

# Mapping the Place for Interpretivism in MICE Destination Choice Research: Issues in Methodology

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## Abstract

Because of the immense benefits that MICE bring to host destinations, there is more interest from facilities and destinations areas to position themselves towards such a lucrative and fastest growing sector of Tourism. In a quest to position themselves successfully to the MICE markets, destinations need to understand factors that influence organisations to choose specific destinations for their conferences. Relatively, a number of research approaches have been used to explore such factors including, the adoption of Interpretivism paradigm, albeit to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, the interpretivism paradigm has been given less attention, with little explanation pertaining to its meaning, implication and the relevant research methods underpinning its adoption. This paper therefore discusses interpretivism and its application in MICE destination choice research, in which the critical issues that underlie its methodology are equally presented.

## 1.0 Introduction

The concept of destination choice is a critical issue in any form of tourism. Understanding the concept of destination choice by tourists has increasingly been of great interest to tourism scholars, marketers and policy makers (Pikkemaat, 2004). A majority of previous studies on destination choice have largely focused on factors that influence tourists in making decisions to travel and their choice of the specific places they travel to (Crouch & Louviere, 2001). While the concept of tourism destination choices remains one of the fundamental topics in general tourism literature, destination choice is a very critical aspect of decision making in the events sector (Bodwin *et al.*, 2010). Choosing a site for any type of event within the meeting industry is seen as being of great importance to the organizers and even participants. Commonly called venue selection or site selection, the choice of where to hold an event affects the success of the event itself (Chen, 2006), to which Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, Exhibitions (MICE) are no exceptional.

As part of business tourism, MICE brings several contributions to the tourism sector and the host destination. MICE enhances job creation and utilization of facilities during low season for various destinations. As noted by UNWTO (2014) MICE enhance knowledge sharing. Mahadewi, Bendesa and Antara (2014) also adds that MICE bring high returns to the local economies, both directly and indirectly., Zhang, Qu and Ma (2010) also acknowledge that unlike leisure tourism market, the MICE market is not easily affected by economic fluctuations. In addition, the ICCA (2012) sees conference travellers as higher spenders than ordinary travellers. Conferences are therefore a lucrative tourism market capable of making a huge contribution to the development of tourism and economy of the host destinations unseasonably. The UNWTO (2014, p.4) report on the meetings industry recognises that: *the meeting industry has firmly placed itself at the centre of tourism as one of the key drivers of the sector's development and an important generator of income, employment and investment. In addition to important business opportunities, the meetings industry provides immense benefits to the broader economy as it generates on average a higher spending level, reduces seasonality, contributes to the regeneration of destinations, spreads knowledge and enhances innovation and creativity.*

Apart from the obvious economic benefits that arise from hosting of meetings and conventions, destinations also benefit from expansion of international trade and cultural ties, the enhancement of civic pride and political motivations (Crouch and Ritchie, 2004).

Because of the immense benefits that MICE brings to a host destination, it is not surprising that destinations covet this segment. This is manifested by the stiff competition amongst conference destinations both at facility and destination level (Dragičević, Jovičić, Blešić, Stankov & Bošković, 2012). As observed by UNWTO (2012) destinations are increasingly striving to position themselves so that they benefit from this fastest growing and lucrative sector of tourism. However, as observed by Crouch and Louviere (2004) it is important to understand factors that influence organisations' choice of conference destinations, if facilities and destinations are to be successful in attracting conferences

Literature on the concept of choice is a complex blend of research drawn from psychology, economics and statistics. As noted by Levin and Milgrom (2004), understanding the concept of choice paves way for creating a way to understand the behavioural realities of consumer choice and allow accurate forecasts of future choice behaviour to be made. In a similar way, the need to understand issues related to MICE destination choice has led to a number of studies in the area (Bodwin *et al.*, 2006; Lau, 2009; Fenich, 2006; Lau, 2009; Chen 2013; Webber & Chon, 2002; Hayat *et al.*, 2014; Lau, 2013; Crouch & Ritchie, 2010; Dwyer & Mils, 2000; Hayat, Severt, Breiter,

Nusair & Okumus, 2014; Baloglu & Love, 2005; Lee & Back, 2007; Crouch & Louviere, 2004; Crouch & Ritchie, 2004; Tan, 2007; Ananazeh, 2002 and Whitfield & Webber, 2010). However, while a number of research methods and approaches have been adopted in examining issues of conference destination choice, interpretivism has not been embraced much. This paper therefore strives to discuss how interpretivism can help not only in identification but also explaining how the choice of a MICE destination is influenced by a number of specific factors.

### 1.3 Research Problem

While there has been numerous research on the issues of MICE destination choice, most studies have not embraced interpretivism. Apparently, research articles that explain the methodological issues pertaining to interpretivism remain scanty. This paper therefore, seeks to present and explain how interpretivism can be adopted in studying factors that influence the choice of a MICE destination. Specifically, the paper discusses the importance of MICE, introduces the concept of destination choice and explains interpretivism and its methodological underpinnings. Aspects of research methods, research designs, sampling techniques, data collection methods and techniques, data analysis and validity and reliability issues related to interpretivism are discussed.

This paper is based on information drawn from available literature on interpretivism and research methodology. It presents very critical aspects of research methodology to help researchers who might want to adopt interpretivism in their studies including those that span beyond issues of MICE destination choice. This paper stands to shape the direction of future interpretivism research and present the principles that underpin it.

### 2.0 Meaning and rationale of Interpretivism

According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2013), all research is based on some underlying philosophical assumptions about what constitutes truth and how the truth can be discovered or the research methods appropriate for the development of knowledge in social sciences. Such assumptions are collectively called research paradigms. Without nominating a paradigm as the first step, there is no basis for subsequent choices regarding methodology, methods, literature or research design (Klenke, 2008). This implies that it is not possible to carry out a rigorous research without understanding its philosophical underpinnings. This paper argues that in order to understand issues of MICE destination choice, adopting an interpretivism paradigm would be instrumental.

According to Elster (2007), interpretivism refers to research approaches which emphasise the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life. It denotes research methods which adopt the position that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors, and so it distinctively rules out the methods of natural science (Eliaeson, 2002). These definitions present a very important notion that interpretivism supports a form of enquiry in which people, who are subjects or stakeholders in the MICE destination choice can be engaged in the hunt for knowledge.

With interpretivism, researchers do not only look for the presence or absence of a causal relationship, but also the specific ways in which it is manifested and the context in which it occurs (Mackenzie & Knipe 2006). This allows researchers to go beyond what has occurred to see how it has occurred. Interpretivism would thus allow researchers to examine not only the choices that are made or the factors influencing such choices, rather, how the specific factors influence the MICE destination choice itself also. Greener (2008) makes a significant observation that because of the significance of studying the social world through a subjective thought and ideas, interpretivism enables researchers to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied thereby allowing them to acquire multiple perspectives of reality, rather than the one reality of positivism. Since MICE involves various players, embracing interpretivism would thus allow researchers to gain multiple insights from such different players. Such approaches would bring diverse and the much needed depth of knowledge, necessary to explain issues of MICE destination choice.

The main goal of the interpretivists is therefore to understand the meaning of the social situation from the point of view of those who live it (Chowdhury, 2014). Interpretivism is based on a life-world ontology that argues that all observations are both theory- and value-laden and investigation of the social world is not, and cannot be, the pursuit of a detached objective truth (Leitch, Hill & Harrison, 2010). Epistemologically, the viewpoint of the interpretivism paradigm is that the knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors (Silverman, 2010). It can therefore be asserted that interpretive research paradigm is characterized by a need to understand the world as it is from a subjective point of view and seeks an explanation within the frame of reference of the participant rather than the objective observer of the action.

Essentially, interpretivism would thus be suitable because all events are organised, held and attended by humans, such that even the MICE destination choices are made by them. At an axiological level, the interpretivism paradigm is more concerned with relevance than rigor (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Proponents of interpretivism (e.g. Schwandt, 2005) argue that one can only understand what a particular action means or the meaning in an action by interpreting in a particular way based on what the actors are doing. Similarly, as Johnson (2010) states, the hunt for knowledge on MICE destination choice can best be achieved through highly participative and inductive research methods, embracing many concerned voices.

In the events sector, interpretivism has been adopted mainly because, events are multifaceted, they involve people, are staged by people and multiple players (Crowther, Bostock & Perry, 2015). Crowther *et al.*, (2015) advise that good enquiries to get rich information can be conducted by gathering data through the lens of the event stakeholders themselves through qualitative data collection methods. Even researchers who did not explicitly confess their paradigmic affiliations in their studies (Getz, Andersson & Larson, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2006), the method of enquiry and analysis that they employed revealed their conformance to the interpretive paradigms. For instance, Yoo and Chon (2008) examined how destination and facility factors influence the choice of a destination for convention meetings. Their study established that both destination attributes such as convention bureau support at the destination, quality of service, accessibility, technological advancement and security and safety were the key determinants of the destinations' appeal for conventions. Nevertheless, although these studies necessarily adopted interpretivism, there is lack of detailed information on the meaning and implication of interpretivism, and explanation of the research methodologies underpinning the research and paradigm.

## 2.2 Research Methods in interpretivism

Interpretivism can be accomplished using qualitative research methods. As a form of social enquiry, qualitative research is used to explore the behaviour, perspectives, experiences and feelings of people and emphasise the understanding of these elements (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). It hence seeks to generate information from the perspective of the respondent and satisfies the ethos of exploratory studies. The logic behind qualitative data collection method is to describe and develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Mason (2002) states that qualitative research methods allow the researcher to explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world. These may include the texture and weave of everyday life; the understandings, the experiences and imaginations of research participants; the way that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate.

The qualitative research method is always influenced by the respondent's motivation, beliefs and attitudes as well as by the researcher's subjective ability to understand and interpret the qualitative data material (Egerod & Christensen, 2009). This makes qualitative research method "best fit" for interpretivism. In adopting interpretivism, researchers can use four major methods used by qualitative researchers: observation, textual analysis, interviews and transcripts. (Silverman, 2001).

Qualitative research methods have notably been embraced in MICE destination selection research before. For instance, Anananzeh and Chiu (2012) did a qualitative study in which data was collected using semi structured interviews. Another qualitative study was done by Burcu (2006) with the aim of understanding aspects of marketing business tourism in urban and sub urban destinations. Hayat *et al.*, (2014) also undertook an exploratory study in which data was collected through semi-structured telephone interviews. Likewise, Tan (2007) conducted qualitative study to compare attributes of MICE destinations between Macau and Singapore. It can hence be seen that qualitative studies are taking course in conference events literature and it is with no doubt that the qualitative research methods complement interpretivism paradigms when adopted in MICE destination choice studies.

## 2.3 Research Design in interpretivism

Parahoo (2014) described a research design as a plan that describes how, when and where data are to be collected and analysed. Burns and Grove (2003) look at research design as a blueprint for conducting a study with maximum control over factors that may interfere with the validity of the findings. According to Gray (2004), research design can be exploratory, explanatory or descriptive. Interpretivism has the ability to address all the three aspects of research designs. However, it can best be used to explore or explain phenomenon in order to answer the how questions associated with the study. An exploratory study intends to explore what is happening, seek new insights, by asking questions to assess the phenomena in a new light (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It is valuable particularly when there is very little information known about the phenomenon.

According to Polit (2015), exploratory studies are undertaken when a new area is being investigated or when little is known about an area of interest. Explorative studies are used to generate basic knowledge and understanding of a problem area. As such, an explorative study is often used as a pre-study in order to chart the factors that underlie a later research or to give ideas and guidance to different courses of action. In explorative studies the researcher's aim is to learn as much as possible of the problem area so that a fruitful analysis can be conducted (Li *et al.*, 2011).

Exploratory research designs have been used in previous MICE destination choice studies such as, Hayat *et al.*, (2014), Crouch and Ritchie (2004), Chen (2000), Tan (2007) and Anananzeh and Chiu (2012) amongst others. Hayat *et al.*, (2014), explored attributes influencing meeting planners' destination selection of Orlando in Florida. Their study revealed affordability, past experience, facility quality and good weather as important attributes. The study by Anananzeh and Chiu (2012) explored the role of MICE destination attributes on forming touristic image in which they found that local organisations consider MICE destination attributes than international ones. The explorative study by Crouch and Ritchie (2004) on convention site selection in Australia also revealed that

convention and accommodation facilities are given prime consideration. In most studies that adopted interpretivism, the exploratory research designs were relatively in tandem with the research paradigm paralleling the qualitative nature of the study and its methodologies in order to answer the research questions.

#### **2.4 Choosing Target Population in interpretivism**

Polit and Beck (2012) define target population as the entire aggregation of cases that meet a designated set of criteria and for which the researcher would like to make generalizations. In interpretivism the target population may not really be preconceived nor known before-hand (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). While it might be easier to express the target population in terms of target frame (characteristics), it might not often be easier to define it in absolute values.

#### **2.5 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures in interpretivism**

A sample is a subset of a particular population (Serem, Boit & Wanyama, 2013). Serem and co-workers explain that sampling is used in research because not always can a census be feasible, although it is ideally thought to help reduce bias. On the other hand, Serem *et al.*, (2013); Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009); Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) and Kothari (2009) agree that where the population is small, using the whole population is recommended. Kothari (2009) states that sampling helps in reducing study costs and time. In addition, Zikmund (2003) provides that sampling enables the researcher to estimate some unknown characteristics of the population and make generalisations.

Sample size refers to the specific number of elements of the required group from which data is collected (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). In interpretive studies, samples are often small since the focus is to get more information from the samples and generate deeper understanding about the phenomenon under study not to generalize it to a population (Farzanfar, 2005). Furthermore, the small sample sizes are considered appropriate because sample size does not influence the importance or quality of the study and that there are no hard rules in determining sample size in qualitative researches, which are adopted in the interpretivism paradigm (Holloway and Wheeler, 2002). As stated by Patton (2002, p. 184):

*the size of the sample in qualitative study depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.*

The greatest sample size consideration when using interpretivism to understand issues of MICE destination choice should be that the sample size should allow the researcher to collect all the data that is necessary to answer the research questions within the available time and in line with the available funds. Furthermore, just like in any qualitative study, data collection should be continued until data saturation has been reached.

Interpretivism embraces non-probability sampling techniques, such as census, convenience, snowball sampling and purposive (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2013). In particular, purposive sampling is often adopted to aid in generating a rich information for the studies by collecting data from people who have pertinent knowledge on the subject matter and who were qualified for the study as determined by the researcher (Lugosi, 2009). Census is used where the respondents constitute a small and well-defined target population (Serem, *et al.*, 2013). While census is not really a form of sampling, it is applicable in interpretivism because by its own nature, the idea is not to generalise findings. When to use convenience sampling techniques are often chosen based on factors related to time and availability of the respondents to participate in the study. A combination of convenience, accidental, census and snowball sampling technics can also be used in selecting samples.

#### **2.6 Research Instruments and Procedures**

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) define research instruments as tools that are used in collecting data. In embracing interpretivism, researchers can adopt data collection tools and technics used in collecting qualitative data. Data may thus be collected using observations, interviews, focus group discussions textual analysis, and transcripts. With interpretivism, interviews, focus group discussions and naturalistic observations are the most widely used data gathering methods for researchers using qualitative research methodology. In this case, such tools as observation checklist, interview guides, open ended questionnaires may be used (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). However, for effective explanation of how a number of the factors influence the MICE destination Choice for example, there would be a need to engage the actors in the MICE business through an interactive enquiry such as interviews and focus group discussions and interviews. This would help to supplement other technics such as document analysis and observations.

Interviews would be ideal for interpretivism because they are appropriate for research topics that require probing in order to acquire comprehensive data (Walliman, 2011). The interviews may be semi-structured, structured or non-structured. However, semi-structured interviews would give researchers flexibility to add or remove questions from the interview guide based on the results of each interview (Dawson, 2002). This means that although, all the interview guides may have preconceived questions that are sequentially structured, the

researcher can vary the order in which they are presented to the respondents in a way that supports the flow of the interview (Creswell, 2009). This would enhance flexibility in the flow of the interview questions without deviating from the focus of the study. While there are no hard rules on the number of interviews that should be conducted, Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), recommends that number of interviews conducted should meet the recommended threshold for qualitative studies. The interviews may be conducted face to face or through telephone, but the decision would be based on the challenges and opportunities of each form of interview as considered by the researcher.

As observed by Fusch and Ness (2010), focus group discussions are found in interpretive theory wherein the researcher operates through a belief in the multiplicity of peoples, cultures and means of knowing and understanding. Brockman *et al.*, (2010) defined a focus group discussion as a flexible, unstructured dialogue between the members of a group and an experienced facilitator/moderator that meets in a convenient location. Focus group discussions are favoured in interpretivism because they enable the researcher to capture diverse thoughts from the respondents on the factors that influence the choice of a MICE destination (Casey & Krueger, 2000). They also allowed the researcher to collect data from multiple respondents within a short period of time (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The FGDs may be heterogeneous or homogenous but as explained by Ritchie and Lewis (2003), subjects should be chosen based on their characteristics which will enable them to provide the researcher with the required information. The Focus Group discussion should have at least seven people, as is recommended for qualitative studies (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011).

## 2.7 Validity and reliability

Having valid research instruments is necessary to obtaining relevant data for any research. According to Serem *et al.* (2013), validity refers to the ability of the research instrument to measure what it is set to measure or not to measure. Within the positivist terminology, validity resided amongst, and was the result and culmination of other empirical conceptions: universal laws, evidence, objectivity, truth, actuality, deduction, reason, fact and mathematical data to name just a few (Winter, 2000). On the other hand, Joppe (2000. P.1) defines reliability as: the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. while reliability is the ability of the research instrument to generate the same results if re-used. However, Serem *et al.* cautions that the concept of validity was primarily developed for use in quantitative research. Since reliability and validity are rooted in positivist perspective then they should be redefined for their use in a naturalistic approach (Golafshani, 2003).

Patton (2001) states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analysing results and judging the quality of the study. As such, the research instruments used in interpretivism research and their findings may not be replicable due to changes of time and complexity of the study topic. Earlier own, Healy and Perry (2000) suggested that the quality of a study in each paradigm should be judged by its own paradigm's terms. Similarly, since interpretive studies adopt qualitative research methods, the researcher need to ensure that there is a sense of trustworthiness, authenticity, credibility, neutrality or confirmability, consistency or dependability and applicability or transferability in relation to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher must ensure that the data collection techniques allow for collection of complete information through proper timing, creation of proper environment and avoidance of bias during data collection.

## 2.8 Data Presentation and Analysis

Interpretive researchers place strong emphasis on better understanding of the world through first-hand experience, truthful reporting and quotations of actual conversation from insiders' perspectives are used to provide context based, rich and detailed or thick description of social phenomena (Neuman, 2003). With interpretivism data analysis involves looking at the data, assigning categories and putting together emerging themes (Richards, 2003). Interestingly, just like in qualitative research, data is mostly in the form of words, which are commonly in verbal forms or transcripts and non-verbal form like pictures, clips or videos (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011).

Conducting interpretivism and the relative data analysis may be chaotic, challenging, complex, messy, iterative and a rigorous process (Creswell, 2007). Ong'ondo (2011, P.103) summarises data analysis in qualitative research as "a systematic process of transcribing, collating, editing, coding, and reporting the data in a manner that makes it sensible and accessible to the reader and researcher for purposes of interpretation and discussion." Because interpretivism goes beyond addressing the "what" to answering the "why" questions, thematic data analysis would be appropriate. Thematic analysis offers flexibility, which enables researchers to familiarise themselves with the data, identify codes from the interview transcripts and generate and revise themes from the coded data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis has been used in previous studies which focused on MICE destination Choice before. For instance, Miller and Kerr (2009) did a study on buyers' expectations and suppliers' knowledge of important

destination attributes for conventions held by associations in the city of Wollongong, Australia. Data was collected using semi structured interviews and analysed thematically. Tan (2007) also did a comparative study on MICE destinations between Macau and Singapore. Data was collected using semi structured interviews and analysed thematically. Furthermore, Karakas (2012) examined factors that are considered when choosing to hold business events at urban or suburban places. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematically. Maire, Laing and Ramirez (2013) also explored people's intentions to attend conventions based on their gender. Data was collected using semi structured interviews and analysed thematically. In all these studies, researchers emphasized that thematic analysis allowed them to uncover issues which would have been overshadowed if other methods of analysis were used.

With interpretivism, thematic analysis may be conducted based on the procedure recommended by Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011), which involves four steps; transcribing the data, re-familiarising with the data, coding the data and data analysis process. As observed by Merriam (2009), thematic data analysis may be treated as a continuous process, done simultaneously with data collection to avoid accumulating heaps of data and to clearly understand patterns emerging from the collected data. For a robust interpretivism study, data should be presented using verbatim quotations and texts, thematically analysed, whereby data should be organized by coding, editing, data categorisation, generating themes and drawing patterns (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). More importantly, the data should be evaluated for its relevance to the research questions and rich discussion of the study findings should be done.

### 2.9 Limitations in interpretivism studies

Although interpretivism is a very promising research paradigm in events management and tourism research, a number of challenges may be encountered. Most limitations are similar to those encountered when doing qualitative research. For instance, where interpretivism is adopted generalisation of the study findings to other conference destinations need to be done with caution due to the differences of destination features, even if the same MICE clients are involved. However, since the goal of qualitative studies is not really generalisability of research findings rather to bring an in-depth understanding about a phenomenon (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011), the study would have necessary impacts to its audience. Further to that, where interviews are concerned it may not always be possible to record interviews as some interviewees may not accept to be recorded.

### 3.0 Conclusion

The paper has discussed the meaning of interpretivism and how it can be applied in MICE destination choice studies. The paper has presented a summarised but rich detail of key issues related to research methodology applicable to interpretivism. It is envisaged that this paper is informative to new researchers who might want to embrace interpretivism as their research paradigm in various studies.

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