



ENHANCING RELIABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF STRATEGIES AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

One of the major concerns in qualitative research is reliability. Readers should be able to understand the various ways in which interpretations and conclusions have been arrived at. In tourism and hospitality research, qualitative techniques are predominantly used to study various aspects including visitor experiences and service encounters, employee relations and destination identification, cultural meanings, community participation and organization. These topics are context-sensitive and dynamic. This means that they cannot be replicated by a mechanical method. This paper examines the strategies to improve reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research. The paper uses a critical integrative review. It gives preference to research articles in peer-reviewed journals published between 2022 and the present, and other related articles in discipline-specific journals. The focus is on the philosophy and framework that underpin research design, sampling, participant engagement, researcher reflexivity, audit trails, triangulation, peer debriefing, and data analytical consistency; as well as digital data management and research transparency.

The review states that while other components of methodology may also be construed as components of rigour, when reliability is framed as context-sensitive dependability, traceability and consistency of research choices within an identified methodological position become relevant. The study notes that any single method is inadequate, and suggests the use of various methods may be more appropriate. The study proposes a structure comprising philosophical alignment, ethics, and systematic fieldwork, with reflexive and traceable analysis, context-sensitive verification, and an explicit reporting strategy. The review notes that documentary methodology will be improved if strategies are adopted for clear rationale, inconsistencies are analyzed, and limitations are stated. Moreover, the study notes that the approach provides guidance to researchers, supervisors, peer reviewers, and journal editors. The approach is intended to provide a methodological framework for qualitative research, improve trustworthiness, dependability, and/or rigour, and requires further study and verification in various qualitative traditions and research areas including tourism and hospitality.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative Research, Reliability, Dependability, Trustworthiness, Tourism, Hospitality, Reflexivity, Audit Trail, Methodological Rigour

1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research plays a big role in helping us understand the social, cultural, and organizational sides of tourism and hospitality. Tourism is not just about people moving from place to place or booking hotel rooms, it is about how everyone involved makes sense of places, identities, services, development, and even the feeling of belonging. Qualitative methods give researchers the tools to see how people create, challenge, and shift these meanings in all kinds of different situations.

Sometimes published studies are not clear about how they picked participants, how they gathered data, or even how a researcher's own perspective shaped the process. Goolaup and Nunkoo (2024) pointed out that while methodological diversity makes tourism and hospitality research stronger, it is still common for people to question how rigorous and well-designed these qualitative studies actually are.

People often link "reliability" with consistency. In quantitative work, it's about getting the same results if you measure the same thing twice. In qualitative research, it's a different story. Meanings shift, and people's stories change depending on the moment and context. When you re-interview someone, you might hear something totally new maybe their life has changed, your relationship with them is different, or something significant happened that makes them see things in a new light. These kinds of differences aren't errors. The real questions are: Did the researcher follow a clear process? Can you trace their decisions? Do their interpretations actually make sense given what they found and the approach they used? (Adler, 2022; Janis, 2022).



In tourism and hospitality, getting this right matters a lot. Studies might happen in seasonal tourist spots, communities full of cultural differences, workplaces with strict hierarchies, or even digitally, where information gets scattered across different platforms. Sometimes employees won't speak up because they do not want trouble. Residents might stay quiet out of fear for their livelihoods. Online reviewers could be writing for audiences those researchers do not expect. All of this shapes what information you can actually use and how you should read it. Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe (2024) say that researchers need to pick their qualitative samples in ways that match their goals and context, not just by following set numeric guidelines.

Recently, scholars have also cautioned against using rigid, one-size-fits-all checklists for assessing quality. Braun and Clarke (2023, 2024a, 2024b) argued that thematic analysis comes in many flavours, and your quality standards should fit the particular approach you're using. For example, in reflexive thematic analysis, coding is not about nailing down the "right" answer; it is more about interpretation, so aiming for perfect agreement between coders doesn't really fit. On the other hand, with content analysis, clear coding rules and having more than one coder can help when categories are fuzzy. What matters most is that a study's methods hang together logically, not that one just ticks off a list of common techniques. The goal here is not to present fresh participant data, but to offer guidance for researchers on how to conduct and think about reliable qualitative research.

Recent research reminds scholars not to treat quality procedures as universal checklists. Braun and Clarke (2023, 2024a, 2024b) point out that thematic analysis is not just one thing, but a whole family of approaches, and the criteria for quality need to match the specific version you're using. For reflexive thematic analysis, coding is all about interpretation, so expecting perfect inter-coder agreement does not really fit. On the flip side, structured content analysis relies on clear coding rules and independent coding, which actually help when one is dealing with ambiguous categories. It is not about how many techniques one can list in the methods section; it is about making sure your approach actually makes sense for your study. This paper argues that reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research should mean open, context-sensitive dependability, not just guaranteeing someone else can replicate your results exactly.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Qualitative research has positioned itself in the hospitality and tourism sector, despite critics of reliability concerns which make it look inconsistent. In most instances, researchers mumble together terms like validity, reliability, credibility, confirmability, dependability and trustworthiness, as if they are similar in meaning. Despite the terms being related, they infer different viewpoints in research.

Simply saying "triangulation ensured reliability" is not enough. What sources did the researcher actually compare? How did the researcher deal with disagreements or differences? Did it change the outcome? The same goes for statements like, "interviews were coded systematically." Without describing how the researcher approached the analysis or made decisions, it doesn't tell much (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Jamieson et al., 2023).

It's not that there aren't standards in qualitative inquiry they definitely are. The trouble is, sometimes people use strategies without really explaining why those strategies fit their research questions or context (Lloyd et al., 2024; Urry et al., 2024). For example, member checking might get used as a stamp of truth, even though participants might disagree with the interpretations, change their minds, or decide not to comment at all (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023). Inter-coder agreement turns into a universal badge of rigor, even though it doesn't work for all interpretive styles.

There's seasonal fieldwork, participants moving around, confidentiality, language barriers, commercial sensitivity, uneven power dynamics, and fast-changing online platforms in tourism and hospitality research. All these factors make it tough to re-engage with participants or compare stories across time. The field needs a clear, workable way to show how researchers can achieve dependability without forcing everyone into one narrow way of thinking about qualitative research. This review aims to pull together the latest literature and lay out a practical, flexible framework for moving the field forward.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective is to critically review strategies for enhancing reliability in qualitative research in tourism and hospitality.

1. To examine the conceptual and philosophical foundations of reliability in qualitative research.
2. To critically evaluate strategies for enhancing reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research.
3. To assess the applicability and limitations of these strategies in different tourism and hospitality research contexts.
4. To examine methodological and contextual challenges affecting the demonstration of reliability in qualitative studies.
5. To propose an integrated framework for enhancing and reporting reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussion of trustworthiness in qualitative research is normally tied to reliability. Trustworthiness, in most cases, is expressed through transferability, credibility, confirmability and dependability (Adler, 2022). Credibility examines if interpretations are grounded in sufficient evidence or plausible. Transferability focuses on whether contextual information is provided to help the reader evaluate



other relevant contexts (Jamieson et al., 2023). Dependability concerns the clarity and coherence of the research process. Confirmability addresses whether research positioning and evidence are clear to assess interpretations.

It is important to note that dependability should not be confused with the social life of the research becoming stabilized. In tourism research, first-time and repeat visitors to a specific destination may have completely different experiences, and so may residents and tourists to a destination, as well as workers during peak and off-peak periods. In this case, dependability invites researchers to show how variations in context are dealt with and how analytical conclusions have been further developed. Janis (2022) discussed how in two qualitative case studies, careful consideration of codes and meanings, as well as triangulation, may be of help in creating dependability. The assumption here is evident in comparison and traceability, rather than in the assumption that all accounts need to converge to the same conclusion.

The four trustworthiness dimensions are complimentary, not interchangeable. A proper audit trail shows that decisions were documented, but it fails to compensate for a sample that excludes key participant groups (Jamieson et al., 2023). While several sources may corroborate credibility, it does not necessarily make analysis dependable if researchers do not explain how sources were comparable (Adler, 2022). A defensible reliability claim needs to be positioned within the greater quality of research design, and the association between conclusions and evidence quite clear.

Philosophical assumptions influence the meaning of reliability and the relevant procedures that are desired (Almusaed & Yitmen, 2025). Post-positivist qualitative approaches may stress explicit coding rules, systematic protocols, reduction of avoidable procedural changes and comparison across various analysts. These steps are viable whenever the sole purpose of the study entails classifying service complainants, developing a structured account of recurring participants and comparing organisational cases.

Interpretivist approaches clearly understand social reality is mediated by meaning and interaction. The researcher is not a neutral instrument to extract predetermined facts, but is actively involved in producing the settings within which accounts are expressed and interpreted. Rigor therefore relies on reflexivity and an account of how interpretations were derived. McBride (2023) prefers reflexivity to be located within the field encounter, rather than being limited to retrospective commentary. Jamie and Rathbone (2022) discuss how theoretical reflexivity during data collection increases the transparency and trustworthiness of qualitative research.

Tsegaw (2024) advocates for methodological eclecticism in critical tourism, leisure and hospitality research in Africa. Reliability in such cases is achieved by making the researcher's position explicit. However, it is not based on the assumption that the analysis does not rely on theory. Braun and Clarke (2023, 2024a, 2024b) emphasized that thematic analysis includes slants with various procedures and assumptions. Researchers need to map the relevant approach for use, in avoiding merging incompatible practices without justification.

Reflexivity, according to Olmos-Vega et al. (2023), is considered continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted. In this view, it extends across interpersonal, personal, methodological, and contextual dimensions. Moreover, Kahlke (2022) also emphasized that reflexivity needs to be enacted across the entirety of the research process, as opposed to being ascertained at the end. This informed that qualitative research's reliability analysis is all-round, covering all the research stages, as opposed to quantitative methods.

In hospitality research, a researcher with management experience may interpret employee accounts through assumptions about service standards or organizational performance (Jamie & Rathbone, 2022). A researcher studying community tourism may initially privilege income generation as a measure of success, only to discover that residents prioritise cultural control, environmental protection, or land rights. A researcher's institutional affiliation may influence access to participants or the degree to which workers feel able to speak openly (McBride, 2023). These influences are not eliminated by declaring neutrality; they are better managed through explicit reflection and documentation.

Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe (2024) caution that qualitative interview sampling in tourism should be justified rather than governed by universal sample-size rules. Researchers need to explain who was recruited, why those participants were relevant, which forms of variation were sought, and how the adequacy of the evidence was assessed.

The concept of saturation is influential but should not be used mechanically. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) reviewed empirical studies of saturation and found that relatively small samples can be sufficient in studies with narrow aims and comparatively homogeneous participants, while more diverse or conceptually ambitious studies may require larger samples. Their review also distinguishes the recurrence of codes from deeper saturation of meanings. Saturation is therefore a methodological argument that needs explanation, not a magic number.

Standardization can become counterproductive when it prevents participants from explaining unexpected meanings. A rigid script may impose the researcher's categories on participants, while excessive improvisation can make it difficult to understand why different people were asked different questions. A balanced protocol provides consistency in the purpose and coverage of interviews while allowing contextual probing. Mieli (2022), in discussing experience sampling in tourist smartphone-use research, illustrates how qualitative methods can be adapted to the temporality and situated nature of tourist experience.

Research teams should document changes to interview guides and explain whether the changes affect comparability. If preliminary interviews reveal that participants interpret a key term differently, researchers may need to revise the wording and revisit earlier accounts where possible. Such changes should be treated as transparent methodological development rather than hidden



irregularities. Jamie and Rathbone (2022) argue that theory and reflexivity during data collection can make these decisions more deliberate.

Triangulation should not be treated as a search for compulsory agreement. Managers may describe a policy as inclusive while residents experience consultation as tokenistic. Visitors may interpret cultural authenticity as a staged performance, while residents may see the same practice as a meaningful expression of identity or as commercial appropriation. Contradictions can reveal different interests, power relations, or meanings rather than poor data quality.

The researcher should explain why sources were selected, what each source can and cannot establish, how discrepancies were handled, and how the comparison affected the analysis. Multiple sources may share the same bias, and official documents may represent institutional aspirations rather than everyday practice. Triangulation is therefore a means of expanding interpretation, not a mechanical guarantee of truth. Janis (2022) illustrates how source and method triangulation can support dependability across case studies, while Ma and Cai (2023) show how social media can be integrated into tourism ethnography with attention to context and embedded culture.

Power within research teams also matters. Junior researchers may hesitate to challenge senior investigators, and researchers from outside a destination may privilege familiar theories over local knowledge (Vega et al., 2023). Facilitated discussion, documented decisions, and opportunities for dissent can improve the analytical value of collaboration.

Urry et al. (2024) describe collaborative reflection as an approach in which participants respond to summaries and recommendations to support scrutiny, communication, and future use of findings, rather than simply approving or rejecting the researcher's interpretation. Lloyd et al. (2024) critically evaluate member checking in interpretive description, while Erdmann and Potthoff (2023) discuss ethical criteria for selecting a member-checking method. Sahakyan (2023) presents diagrammatic elicitation as a way to make participant engagement more collaborative.

In tourism and hospitality, participant review can be valuable when researchers interpret local language, organisational practices, or culturally specific experiences. Yet it must be designed with confidentiality and power relations in mind. Hotel employees should not be required to share sensitive transcripts with supervisors, and residents should not be pressured to endorse a report that may affect community relationships. Researchers should state what was shared, who was invited, what feedback was received, and how the feedback informed the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2023) identify problems in the use and reporting of thematic analysis, including confusion about different versions of the method and misalignment between stated approach and actual practice. Their subsequent reporting papers propose more methodologically coherent ways to describe reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024a). These arguments are relevant to tourism and hospitality because thematic analysis is often used to examine interviews, online reviews, and destination narratives.

Inter-coder agreement is appropriate when the study aims to apply a shared classification system consistently. It is not a universal quality criterion. In reflexive thematic analysis, researchers' different readings may contribute to analytic development rather than represent error to be eliminated (Braun & Clarke, 2024b). A strong report explains familiarisation, coding, theme development, the use of theoretical concepts, and the relationship between data extracts and claims. It should also show how contradictory evidence was considered, rather than presenting only quotations that confirm the dominant theme.

Ma and Cai (2023) revealed the use of WeChat in ethnographic research with Chinese outbound tourists, further emphasising the need to understand platform culture and its relationship to fieldwork. These inherent considerations are associated with the reliability of the qualitative data obtained. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2022) demonstrated the potential of social media data for understanding tourist travel patterns; however, their quantitative network analysis was not itself a qualitative reliability strategy.

A digital research protocol should record the platform used, relevant collection period, selection or search terms criteria, data capture approaches, exclusion and inclusion rules and handling or deleted content or duplicates where necessary (Goyanes et al., 2025). Ethical considerations include whether users can expect privacy, whether reproducing a post could result in harm or whether quotations can identify individuals using search. Provenance of data and version control aids readers clearly fathom relevant analysis and assembly of digital corpus.

COREQ and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) are the most used remaining reporting resources, although they precede the 2022 literature onward. More specifically, Braun and Clarke (2024a) argued that general checklists often do not support reflexive thematic analysis since quality criteria are desired for reflecting viable methodological tradition. The Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) were anticipated to support methodologically coherent reporting in that specific approach. Scholars need to select relevant reporting guides that match their specific design and further explain departures where appropriate.

Transparency is also another crucial component, in providing a list of qualitative reliability procedures to be adopted (Ahmed, 2024). Authors need to state the contributions of their various procedures, inherent limitations and how it influences claims. Researchers' inferences and participant assertions are often distinguishable, aligned with theoretical interpretation. Furthermore, transparency also makes more changes to the research plan, translation steps, confidentiality, negative cases and constraints pegged on confidentiality or access.



5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Review design

The paper adopted a critical integrative review, in a bid to synthesise contemporary methodological scholarship on reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research. An integrative approach is viable since the topic extends to methodological critiques, conceptual papers, discipline-based studies and empirical reviews. The aim is not just estimating the claim's exhaustive coverage or effective size but comparing contributions, assumptions and limitations of strategies employed to support qualitative rigour of the study.

5.2 Search strategy and source selection

The paper adopted concepts such as dependability, qualitative reliability, reflexivity, trustworthiness, audit trails, thematic analysis, member checking, digital ethnography, qualitative sampling, tourism research methods and hospitality research. The searches were based on peer-reviewed journal articles and other chapters of publications from 2022 onwards. This was done with emphasis on sources that directly address methodological rigor or offered relevant tourism and hospitality applications. Bibliographic details were also examined against journal records, publisher pages and scholarly repositories.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) clear contribution to qualitative methodologies, sampling, reflexivity, trustworthiness, reporting or analysis; (b) publication in 2022 or later. Existing reporting standards prior to 2022 discussed in the body in cases where relevant (c) scholarly publication details (d) relevance to hospitality or tourism or transferability to qualitative research practice

5.3 Data extraction and synthesis

The literature was stratified into five cadres, in line with the study objectives. They comprised:

conceptual foundations; strategies for reliability enhancement; context-specific applicability; implementation challenges; and integrated framework development. Each of these sources was viewed based on their methodological assumptions, key arguments, recommended practices, limitations and feasibility within the tourism and hospitality lens. The study synthesis did a comparison of various sources and further noted various tensions, especially those on coding agreement, sampling adequacy, participant validation and the association between transparency and interpretive flexibility.

5.4 Quality appraisal and limitations

The paper provided priority to traceable peer-reviewed publications, methodological clarity, direct relevance, and the availability of viable records or DOIs. This was an important integrative review as opposed to being a preregistered systematic review. The paper did not use duplicate independent screening on every database record, a PRISMA flow diagram or any risk-of-bias instrument. Also, the paper failed to claim it had identified every eligible publication or offered an exhaustive systematic map of the entire field.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Reliability is context-sensitive and depends on methodological coherence

In the first finding, reliability was best considered as a traceable and defensible research practice, as opposed to being an exact replication (Janis, 2022). Tourism is faced by social relationships, time, culture, place and institutional conditions as factors which shape its trends. Various studies across diverse contexts may be viable in case researchers document conditions where evidence is viable (Goolaup & Nunkoo, 2024). The conclusion was consistent with the methodological discussions on qualitative diversity in hospitality and tourism.

In the second case, qualitative strategies need alignment with the relevant method. In this view, structured content analysis may justify agreement checks and coding rules. In this case, reflexive thematic analysis calls for transparency in interpretation and coherence in reporting, as opposed to using mandatory coder consensus. This outcome was further enhanced by Braun and Clarke's (2023, 2024a, 2024b) reviews of thematic analysis practice.

6.2 Complementary strategies are more defensible than isolated techniques

In the third case, no single approach was viable. Reflexivity aids in revealing the researcher's influence; an audit trail documents decisions; triangulation compares sources; peer debriefing challenges interpretations; and participant engagement can clarify meaning or support knowledge translation. These notable practices are viable for addressing diverse sources of uncertainty and need to be selected in line with the relevant research design. Jamieson et al. (2023) similarly noted ethical co-construction, methodological alignment, ethical co-construction, transparency and multi-perspective interpretation as major themes in qualitative rigour.

A study that merges such approaches may provide a transparent account as opposed to a study which lists various approaches without explaining their main source. Reliability needs to be enshrined into design, analysis, fieldwork and reporting, as opposed to being a final check on qualitative research.



6.3 Applicability varies by research setting

In the fourth case, the value of specific procedures changes by setting. Visitor-experience studies may call for contextual observation and flexible interviewing. In this case, hospitality employment studies call for stronger protection of confidentiality and attention to hierarchy. In such instances, community research calls for linguistic and cultural sensitivity; digital research calls for platform awareness and data provenance and multi-site studies benefit from documented adaptations and shared protocols. Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe (2024), Ma and Cai (2023), and Adams (2024) informed the significance of methodological decisions which address the characteristics of tourism research settings.

The results challenge the assumption that a uniform reliability checklist was viable for all studies. A consistent methodological justification is crucial, but specific practices need to remain responsive to relationships among participants, intended claims and the research environment.

Visitor experience research

Useful approaches include contextualised interviewing, field notes, reflexive interpretation, and comparison of accounts across visitor groups. Excessive standardisation may obscure individual experiences.

Hospitality employment research

Confidential interviews, clear recruitment procedures, secure data handling, and reflexivity are particularly important where employment hierarchies may constrain disclosure.

Destination-community research

Local-language competence, community engagement, contextual description, and attention to researcher positionality help preserve the meanings attached to place and livelihood.

Digital tourism research

Documented collection procedures, source provenance, platform context, version control, and ethical management of online material strengthen traceability.

Multi-site organisational research

Shared protocols, documented adaptations, analytical memos, and appropriate team discussions support continuity while allowing for differences between organisations.

Figure 1: Applicability across diverse settings

Source: Authors (2026)

6.4 Practical, epistemological, and ethical constraints remain significant

On the fifth objective, the researchers faced setbacks which could not be eliminated through standardization. Seasonal work, limited time, language and translation, participant mobility, digital content volatility, limited time and unequal power relations may restrict either data collection or verification. Differences in epistemology may also affect whether coder agreement, standardization, or participant validation is viable. Ethical considerations may also limit material desired to be retained or published, especially across hierarchical workplaces or small destinations. These constraints need to be reported as conditions influencing evidence, not hidden as imperfections. The aim is to make the scope of claims clear and further to explain limitations' management among researchers.

6.5 Reporting is integral to reliability

The reliability results cannot be assessed when reporting is generic. There is a need for authors to describe the actual use of procedures, such as the purpose of the participant engagement, triangulated sources, treatment of contradictory evidence and the purpose of participant engagement. Braun and Clarke (2024a, 2024b) revealed that reporting guidance must be methodologically specific, as



Urry et al. (2024) and Lloyd et al. (2024) demonstrated the reasons why participant review needs to be described in terms of purpose and implementation as opposed to being treated as a universal validation step.

Table 1: Summary of the study findings

Research objective	Principal finding	Implication for practice
Conceptual and philosophical foundations	Reliability is context-sensitive and depends on methodological coherence.	Define reliability in relation to the research paradigm and analytical method.
Evaluation of reliability strategies	Complementary strategies are more defensible than isolated techniques.	Integrate reflexivity, documentation, appropriate verification, and transparent analysis.
Applicability across contexts	Strategy effectiveness varies by participants, setting, and research design.	Adapt procedures to visitor, employee, community, digital, and organizational contexts.
Methodological and contextual challenges	Practical constraints, power relations, language, and epistemological differences affect implementation.	Report limitations and explain how they influence interpretation.
Integrated framework	Reliability requires coordinated procedures throughout the research process.	Link research design, data collection, analysis, verification, and reporting.

Source: Authors (2026)

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Dependable interpretation

The first objective assessed both the philosophical and contextual foundations on reliability. The synthesis showed that qualitative dependability is better showed through methodological accountability, as opposed to through a promise that another researcher would yield similar outcomes. This is crucial for tourism, where visitor expectations, seasonality, destination development and labour relations can alter the phenomenon under study. A repeat study may show change as opposed to inconsistency Goolaup & Nunkoo, 2024; Janis, 2022). The methodology responsibility lies in documenting the conditions and further explaining how they affect interpretation.

The position does not imply that anything goes. In this view, researchers need to demonstrate coherent analysis, systematic data collection and an evidence base for the claims. In this view, dependability checks whether the readers are able to follow the logic of the research question and further understand how the findings were developed. It is quite a demanding standard since it calls for explanations for both uncertainties and decisions.

7.2 Why methodological coherence outweighs procedural accumulation

The second objective looked into strategies to better reliability in qualitative studies. The review reported a list of techniques which do not create rigour automatically. Triangulation may be superficial if sources are simply mentioned as opposed to being compared. Member checking may prove inappropriate, ethically, if participants are exposed to risk (Braun & Clarke, 2023, 2024a). Inter-coder agreement may be useful for structured coding but incoherent with some reflexive approaches. It was reported that the researcher needs to articulate the purpose for each strategy and further demonstrate how it fits with the relevant method.

This presents a practical implication for existing research reviewers, supervisors and journal editors. Quality appraisal needs to ask whether the study procedures, assumptions and claims are in line (Erdmann & Potthoff, 2023; Lloyd et al., 2024). It should not call for every author to use similar tools, regardless of epistemology. Methodological diversity does not account for weak practice, but it calls for researchers to justify their quality criteria, relevant to their approach.

7.3 Reflexivity as analytical accountability

Reflexivity is considered as the most valuable analytical accountability mechanism when it changes how the researcher works. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) framed reflexivity as ongoing and collaborative, as Jamie and Rathbone (2022) demonstrate its significance during data collection.

For researchers in tourism and hospitality, reflexivity can inform how assumptions on sustainability, authenticity, community benefit and service quality influence research questions and interpretations. It can further aid in identifying how researchers' identities influence disclosure and access.

Nonetheless, reflexivity is considered formulaic whenever it names the background of the researcher, merely. A stronger account informs influence, the decision it influenced and the relevant response taken. This can be witnessed using analytic memos, field notes, interview-guide revision records and discussions on alternative interpretations. In this view, audit trail and reflexivity are mutually reinforcing each other. One supports critical awareness, and the other preserves a traceable record of how that awareness influenced the research.



7.4 Contextual adaptation and methodological pluralism

The third objective examined the applicability of reliability across contexts. The review revealed that reliability strategies need to be adapted without abandoning methodological coherence therein. An ethnographic study of resident–visitor associations often require prolonged engagement and reflexive field notes. In this case, a qualitative comparison of hotel policies may require a shared protocol and transparent case-selection criteria; which is a digital ethnography may need detailed documentation of platform-specific collection practices. Adams (2024) informed the diversity around tourism ethnography. Nonetheless, Ma and Cai (2023) showed the importance of platform culture in digital fieldwork.

Sampling decisions also form part of this contextual adaptation. More specifically, Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe (2024) argued against universal sample-size rules in tourism interview research. Furthermore, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) showed that sample sufficiency changes with the scope of the question and the diversity of the sample. In this view, researchers should therefore explain how their sampling strategy supports the intended analytical claims as opposed to relying on an arbitrary threshold.

7.5 Power, ethics, and participant engagement

Challenges were examined in the fourth objective. The study reported that power relations can affect what participants are willing to disclose, especially in cases where workers rely on managers or communities rely on tourism-related funding. A consistent interview protocol cannot, by itself, resolve these challenges. More precisely, interview location, recruitment, researcher affiliation and confidentiality all affect the conditions under which accounts are produced.

The outcomes showed that member checking must be handled with equal care. Returning findings to participants can aid in clarifying meanings. However, participants may not share the theoretical interpretation of the researchers or at times may face risks if sensitive material is circulated (Lloyd et al., 2024; Urry et al., 2024). Past discussions encouraged changes from a narrow accuracy test to ethically considered engagement or collaborative reflection.

7.6 Contradiction as an analytical resource

Triangulation in most cases is presented as a way of verifying results, despite its contribution being the highest in areas where sources disagree. Across destination studies, government officials may describe participation as inclusive in cases where residents report that decisions are made elsewhere. As opposed to deciding the correct account before analysis, researchers need to explore experiences and institutional positions producing the divergence. The approach may provide debatable decisions on benefit, sustainability and participation.

The researcher needs to still assess credibility and limits of every source. Contradiction does not imply that all accounts are equal in terms of information for all queries. It implies differences need to be analysed in line with the phenomenon, and not erased fully in a bid to create artificial consensus. These practices improve the explanatory value and rely on the final interpretation.

7.7 An integrated framework for reliability enhancement

The fifth objective was to propose an integrated framework viable for reliability analysis in the hospitality and tourism industry. The review proposes five linked components: (1) philosophical and design alignment; (2) systematic and ethical fieldwork; (3) reflexive and traceable analysis; (4) context-appropriate verification; and (5) transparent reporting and critical appraisal.

The framework was iterative, as opposed to being linear. New evidence calls for the researcher to revisit their sampling strategy, interview guides and interpretations, and these changes clearly recorded.



Figure 2: Proposed integrated framework for enhancing reliability in qualitative tourism and hospitality research.

Source: Authors (2026)

The first component calls for the researcher to define the research questions, epistemological position and expected claims. The second component looks into consent, transparent sampling, protocols, sampling, ethical safeguards and contextual adaptation. The third component links audit trails and reflexive journals with various analytical decisions. The fourth component selects peer debriefing, triangulation, participant engagement, and coding checks where viable. The fifth component reports limitations, procedures and contradictions and evidence aligned with conclusions. The components make reliability an element of the whole research process, as opposed to being a standalone test.

The main contribution of the framework is integration. Reflexivity can trigger change in protocol, where the audit trail records the reason. Later analyses further assess whether the change influences interpretation, and reporting further explains the consequences. The framework is a traceable chain and calls for future empirical evaluations across various tourism and hospitality settings. Moreover, it is a guide for methodological decisions, as opposed to prescribing an identical sequence for each study. Earlier stages must be revisited as new evidence emerges, and various research traditions may enhance the various components.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The review assessed how reliability can be strengthened across qualitative studies in tourism and hospitality research. It further concludes that reliability need not be equated to exact replication. It is more defensibly understood as the consistency, transparency and traceability of methodological decisions, having no clear research tradition. The examination notes that tourism experiences keep changing and are more reliant on contexts, as they maintain a stronger expectation that researchers clearly explain how their conclusions were arrived at.

The review notes that there was no single technique that proved sufficient. Audit trails, reflexivity, triangulation, participant engagement, peer debriefing, analytical documentation, and systematic data collection and analytical documentation each address various concerns, hence the need for selective integration. The viability of such strategies lies on the epistemological assumptions, research questions, context and analytical methods. More specifically, inter-coder agreement and member checking need not be used as universal tests.



Researchers in tourism and hospitality must account for power relations, seasonality, cultural and linguistic diversity, ethical constraints, and digital data conditions. These conditions influence evidence and need to be documented as opposed to being hidden. The proposed framework connects ethical fieldwork, philosophical alignment, context-appropriate verification, reflexive analysis and transparent reporting. Since the framework emanates from an integrative review rather than empirical testing, future studies need to assess its utility and outcomes across various qualitative settings and designs.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 For researchers

- i. There is a need for clearly defined reliability or dependability, in line with the study's analytical method or philosophical alignment.
- ii. A series of strategies need to be adopted for clear methodological justifications. There is no need to assume that all qualitative studies require similar procedures.
- iii. They need to maintain an audit trail which documents recruitment, protocol changes, coding or interpretive decisions, and the treatment of contradictory evidence where necessary.
- iv. They need to include reflexive journaling throughout fieldwork and analysis. This should be linked to positionality on specific methodological decisions.
- v. They also need to justify sampling in line with the study aims, diversity of participants, dialogue quality, and analytical ambition as opposed to some arbitrary number.

9.2 For universities and research institutions

Universities and other research institutions need better training in qualitative epistemology, sampling, reflexivity, thematic analysis, methodological documentation, and ethical fieldwork. In this view, supervisors need to assess the nexus between research questions, claims, procedures and assumptions. Institutions also need to offer viable support for transcription, secure data storage, qualitative software, translation and collaborative reviews.

9.3 For journals and reviewers

The study reveals that journals need to encourage authors to properly describe the implementation and limitations of their diverse quality-assurance strategies as opposed to solely relying on generic assertions. Also, reviewers need to assess whether procedures are a match to the declared methods or not, and further avoid imposing coder agreement or other provisions universally. The reporting guidelines need to support critical appraisal without automatically replacing methodological judgement across studies.

9.4 For future research

Future scholars need to empirically assess the proposed framework across heritage destinations, hotels, community-based tourism, ecotourism projects and across digital tourism platforms. Other comparative studies could assess how dependability is demonstrated within grounded theory, ethnography, case study research, phenomenology, qualitative content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis. Also, future work should also examine reliability across underrepresented cultural and geographical settings, especially on how translation, local knowledge and unequal power relations influence the quality of research.

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