

Mapping the Methodological Landscape: A Critical Review of Qualitative Approaches to Business Research in Emerging Economies

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Abstract: Qualitative business research in emerging economies has expanded significantly over the past decade, yet its methodological foundations remain fragmented and often misaligned with the cultural, institutional, and epistemological realities of these contexts. Existing reviews focus either on substantive findings or on generic qualitative methods and methodological principles, without addressing the contextual realities specific to emerging economies which this review directly fills. A structured critical literature review was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar, yielding a final sample of 40 peer reviewed studies published between 2011 and 2025, supplemented by seminal methodological works. Studies were analysed through an original five dimension framework addressing contextual imperatives, dominant methodological approaches, cross cultural challenges, quality and rigour, and methodological innovation. Findings reveal a persistent tension between established Western methodological frameworks and the need for context sensitive approaches that reflect local ways of knowing. Case study designs and semi structured interviews dominated the literature, yet methodological justification and adherence to recognised quality standards were often weak. Member checking was analytically consequential in only 20 percent of the studies reviewed which is a concrete benchmark not previously reported in the literature. Three critical gaps are identified and consolidated for the first time including the absence of validated indigenous quality criteria, limited South South methodological exchange, and the systematic exclusion of digitally marginalised populations from technology enhanced research. The review makes four original contributions including a systematic evidence based mapping of methodological tensions, identification of three previously unconsolidated gaps, an empirical benchmark on member checking practice, and a contextually grounded decision framework for qualitative method selection in emerging economy settings. These contributions advance the academic debate on research methodology for business and management studies by providing an evidence base rather than advocacy for methodological pluralism, culturally grounded quality frameworks, and digitally inclusive research design.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Emerging Economies, Business Research Methodology, Contextual Adaptation, Cross-Cultural Research, Methodological Rigour, Critical Literature Review

1. Introduction and Background

Qualitative business research in emerging economies has expanded significantly over the past decade, yet its methodological foundations remain fragmented and often misaligned with the cultural, institutional, and epistemological realities of these contexts. Emerging economies are characterised by rapid economic transition, diverse institutional frameworks, cultural values, and evolving market systems. These conditions create research environments that cannot be fully understood through the direct application of Western developed methodologies (Plakoyiannaki, Wei, & Prashantham, 2019; Halme et al., 2024). The expansion of qualitative research across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe has highlighted concerns regarding the suitability of dominant qualitative traditions in non Western contexts. Many established approaches are grounded in assumptions about individualism, institutional transparency, and formal documentation, which may not align with environments shaped by informal economies and collectivist knowledge systems (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Qualitative methods remain important in contexts where quantitative data is limited, yet balancing methodological rigour with contextual relevance remains a persistent challenge. Existing reviews focus either on substantive findings or on generic qualitative methods and methodological principles, without addressing the contextual realities specific to emerging economies (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This creates a gap in the literature which this review addresses directly by focusing on methodological tensions rather than research outcomes alone.

1.1 Problem Statement

Qualitative business research in emerging economies often relies on Western-developed methods that may not align with local realities shaped by institutional voids, collectivist knowledge systems, and informal economies. Approaches such as case studies, grounded theory, and semi-structured interviews are frequently applied without sufficient contextual adaptation, reducing validity and limiting methodological relevance (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). The field faces three key challenges: the uncritical application of Western methods, poor

documentation of contextual adaptations, and the lack of validated quality criteria for indigenous approaches (De Klerk & Swart, 2023; Mpofu & Mudau, 2026; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As a result, methodological fidelity may compromise contextual validity, while adaptation and indigenisation may weaken transparency and credibility (Saunders & Rojon, 2011).

1.2 Rationale of the Study

This review is justified by four interrelated factors. Emerging economies account for a large share of global population growth and economic expansion, yet methodological understanding of how qualitative research is conducted in these contexts remains underdeveloped (Halme et al., 2024). Although qualitative research has grown rapidly, methodological reflection has not kept pace with this expansion. Existing reviews tend to focus either on substantive findings or on general methodological principles rather than on systematic mapping of context specific methodological tensions (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Foundational qualitative standards are also inconsistently applied, with many studies referencing methodological authority without demonstrating full adherence to established quality criteria (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). In addition, calls to decolonise research methods highlight the need to evaluate both Western and indigenous approaches based on evidence rather than assumption (Meyer, 2014).

1.3 Search Strategy and Scope

The search was conducted systematically across four major academic databases. Search terms, date ranges, and inclusion criteria are documented below in Table 1 to guard against selection bias (Saunders & Rojon, 2011).

Table 1: The full bibliographic details of the 40 studies comprising the final corpus are included in the Reference list.

Element	Detail
Databases	Scopus · Web of Science · EBSCO Business Source Complete · Google Scholar
Search terms	“qualitative research” AND (“emerging economies” OR “developing countries”) AND “business research”; “methodology” AND “cross-cultural” AND “qualitative”; “institutional voids” AND “qualitative”
Date range	2011–2025 (primary); seminal works pre-2011 retained
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed articles; qualitative or mixed-methods studies; business/management focus; explicit methodological discussion
Exclusion criteria	Purely quantitative studies; grey literature; no methodological discussion
Final corpus	40 studies

1.4 Analytical Framework

This review uses a five-dimension analytical framework to ensure systematic synthesis rather than descriptive summary (Croom et al., 2000). The framework comprises contextual imperatives, dominant methodological approaches, cross cultural challenges, quality and rigour, and methodological innovation. Table 2 maps these dimensions to the corresponding sections of the review, providing a clear structure for analysing methodological tensions in emerging economy research.

Table 2:

Dimension	Analytical Focus	Key Sub-Themes
Contextual Imperatives	Why emerging economies demand methodological adaptation	Institutional voids; cultural epistemologies; resource constraints
Dominant Approaches	Which qualitative traditions are deployed and how	Case study; grounded theory; interviews; mixed methods
Cross-Cultural Challenges	Language, ethics, and power in cross-cultural inquiry	Translation; positionality; ethical protocols
Quality & Rigour	How trustworthiness is established under contextual pressure	Saturation; triangulation; transparency
Innovation & Futures	Emerging directions and capacity-building imperatives	Digital methods; decolonising; South–South networks

2. Contextual Imperatives: The Case for Methodological Adaptation in Emerging Economies

Research in emerging economies is shaped by four key contextual features: cultural diversity, economic variability, institutional differences, and resource constraints. Together, these factors create a distinct research environment that often challenges methodologies developed in Western contexts and requires methodological adaptation to generate meaningful and contextually relevant insights (Plakoyiannaki, Wei & Prashantham, 2019; Halme et al., 2024).

2.1 Institutional Voids and Informal Economy Dynamics

Emerging economies are characterised by institutional voids, that is the absence of market-supporting institutions that facilitate transactions in developed economies. Research on open innovation shows how firms navigate institutional constraints through partnerships with startups and academic institutions (Gassmann, Enkel, & Chesbrough, 2010). Studies of informal female entrepreneurs in India further demonstrate how traditional business frameworks struggle to capture enterprises operating outside regulatory systems (Shet et al., 2024). These businesses often lack documented records, rely on oral agreements, and resist conventional data collection methods. Institutional instability also creates temporal challenges, reducing the transferability of findings across time (De Klerk & Swart, 2023). The key methodological challenge is not the rejection of Western tools, but their deliberate adaptation to institutional context. Researchers may need to adapt their methodologies to align with local governance structures and legal requirements (Nguyen et al., 2025).

2.2 Cultural Epistemologies and Local Knowledge Systems

Emerging economies are characterised by diverse cultural values, beliefs, and social norms that influence research processes and outcomes. Cultural competence is therefore essential for engaging effectively with participants and ensuring valid and reliable findings (Mazonde & Carmichael, 2020; Oliver & Lincoln, 2025). Researchers often need to adapt research designs to reflect local cultural contexts rather than relying solely on Western assumptions (Oliver & Lincoln, 2025). This challenge extends to knowledge production, as Western epistemological frameworks may not fully capture indigenous perspectives (Meyer, 2014). For example, Ubuntu, Christian values, and collective obligations shape business sustainability in Zimbabwean family firms (Chagwesha et al., 2025), while hierarchical relationships influence behaviour in Confucian contexts (Liu, 2011). These cultural differences often require researchers to modify existing concepts and analytical approaches to ensure contextual relevance.

2.3 Resource Constraints and the Digital Divide

Infrastructure disparities create methodological asymmetries with significant implications for research quality. Researchers in emerging economies may lack reliable electricity, internet access, or computing resources (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2018). Digitally mediated research can also exclude marginalised populations whose experiences are often most important to study. Addressing these constraints therefore requires both

methodological adaptation and broader investment in equitable research infrastructure (Frimpong & Mamuti, 2026; Couper & Piekari, 2025). Researchers in emerging economies are increasingly recognizing the value of adapting their approaches to better capture the complexities of these environments. This shift towards methodological flexibility and contextual sensitivity is essential for advancing knowledge that is both locally relevant and globally significant.

2.4 External Validity in Transitional Contexts

A fourth contextual challenge is the stability of research findings over time in rapidly changing emerging economies. Institutional environments often evolve faster than the research cycle, meaning that findings may become less relevant as economic, regulatory, and social conditions change (De Klerk & Swart, 2023). Longitudinal research can help address this challenge by tracking change over time rather than relying on a single snapshot of a particular context (Pettigrew, 1990). Where longitudinal designs are not feasible, researchers should clearly report the period of data collection and the institutional conditions under which the study was conducted. Such transparency enables readers to assess the continuing relevance of the findings and their applicability to changing contexts. Having established why emerging economies constitute a distinct research environment.

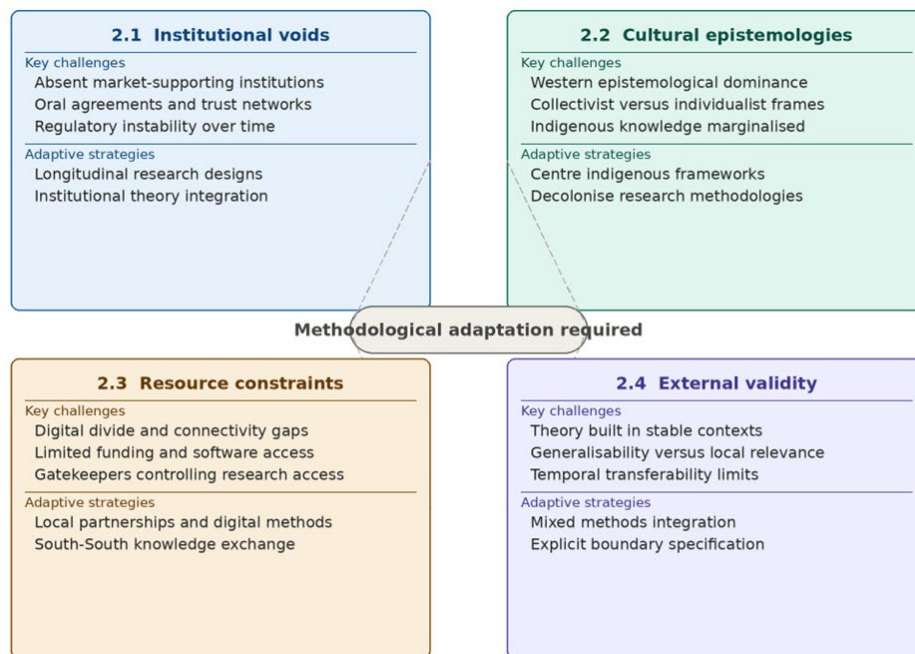


Figure 1: Contextual challenges requiring methodological adaptation in emerging economies (Sections 2.1–2.4).

3. Dominant Qualitative Approaches: Critical Assessment

This section critically evaluates research design, sampling rigour, and the quality of evidence each tradition produces. The goal is evaluative synthesis, not descriptive catalogue.

3.1 Case Study Research

Case study methodology is the most widely used qualitative approach in emerging economy research because it provides rich contextual insights (Welch, Piekari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011; Yin, 2018). However, many studies rely on purposive sampling through personal networks, which can exclude businesses operating in informal settings and limit broader applicability. In addition, important methodological frameworks such as Eisenhardt's (1989) approach to theoretical sampling, Yin's (2018) procedures for construct validity, and Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidance on qualitative inquiry traditions are often not clearly applied or reported, reducing methodological rigour.

3.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory has gained prominence where existing theories are insufficient to explain local phenomena (Shet et al., 2024). However, many studies claim theoretical saturation without adequately documenting how it was achieved, raising concerns about sampling adequacy and premature closure (Mpofu & Mudau, 2026). Researchers also rarely distinguish between Glaserian, Straussian, and constructivist grounded theory traditions, despite their different epistemological assumptions. This limits methodological transparency and makes comparison across studies more difficult (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

3.3 Interview-Based Methodologies

Semi structured interviews remain the dominant data collection method in qualitative business research in emerging economies (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Vignette techniques, which use hypothetical scenarios to encourage more open discussion, have shown value in addressing cultural deference and sensitive topics (Azman & Mahadhir, 2017). However, interviews with senior managers and business leaders can be challenging because access is often gained through personal networks that may influence participant responses. Although less common, focus groups offer value in collectivist contexts because they capture how shared meanings are developed through group interaction.

3.4 Mixed Methods

Mixed methods research reflects a pragmatic approach to addressing complex research problems (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Sequential exploratory designs are particularly useful because qualitative findings can inform the development of quantitative instruments grounded in local language and cultural understanding. However, several studies do not clearly explain how qualitative and quantitative components are integrated, limiting the overall value of methodological mixing. Effective mixed methods research requires explicit justification of how different forms of evidence contribute to interpretation and knowledge generation. The literature provides limited comparative evidence on which qualitative approaches generate the most transferable insights across different emerging economy contexts. Figure 2 presents a decision framework for selecting an appropriate research approach based on theoretical adequacy, research objectives, contextual conditions, and access constraints. For example, where existing theory is sufficient, mixed methods can be used to test and refine theory, while grounded theory is more appropriate when studying novel phenomena with limited theoretical foundations. Similarly, case studies, interviews, and vignette methods may be selected according to the depth of inquiry required and the practical realities of access. By emphasising methodological fit rather than methodological preference, **Figure 2** provides a context sensitive guide for qualitative research design in emerging economies.

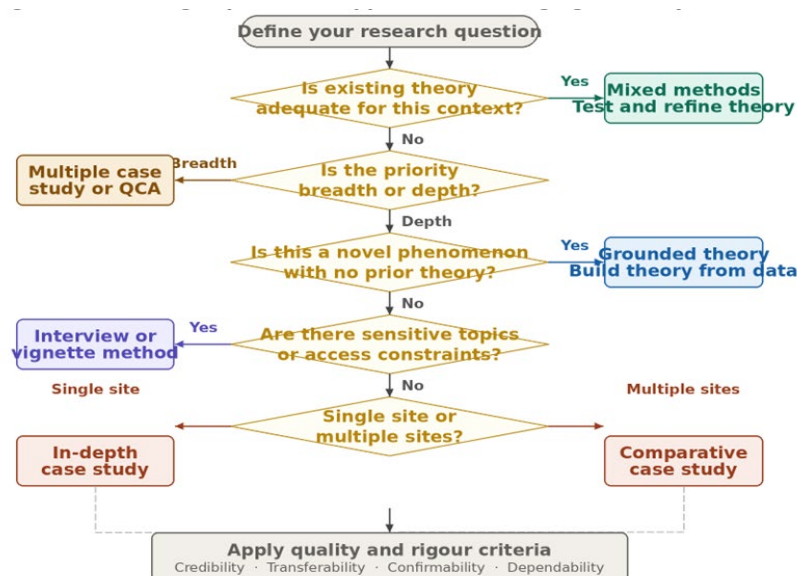


Figure 2: Decision framework for selecting a qualitative approach for emerging economy research (Sections 3.1–3.4). QCA = Qualitative Comparative Analysis

4. Cross-Cultural and Multilingual Research Challenges

4.1 Language, Translation, and Meaning-Making

Language is a major but often overlooked challenge in cross-cultural qualitative research (Couper & Piekkari, 2025). Concepts like “trust” or “entrepreneurial orientation” can mean different things in different cultures, making direct translation difficult. Researchers must decide whether to keep standard tools or adapt them to local contexts. One approach is to code data in the original language first, then translate it for analysis, but this requires strong bilingual skills and clear reporting. Back-translation can check wording accuracy, but it does not ensure the concept has the same meaning. A question may be correctly translated but still fail to measure the same idea. Testing for true conceptual equivalence is rarely done and remains a key gap in the literature.

4.2 Positionality, Ethics, and Power

Insider/outsider researcher status takes distinctive forms in emerging economy contexts. Local researchers possess cultural fluency and community connections but may struggle to maintain critical distance, meaning the ability to step back from personal involvement and cultural familiarity in order to analyse the data objectively and question taken-for-granted assumptions, while external researchers may gain access more easily but risk misunderstanding local contexts (De Klerk & Swart, 2023). Ethical guidelines designed for Western settings may also fail to fit collectivist contexts where community consent matters more than individual consent (Chagwasha et al., 2025). Studies in South African mining and Indonesian social enterprises show that power differences between researchers and participants can affect data quality, as participants may adjust responses strategically (De Klerk & Swart, 2023; Hesse et al., 2019). However, there is currently no validated tool to assess how power relations affect data authenticity in cross-cultural research. Developing such a reflexivity audit tool is therefore an important priority. These challenges highlight the need to examine how quality and rigour are established in the literature, as discussed in Section 5.

5. Quality, Rigour, and Validity

5.1 Trustworthiness in Unstable Contexts

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness framework, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, remains the dominant standard for qualitative quality. However, its application in emerging economies is uneven and often context constrained. Institutional instability can disrupt dependability, while credibility through member checking may be limited in contexts where participants are reluctant to challenge researchers (Chagwasha et al., 2025). Across the 40 studies reviewed, 24 (60%) reported member checking, 14 (35%) described how it was conducted, and only 8 (20%) showed that it influenced analysis. This indicates that member checking is often reported procedurally but rarely integrated into interpretation, reducing transparency and weakening overall rigour. Confirmability is also difficult to establish in cross cultural research due to researcher positionality and interpretive bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.2 Saturation and Open Science Dilemmas

Theoretical saturation is often claimed without sufficient justification, particularly in diverse settings where different populations may produce different findings (Mpofu & Mudau, 2026). In such contexts, saturation may reflect limited sampling rather than true theoretical completeness. Triangulation is also constrained by limited availability of documentary data, making participant based triangulation more common. Open science requirements present ethical challenges, as data sharing may expose participants to harm in sensitive political or organisational environments. As a result, detailed audit trails and transparent reporting of methodological decisions are more appropriate than full data sharing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

6. Emerging Trends and Future Directions

6.1 Digital Methods and Technology

Mobile technology enables new ways of collecting data in low-resource settings (Alam & Pal, 2024), while AI-assisted qualitative analysis can improve coding consistency and efficiency (Morgan, 2023). However, these digital approaches may exclude marginalised groups without smartphones or reliable internet access, and AI

tools can reflect biases in their training data, often favouring Western and English-language sources. These limitations are balanced by important benefits. Mobile tools with offline functionality can improve access to hard-to-reach populations (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2018). When used as support rather than replacement for researchers, large language models can also help reduce individual bias in qualitative coding (Jalali & Akhavan, 2024). Moreover, concerns about Western bias are increasingly addressed in newer multilingual AI systems. Overall, digital methods should be evaluated contextually rather than viewed as inherently problematic.

6.2 Decolonising Methodologies

The decolonisation agenda questions core assumptions in conventional qualitative research (Meyer, 2014). Approaches grounded in Ubuntu philosophy aim to centre indigenous knowledge systems (Chagwasha et al., 2025), but meaningful decolonisation also requires changing structural inequalities in publishing and funding, not just using indigenous terms in Western formats. However, the debate is not one-sided. Comparative methodology scholars argue that social science should distinguish between universal and context-specific concepts, and that fully replacing Western categories may complicate comparison (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Others caution that treating “indigenous methodology” as a single system can oversimplify diverse knowledge systems and may reflect Western assumptions (Mir & Mir, 2009). In addition, research using indigenous frameworks can still face publication barriers, limiting its intended impact. Overall, decolonisation debates are complex and should be presented in a balanced way.

6.3 Capacity Building and South–South Networks

South–South research networks develop methods based on shared local challenges rather than relying on imported Northern frameworks (Couper & Piekkari, 2025). However, three main gaps remain: agreed standards for evaluating indigenous research quality, stronger systems for collaboration between Southern countries, and better digital research designs for people with limited internet or technology access. Efforts such as regional journals, shared databases, and joint PhD programmes are important, but they need to be based on evidence to avoid past mistakes. The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) shows that collaboration within the Global South can improve research skills, but it also depends heavily on stable funding (Mkandawire, 2011). Similarly, CLACSO journals have improved regional knowledge sharing, but many are not indexed in major systems like Scopus, which limits their global visibility (Beigel, 2014). Platforms like the Open Science Framework are also not widely used in qualitative research and can lack strong quality control when used informally. Overall, these initiatives can work well, but they often struggle because of funding problems, limited global recognition, and inconsistent research standards.

6.4 Limitations and Reflexivity

The tension between Western methods and emerging economy contexts should be seen as a space for innovation rather than a problem. However, this review has limitations. It included only 40 studies, mainly from English-language sources, which may exclude relevant work in other languages and regions. The 2013–2025 range also leaves out earlier foundational studies, and the focus on issues like quality criteria and digital access meant less attention to oral and participatory methods. The review is also shaped by its own assumptions. As Mingers (2000) notes, research is influenced by the researcher’s context. Although it supports decolonising approaches, it is not fully neutral and follows Western academic norms such as English-language publishing and Global North peer review. A clearer positionality statement would improve transparency and rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mingers, 2000).

6.5 Implications for Research Methodology in Business and Management Studies

This review shows clear implications for research methodology in business and management studies. Emerging economies require context-sensitive methods rather than simply applying Western frameworks, which affects how methodology is taught, how PhD students are supervised, and how journal reviewers judge rigour. Digital and configurational methods should support, not replace, traditional case studies and interviews, with choices driven by research questions and context rather than trends (Reuber et al., 2022). Quality standards also need to be rethought. Saturation should include cultural as well as conceptual depth, credibility must consider unstable contexts, and member-checking should be treated as an analytical process rather than a routine step, as it influenced outcomes in only 20% of studies reviewed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mpofu & Mudau, 2026).

6.6 Original Contributions to Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies

This review makes four main contributions to business and management research methodology. First, it maps key methodological tensions in qualitative research in emerging economies using a five-dimension framework across 40 studies, offering an evidence-based rather than opinion-based synthesis. Second, it identifies three key gaps: lack of validated indigenous quality standards, limited South–South collaboration, and exclusion of digitally marginalised groups in digital research. Third, it strengthens debates on quality by showing that member-checking influenced analysis in only 20% of studies, providing a clear benchmark for future research. Fourth, it offers a practical framework for choosing qualitative methods based on research goals, context, theory, and access conditions. Overall, these contributions support more rigorous and context-sensitive qualitative research.

6.7 Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

The review leads to three linked recommendations for researchers, methodologists, journal editors, and institutions involved in emerging economy business research.

6.7.1 *Recommendation 1: Embrace Methodological Pluralism*

Researchers should select methods based on the research question, context, and practical access rather than fixed methodological rules. Methodological choices should be justified by their evidential value and accompanied by clear documentation of contextual influences on research design (Reuber et al., 2022).

6.7.2 *Recommendation 2: Reconceptualise Quality Criteria for Emerging Economy Contexts*

The field requires context-sensitive quality criteria beyond traditional trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Saturation, credibility, and member-checking should reflect cultural and contextual complexity, with future research validating quality standards for diverse emerging economy settings (Halme et al., 2024; Plakoyiannaki, Wei & Prashantham, 2019).

6.7.3 *Recommendation 3: Pursue Structural Transformation in Publishing and Funding*

Decolonising research requires structural change beyond the use of indigenous terminology, including more inclusive editorial boards, funding models that prioritise community benefit, and publishing standards that recognise contextual adaptation as rigorous (Meyer, 2014). It also demands fair authorship practices and equitable data ownership in international collaborations.

7. Conclusions

This critical review demonstrates that qualitative business research in emerging economies is shaped by persistent tensions between established methodological frameworks and context-specific realities. While qualitative approaches such as case studies, grounded theory, and interviews remain dominant, their application often shows limited adaptation to institutional instability, cultural diversity, and resource constraints. The five-dimension framework developed in this study enables a structured synthesis of these challenges and highlights recurring weaknesses in methodological justification, transparency, and quality assurance. A key empirical finding is the inconsistent application of member checking, with only 20% of the reviewed studies demonstrating that participant feedback influenced analytical outcomes. This suggests that procedural compliance with quality criteria does not necessarily translate into analytical rigour. Overall, the review identifies three major gaps: the absence of validated indigenous quality criteria, limited South–South methodological exchange, and the exclusion of digitally marginalised populations from technology-enabled research. These findings support the need for methodological pluralism, context-sensitive quality frameworks, and more inclusive research designs in emerging economy scholarship.

AI AND ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

☐ AI tool use

AI tools were used for language and structure support, but all analysis and conclusions were completed by the author.

☐ Ethical clearance

No ethical clearance was required because the study used only publicly available literature and no human participants or primary data were involved.

☐ Academic integrity

The review followed standard academic integrity practices, including proper citation and avoidance of plagiarism.

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