not follow an obvious chronological order is likely to be highly confusing. It is akin to reading a recipe for baking a cake where the process of icing and decorating the cake is discussed before the method of creating the cake mixture. Even though this sounds like simple common sense, it is disappointing to see the high number of research studies in which the key elements of the research process are structured in an unordered – almost random or ‘scattergun’ – manner. This affects the transparency of the research (Tracy 2010) if the process of conducting the research is unclear.

Ideally, the description of research methodology should follow roughly five chronological stages. An example of the use of this structure is McWha et al. (2018). The first concerns early design issues, such as the research paradigm and approach, which the researcher would have considered at the beginning of the study. From this a discussion of design should flow, including the rationale for choosing interviews, focus groups, mixed methods or other methods of data collection. Having decided on the appropriate methods, the discussion should move on to how the research was set up and then conducted. Again, it is necessary to provide a chronological narrative of the various steps that were taken.

Accordingly, a second section should entail descriptions of the criteria for the identification of research participants, followed by details of how they were approached and whether or not any declined to participate. Following this, the criteria for the number of participants or sources of data should be discussed. Having detailed recruitment, the third section should discuss and justify the process of data collection. The fourth section should be an explanation of recording and managing data, including any transcription of audio forms of data, followed by details of member reflections, any revisions required and the completion of a final transcript. Data analysis needs to be considered as the fifth step in the process. Here, details of the method of analysis and any software used should be provided. While there might be a temptation to cover analysis of data earlier as it is such an important and complex stage, nonetheless, to avoid confusion, it is best to keep it in its proper place in sequence. The methodology section should also discuss the trustworthiness of the study, either at the conclusion of the section or throughout as appropriate – for example when discussing certain aspects of the research design that are argued to demonstrate trustworthiness. Some of these stages of research are discussed in more detail below.

5 CLEAR EXPLANATION ABOUT SAMPLING STRATEGIES

How participants were selected (or ‘sampled’) for a qualitative study always needs to be explained clearly. Unfortunately this is sometimes glossed over, leaving reviewers and readers confused and puzzled as to why particular participants were approached to take part in a study. The ideal is to engage in purposive sampling, where participants are selected for a logical reason – typically because they have a strong connection to the phenomenon or case being studied (Creswell/Poth 2018). Two examples illustrate this. First, a study of tourist experiences in a particular national park should aim to select participants who have actually visited that national park (for example Alazaizeh et al. 2019). Second, a study of how disabilities affect tourist motivations and expectations should target participants who either have the lived experience of a disability or health or social service professionals with experience of working with people with disabilities (for example Yau et al. 2004 and Small et al. 2012).

In such an instance it may even be that tourism operators with relevant experience of working with tourists with disabilities are included in the sample. In all these cases the researchers needed to clearly explain why they chose the participants in order to address the aims of the study.

Some studies may aim to select from large populations with general characteristics, such as tourists or event attendees, or select from broad demographic classes. On the other hand, the nature of the research might call for participants to be selected from tightly focused groups. It may be that only a small number of people have had these experiences, for example mountaineers (Pomfret 2012) or professional travel writers (McWha et al. 2018). It may be that the research has a supply-side focus and the purposive sampling needs to be from managers or owners of tourism businesses. These are characterised as elite participants and are ‘people who are especially knowledgeable ... commonly in positions of authority or power by virtue of their experience and understanding’ (Gillham 2007: 55). By their very nature only small numbers of these participants are available and, accordingly, a study might only gather data from a handful. Counterbalancing their small numbers, these elite participants are often highly knowledgeable and articulate, thereby providing detailed and profound insights. All of this needs to be carefully explained, mindful that some reviewers and readers may be more inclined towards quantitative studies, which generally aim for large samples.

Purposive sampling precludes two common trends. The first is that ‘rules of thumb’ should not be used to justify sample sizes in qualitative studies. While Dworkin (2012: 1319) notes in relation to qualitative research ‘An extremely large number of articles, book chapters, and books recommend guidance and suggest anywhere from 5 to 50 participants as adequate’, she also goes on to say: ‘All of these pieces of work engage in nuanced debates when responding to the question of “how many” and frequently respond with a vague (and, actually, reasonable) “it depends”.’ It is therefore not enough to state that 20 people were interviewed ‘in line with’ a previous study. That previous study might have had very different aims and research questions, might utilise a different methodological approach or target a completely different type of participant. A rationale for the numbers selected is necessary – ideally showing that the number of participants was sufficient to address the research questions of the relevant study. For example, Soulard et al. (2019) provide a rationale for the low response rate for their study of transformative tourism providers and explain that data saturation was reached. The second is that convenience sampling is to be avoided. This is particularly the case where students are used as a proxy for tourists in a study. This is only acceptable if the student experience is integral to the study. An example of this would be a study of the tourist experiences of students during their summer holidays. Even using students as a proxy for young people is fraught with difficulties. A study of young backpackers should be based on interviews with young backpackers, not students who just happen to also be young.

6 DETAILED DISCUSSION AND JUSTIFICATION OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The methodology section of a thesis or journal article needs to provide sufficient information so that a study could be replicated by another researcher and to justify what has been done. There is therefore a need for detail about the sources and methods of data collection (for example interviews, focus groups); the ways these data were recorded (for example audio, video, written notes) and stored (particularly

privacy and security considerations with respect to data); and how these data were analysed. A particular method of collecting data might be mentioned, without stating its purpose for the study. For example, researchers may talk at length about doing interviews, but never clarify why interviews were a necessary source of data for the study. They might not refer to where they took place and why, how they were conducted and any issues that were encountered, such as noise or other distractions. The techniques for data analysis are often not explained in any depth, other than to mention that a thematic analysis or content analysis took place. In contrast, studies by Wyatt et al. (2021) and Price and Kerr (2018) have outlined and justified the methodology employed in their qualitative studies so that the research design is clarified for readers.

It is also important to link the sources of data, the methods of data collection and the process of data analysis back to the choice of paradigm and methodological approach so that they are consistent with each other (for example Frost et al. 2020). This is one of the reasons why it is so important to document the paradigm and methodological approach up front in a methodology section, so that the reader can evaluate whether what has been done is in line with these underpinnings. Thus, in an ethnographic study, one would expect to find that the researcher has been heavily immersed in the culture that they are studying, often by fieldwork or time *in situ*, such as occurs in Tucker (2020). A case study generally involves multiple sources of data (for example Gao/Wu 2017), while a phenomenographic study is often based purely on interview data to explore the lived experience of a particular group of individuals (Creswell/Poth 2018; Szarycz 2009), as illustrated in the study by Laing and Mair (2015).

7 PROJECTING THE VOICE OF THE INTERVIEWEES

A major strength of qualitative research is that it allows the ‘voice’ of those who were interviewed to come through. Ideally this occurs through quotations, which allow the reader to imagine that they are listening directly to the people who had those experiences or opinions. These quotations might come from interviews, but could also be obtained from other sources such as diaries, letters or social media posts. Good practice aims for a mixture of short and long quotes so that it doesn’t look like only the longest and most detailed answers have been selected, leading to a skewed narrative. It also recognises the importance of thick description through long quotes of about a paragraph in length. These are often highly powerful as the person recounts their story in their own words. Such quotes may gain impact through being amusing, emotional or just simply well put – examples of the benefits of thick description.

A number of practices need to be avoided in presenting interview data. Generally, quotes should not be presented in tables, as this strips them of valuable context. The counting of responses is also to be avoided. Qualitative research searches for depth and nuanced perspectives. This precludes counting statements, such as ‘ten respondents mentioned this motivation, whereas only six mentioned an alternative motivation’. Nor should paraphrasing be overdone. Simple statements that the participants all agreed about something should be avoided. A common mistake is to search for consensus: highlighting those of a particular opinion – which might attractively seem to be the answer – and omitting those who held different views. Human groups are typically diverse, and this needs to shine through in the findings. Finally, there needs to be sufficient data – demonstrated by quotes – that convinces reviewers and readers that

this was a well-organised and worthy study. The alternative – describing a detailed study in the methods section and then only having a small number of quotes in the findings – leads to doubts about the conclusions reached by the researchers. For examples of effective presentation of quotes in the findings sections, see Laing and Mair (2015) and Filep et al. (2017).

Good qualitative research aims to ‘weave’ these quotes through strong narrative themes, balancing the quotes of those interviewed with the observations and analysis of the researcher. One of the best examples of this technique is Arnould and Price’s (1993) study of white-water rafters, which contains a vivid expression of the experiences of these individuals. This is a skill, and for most researchers it needs to be practised and refined over time. As Tracy observes (2010: 843): ‘To illustrate data’s complexity, researchers are advised to show, meaning that they provide enough detail that readers may come to their own conclusion about the scene. This is contrasted [with] the author [simply] telling the reader what to think.’ Merely providing examples or a series of quotes from participants, without any attempt to weave through an analysis of what has been said, is therefore problematic.

8 USE OF THICK DESCRIPTION

One of the chief values of a qualitative approach is that it enables researchers to explore the rich and nuanced experiences of their participants. The need to provide thick description when presenting research findings is another challenging aspect of writing up good qualitative research. It requires the researcher to provide details and context behind behaviour or experiences that are being studied, as well as the emotions that are at play and the complexity of relationships between individuals (Denzin 1989; Ponterotto 2006). It brings the participants’ quotes to life, and gives them verisimilitude (Ponterotto 2006) – a sense that they are true or accurate. Examples of the employment of thick description in a tourism study can be seen in Marci-nek and Hunt (2019) and Dillette et al. (2019).

Thick description may be facilitated by tacit knowledge, which is gained through a deep understanding or immersion in a subject being studied, so that the researcher is aware of small nuances under the surface or of things that only an insider would normally know about (for example Frost et al. 2020). This often requires extended time in the field gathering data (Tracy 2010), where the researcher is able to observe the surroundings of their participants or share a casual conversation in order to shine a light on hitherto misunderstood or underexplored aspects of our world.

9 CREATING A NARRATIVE

Presenting qualitative findings is an art rather than a science, with the aim of creating a compelling narrative that is trustworthy or credible. Tracy (2010: 845) argues that ‘At the [very] least, qualitative research must be presented with clarity, avoid jargon, and be comprehensible to the target audience. However, evocative writing goes even further.’ It needs to create a story around the data, which includes the analysis of the researcher. There are many ways to do this, and what might be appropriate may depend on the methodological approach selected by the researchers. Creswell and Poth (2018) provide some examples of writing up qualitative research that they feel are a useful guide, based on the five most common methodological approaches.

Articles we regard as examples of evocative writing include Arnould and Price (1993), Filep et al. (2017) and Dillette et al. (2019).

The link with trustworthiness (see below) is that the reader should be able to see how the researcher has arrived at their conclusions by comparing the data that have been presented and the researcher's analysis of that data. The reader may not necessarily agree with that precise interpretation, so long as the interpretation is a credible one based on the data. Links between the qualitative findings and the relevant literature should also be included at some point, whether in the same section as the findings or in a separate discussion section. Tracy (2010: 840) calls this an example of meaningful coherence, where the study 'meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other'. See, for example Frost et al. (2020) and Dillette et al. (2019). The researcher should examine whether the findings support or potentially extend the existing literature, or appear to contradict what has been found previously, so that the contribution to theoretical knowledge is evident.

10 TRUSTWORTHINESS

We have noted the importance of clarifying the trustworthiness or credibility of a qualitative study if it is to be taken seriously (Decrop 2004). This can incorporate a number of elements, with Tracy (2010) arguing for eight markers of quality qualitative research that could be used to show trustworthiness. They are: (a) a worthy topic; (b) a rigorous study; (c) sincerity of the researcher; (d) credibility of the research; (e) resonance of the findings for audiences; (f) the study makes a significant contribution; (g) the study has considered and is based on ethical principles; and (h) the study has meaningful coherence. Some of the ways that these aspects can be demonstrated include: providing adequate detail about the methodology employed in the study; self-reflexivity of the researcher; allowing participants to reflect on what they said or the study findings (member reflections); and the use of thick description. Examples of discussion on trustworthiness within the methodology section of a journal article in a tourism context include a study of travel writers' experiences by McWha et al. (2018) and Laing and Mair's (2015) research on social inclusion in festivals from an organiser's perspective. This information helps to build a case for a reader that the research has been conducted to the highest standards, and the findings are both rigorous and credible.

CONCLUSION

This research note outlines typical problems we have encountered in qualitative research within a tourism context, which we hope will provide a roadmap for presenting such research within journals and theses. There are no doubt other issues that could have been raised, but as a starting point we cover what we regard as essential issues for qualitative researchers to consider. These are: (1) the importance of explaining the philosophical underpinnings of a study, particularly the research paradigm; (2) the need to cover the methodological approach of a study; (3) reflexivity of the researchers; (4) a structure and order to discussions on methodology; (5) the necessity for clearly outlining the sampling strategy and (6) the data collection and analysis process; (7) allowing the voice of the interviewees to be heard; (8) the use of thick

description; (9) presenting a compelling or evocative narrative; and (10) demonstrating trustworthiness of the study findings. References are provided to show how these issues have been addressed in various published studies, to illustrate the practical application of the points raised.

Establishing communities of practice to network with other colleagues specialising in qualitative research might be a way to improve the quality of qualitative research in tourism, both in its design and the way that the findings are written up. There is a need for high-level discussions of the concepts and practices of qualitative research, stimulating much-needed debate and an ongoing exchange of ideas about what constitutes rigorous qualitative research in the tourism literature.

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