

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

Peter Iorper Ugondo & Godwin Peter
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria

Corresponding author: godwinpeterjen@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual review of qualitative research paradigms and their relevance to media and communication research in the digital era. The review examines the major qualitative paradigms, namely interpretivism, constructivism, and the critical paradigm, and explains how each provides a useful foundation for understanding communication processes, media practices, audience experiences, and social interactions. The study further discusses the application of these paradigms in various areas in communication and media studies. In addition, the paper highlights some of the challenges associated with applying qualitative research paradigms, including researcher subjectivity, issues of trustworthiness, participant recruitment, and the interpretation of large volumes of digital data. The review argues that despite these challenges, qualitative research paradigms remain highly relevant because they enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of human experiences, meanings, and communication practices within their natural social and cultural settings. The paper concludes that the continued advancement of digital communication technologies has further strengthened the importance of qualitative research paradigms in producing rich, credible, and context-sensitive knowledge that can inform media practice, policy development, and future communication research.

Keywords: *Qualitative research, Research paradigms, Media and Communication, Interpretivism, Constructivism.*

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research has become one of the most widely used approaches in media and communication studies because it allows researchers to understand how people create, interpret, and share meaning within different social and cultural settings. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses mainly on measuring variables and testing hypotheses, qualitative research seeks to explore experiences, opinions, beliefs, and behaviours in their natural contexts. This makes it particularly useful for examining communication processes, media content, audience experiences, journalism practice, political communication, digital media, and public relations. As communication environments continue to change through technological advancement and the expansion of digital platforms, qualitative research provides researchers with the flexibility needed to investigate emerging communication issues from the perspectives of those directly involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Tracy, 2024).

The philosophical foundation of qualitative research is built on research paradigms, which provide assumptions about reality, knowledge, and appropriate methods for conducting research. Research paradigms influence how researchers perceive and define research problems, collect data, analyse findings, and interpret results. In qualitative inquiry, the most commonly applied paradigms include interpretivism, constructivism, and the critical paradigm. Each of these paradigms offers a different way of understanding communication phenomena while recognising that human experiences are shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2024). Understanding these paradigms is important because they guide researchers in selecting suitable methods and ensuring that their studies

remain consistent from the research questions to the interpretation of findings.

Media and communication research increasingly depends on qualitative paradigms because many communication issues involve human interactions, meanings, identities, cultures, and power relations that cannot be adequately explained through numerical data alone. Studies on news production, social media behaviour, media representation, audience interpretation, health communication campaigns, political campaigns, and organisational communication often require detailed exploration of people's experiences and perceptions. Consequently, qualitative paradigms have become central and even integral to communication research globally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2025; Silverman, 2022).

This study therefore presents a conceptual review of qualitative research paradigms in media and communication research. It discusses the meaning of qualitative research, explains the concept of research paradigms, examines the major qualitative paradigms, explores the role of subjectivity and reflexivity, discusses theory building, highlights practical applications within media and communication studies, identifies existing challenges, and examines emerging developments that are shaping qualitative inquiry in the digital era.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to examine Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research from Conceptual Review perspective. However, the specific objectives are to:

- 1.Determine the emerging developments shaping Qualitative Research in the Digital Era
- 2.Identify areas of application of Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research

3.Examine the Challenges of applying Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research

Conceptual Review

The major concepts constituting this study have been reviewed to provide greater insight to the topic.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research represents one of the two major paradigmatic approaches to social inquiry, majorly concerned with exploring the meanings individuals and groups ascribe to social or human phenomena. It seeks to understand phenomena in their natural settings and interpret them through the meanings people attach to them. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) assert that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, implying that researchers study phenomena in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of them in terms of participants' meanings. This presupposes that qualitative research is primarily carried out to explore how people understand the world in their given social setting. It uses flexible, open-ended questions to study people's experiences. Qualitative research basically seeks to uncover the how and why behind any given phenomenon thereby providing explanation and at the same time demystifying social problems. Similarly, Creswell and Poth (2018) also buttressed that qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. These definitions underscore its interpretive, contextual, and non-numerical orientation, with a central focus on meaning making rather than the measurement of variables as it is in quantitative research.

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that one of the overarching goals of qualitative research lies in its ability to examine how people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the

social realities of individuals, groups, and cultures (Khalifa, 2023). It studies the nature of phenomena, their qualities, different manifestations, and the contexts in which they appear, rather than their frequency or measurable outcomes. It is a socially responsive form of inquiry that emphasises understanding experiences to gain deeper insights into surrounding circumstances (Flick, 2014). As a multi-perspective approach to social interactions, it describes and interprets the meanings participants attach to discourses, using procedures such as logic, ethnography, focus group discussion, discourse analysis, case studies, open-ended interviews, and participant observation (Mohajan, 2018).

Furthermore, Qualitative research is systematic and subjective, highlighting everyday life experiences and assigning meaning that quantitative research alone cannot capture (Mohajan, 2018). Its focus on lived experiences lends itself to generating new theories inductively, which can later be tested deductively. Bryman (2016) describes it as a strategy that emphasises words rather than quantification and aims to discover patterns of meaning rather than test hypotheses. Brennen (2017) frames it as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, enabling scholars, particularly in communication and media studies, to examine texts, discourses, and cultural practices as lived realities. Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to uncover the underlying social, cultural and communicative meanings that statistical analyses often obscure.

Therefore, the focus of qualitative research is thus on understanding subjective meanings, emotions, and interactions that shape social life which are often neglected or underexplored in quantitative research. It privileges the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants and settings, emphasizing context, narrative, and

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

perspective (Flick, 2019). By using non-numerical data interviews, observations, focus groups, documents, or media texts researchers uncover how people experience and construct their realities. This interpretive stance aligns with the ontological and epistemological commitments of constructivism and interpretivism, viewing reality as socially constructed and knowledge as co-created through researcher-participant interaction (Schwandt, 2015; Silverman, 2020). In mass communication, qualitative research deepens understanding of messages, audiences, and cultures. It allows scholars to explore audience interpretations, journalistic meaning-making, and how cultural values shape media content and reception. Approaches such as discourse analysis, ethnography, and case studies enable interpretation of meaning negotiation across media contexts (McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Berger, 2019). In development communication, qualitative methods reveal how communities perceive, internalise, or resist media campaigns, illuminating the participatory and dialogic dimensions of communication that quantitative surveys cannot capture (Asemah & Edegoh, 2018). Thus, qualitative research remains indispensable in media and communication scholarship, offering nuanced insights into the interplay between media texts, audiences, and social realities.

Qualitative Research Paradigms

A research paradigm is the broad view that guides how a researcher understands reality, knowledge, and the process of carrying out a study. It provides the underlying beliefs that shape the choice of research methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the interpretation of findings. In qualitative research, paradigms are important because they help researchers understand human experiences, beliefs, actions, and social interactions within

their natural settings. Rather than seeking a single truth, qualitative research recognises that people often experience the same event in different ways depending on their background, culture, and environment. As a result, qualitative researchers focus on understanding meanings from the viewpoints of the people being studied instead of measuring them with numbers. Studies have consistently demonstrated that qualitative paradigms remain central to research in education, communication, health, management, and other social science fields because they provide rich explanations of complex social issues that cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods alone (Patterson et al., 2023; Phillips, 2023).

Guba and Lincoln view a research paradigm as a basic belief system or worldview that guides how a researcher understands reality, knowledge and the process of conducting research. In their influential discussion, they argue that researchers should not choose research methods in isolation because every method rests on assumptions about what reality is like, how knowledge can be obtained and how the researcher should study what is being investigated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). They organise these assumptions around three main questions: ontology, which concerns what is believed about reality; epistemology, which concerns the relationship between the researcher and what can be known; and methodology, which concerns how knowledge can be obtained. Using these questions, Guba and Lincoln examined four major paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. They particularly emphasised that constructivism sees reality as made up of multiple understandings that develop through people's experiences and social interactions, rather than as one fixed reality that exists independently of people (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Their perspective is important because it shows that a researcher's choice of paradigm affects the

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

questions asked, the kind of evidence considered meaningful and the way findings are interpreted. In later work, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) further explained that research paradigms also involve questions about values and the researcher's position, showing that research cannot be completely separated from the assumptions and values that guide the researcher. Therefore, from Guba and Lincoln's perspective, a paradigm provides the overall direction and

Table 1: Guba and Lincoln (1994)

assumptions of a study, while methods such as interviews, questionnaires, observation and document analysis are tools selected to carry out the study within that broader position.

Table 1 provides further explanation on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of the three commonly discussed research paradigms

Paradigm	Ontological Assumption: What is reality?	Epistemological Assumption: How knowledge is acquired
Positivism	Reality is considered to be real, stable and independent of the researcher. Social events can be studied as facts that exist outside the researcher.	Knowledge is gained through careful observation, measurement and evidence. The researcher is expected to remain as objective and separate from the subject of study as possible.
Interpretivism/Constructivism	Reality is understood as multiple and shaped by people's experiences and interpretations. Different people may understand the same situation differently.	Knowledge develops through interaction between the researcher and participants. Understanding people's meanings, experiences and views is more important than searching for one universal explanation.
Critical Theory	Reality is understood as being influenced by social, political, economic and cultural conditions, including unequal relationships of power. What is accepted as normal may reflect the interests of powerful groups.	Knowledge is not completely separate from values, power and social interests. Research should help reveal unfair conditions and give attention to the experiences of less powerful groups.

This comparison is based mainly on the paradigm framework developed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), who explain paradigms through questions about reality, knowledge and research methods. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) later expanded this discussion by showing how these assumptions influence the way researchers understand and conduct qualitative inquiry. It is

also important to note that the boundaries are not absolute. For example, interviews can be used in positivist, interpretivist or critical research depending on the assumptions and purpose of the study. The method alone, therefore, does not determine the paradigm

LITERATURE REVIEW

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

Understanding major Qualitative Research Paradigms

Interpretivism: The most widely used qualitative research paradigm is interpretivism. This paradigm is based on the belief that reality is created through people's experiences and interactions. It also surmises that reality is socially constructed and interpreted through the lens of the participants involved. Interpretivist researchers believe that individuals give different meanings to events based on their personal and social backgrounds. Therefore, the aim of research is not to discover one universal truth but to understand how people make sense of their lives. Researchers working within this paradigm spend time interacting closely with participants through interviews, phenomenology, observations, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Qualitative researchers recognise that their own background may influence the research process and therefore remain open and reflective throughout the study. Interpretivism is widely applied in communication studies because it allows researchers to understand audience perceptions, media experiences, organisational communication, and social behaviour from the perspectives of those directly involved (Chanthanet & Sukhonthachit, 2023; Patterson et al., 2023). Interpretivism, constructivism and social constructionism are closely related perspectives in social research, but they differ mainly in what they emphasise about reality, knowledge and meaning. Interpretivism is a broad research orientation that seeks to understand how people give meaning to their experiences and social worlds rather than assuming that social reality can be studied in exactly the same way as the natural world; it therefore gives importance to people's views, experiences, values, culture and the meanings they attach to events (Crotty, 1998; Buzzanell, 2016).

Constructivism: Constructivism shares many similarities with interpretivism but places greater attention on the idea that knowledge is jointly created by researchers and participants during the research process. It argues that reality is not fixed but is continually shaped by people's interactions, language, culture, and daily experiences. From this perspective, different participants may describe the same event differently, and all these accounts are considered valuable because they reflect genuine lived experiences. The researcher therefore works closely with participants to develop a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation. Constructivism is especially useful for studies exploring identity, culture, media consumption, organisational behaviour, and community development because it values multiple perspectives instead of searching for one correct answer (Phillips, 2023; Chanthanet & Sukhonthachit, 2023). Constructivism, on the other hand, focuses more directly on how individuals actively develop their understanding of reality through their experiences and interactions. In simple terms, constructivism asks how people make sense of the world and build their own meanings from what they experience, although these meanings are influenced by their social environment.

The critical paradigm: The critical paradigm also occupies an important place in qualitative research. While interpretivism and constructivism focus mainly on understanding people's experiences, the critical paradigm goes a step further by examining how power, inequality, discrimination, and social injustice affect those experiences. Researchers working within this paradigm seek not only to understand society but also to contribute to positive social change. They often investigate issues such as poverty, gender inequality, political exclusion, media ownership, discrimination, environmental justice, and human rights. Participants are viewed as partners whose voices deserve recognition, particularly those

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

who have been ignored or marginalised. The findings generated under the critical paradigm are expected to encourage reforms, influence policy, and improve people's lives. Recent methodological discussions continue to identify critical approaches as valuable for addressing contemporary social challenges because they connect research with practical action and social responsibility (Phillips, 2023).

Although these paradigms differ in their assumptions, they share several important features. They all recognise that human experiences are complex and cannot always be explained through numerical measurements. They encourage researchers to study people within their natural environments, value participants' voices, and acknowledge that

researchers play an active role in the research process. These paradigms also emphasise flexibility, allowing research questions and data collection to develop as new insights emerge during the study. Recent reviews of qualitative inquiry further stress that good qualitative research depends on clear alignment between the chosen paradigm, research questions, methods of data collection, data analysis, and ethical practice. Researchers are also encouraged to be transparent about their own positions and to explain how they reached their interpretations so that readers can have confidence in the findings (Patterson et al., 2023).

Tabular presentation of Interpretivism, Constructivism and Critical paradigm

Table 2: Comparison of interpretivism, constructivism and the critical paradigm.

Key feature	Interpretivism	Constructivism	Critical paradigm
View of reality	Reality is understood through the meanings people give to their experiences and social situations.	Reality is understood as being constructed by individuals through their experiences and interactions with others	Reality is shaped by social, political, economic and cultural conditions, including unequal power relations.
Main concern	To understand how people interpret their experiences and social world.	To understand how people construct and develop meanings about their world.	To examine power, inequality, domination and conditions that may need to change.
View of knowledge	Knowledge comes from understanding people's meanings, experiences and interpretations.	Knowledge is built through interaction between people, their experiences and their social environment	Knowledge is influenced by social values, power and interests and should help expose unfair conditions.
Role of the researcher	The researcher seeks to understand participants' perspectives and interpretations.	The researcher interacts with participants and recognises that meanings are developed through the research process.	The researcher takes a more openly critical position and seeks to identify and question unequal power relations.
Research purpose	To understand and interpret social	To understand how people construct their own understanding of reality.	To reveal inequality, question accepted practices and contribute to social change.

	experiences and meanings.		
Approach to values	Recognises that the researcher's interpretation can influence the study	Recognises that both researcher and participants contribute to the construction of knowledge.	Explicitly recognises the importance of values, power and social interests in research.
Common research methods	Interviews, focus groups, observation, ethnography and interpretive forms of discourse analysis.	Interviews, focus groups, ethnography, phenomenology and constructivist grounded theory.	Critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography, participatory research, interviews and other approaches that examine power and inequality
Typical research question	How do journalists understand and interpret the changes taking place in their profession?	How do journalists construct their understanding of changes in their profession through their experiences and interactions?	How do media institutions and power relations shape/influence journalists' experiences and professional opportunities?

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to understand how people experience and make sense of a particular event, situation or phenomenon in their everyday lives. Rather than beginning with an attempt to measure an experience or explain why it occurs, phenomenology gives attention to what the experience is like for the people who have lived through it. It is therefore useful when a researcher wants to understand issues such as how patients experience healthcare, how journalists experience newsroom changes, or how students experience online learning. Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019) explain that phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences and helps researchers learn from the experiences of others. The approach is concerned with describing and understanding the meaning people attach to their experiences, while phenomenological interviews often allow participants to explain those experiences in their own words (Finlay, 2011). In this sense, phenomenology places the participant's experience at the centre of the research and seeks

to understand the common meaning or nature of an experience from the perspective of those who have experienced it.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is the view that many of the meanings, categories and understandings people accept as reality are developed through social interaction, language, culture and communication rather than existing as fixed truths independent of society. For example, ideas about what counts as appropriate behaviour, professional success, beauty, leadership or social status can be shaped and changed by the ways people communicate and by the values accepted within a particular society. Burr (2015) argues that social constructionism pays close attention to the historical and cultural setting in which knowledge is produced and to the important role of language in creating understandings of people and events. It is important to distinguish social constructionism from constructivism: constructivism generally places greater emphasis on how an individual develops or constructs knowledge from personal experience, whereas

social constructionism focuses on how meanings are created, negotiated and maintained between people through social interaction and language. Thus, social constructionism is less concerned with what an individual thinks alone and more concerned with how people collectively come to accept particular ways of understanding the world (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionism places greater emphasis on the social process through which meanings and understandings are created, shared and maintained between people through language, communication, culture and everyday interaction. Thus, while constructivism tends to highlight how individuals construct meaning, social constructionism is more concerned with how meanings are produced and sustained through social relationships and shared practices (Burr, 2015). The three perspectives therefore overlap because they reject the idea that social reality is simply a fixed set of facts waiting to be discovered, but their emphasis is different: interpretivism asks how people understand and interpret their world; constructivism asks how individuals construct their understanding of that world; and social constructionism asks how shared meanings and realities are created through social interaction. Chen, Shek, and Bu (2011) similarly explain that the three perspectives are related but have differences in their philosophical assumptions and applications in research.

Post-positivism

Post-positivism developed partly as a response to the limits of traditional positivism and accepts that although researchers can study a real world, their understanding of it can never be completely perfect or free from limitations. Instead of assuming that research can produce absolute and final truth, post-positivism recognises that observations can be affected by the researcher, the research setting, the methods used and the limits of available evidence. This does not mean

that post-positivist researchers reject facts, evidence or systematic research; rather, they accept that findings should be treated as carefully supported explanations that may be revised when better evidence becomes available. Ryan (2019) notes that post-positivism provides a position between positivism and interpretivism and allows researchers to move beyond an exclusive concern with facts, cause-and-effect relationships and hypothesis testing. It can therefore accommodate different ways of gathering evidence, including quantitative and qualitative approaches, depending on the research problem. In simple terms, positivism tends to ask what can be objectively measured, while post-positivism asks what the available evidence allows us to reasonably conclude, while recognising that our conclusions may not be perfect (Ryan, 2019).

Choosing an appropriate qualitative paradigm depends on the purpose of the study. A researcher seeking to understand how people interpret their experiences may adopt interpretivism. One interested in how knowledge is created through social interaction may choose constructivism. Another who aims to examine social inequality and encourage change may adopt the critical paradigm. The selected paradigm should therefore match the research objectives and the nature of the problem under investigation. Regardless of the paradigm selected, qualitative research remains valuable because it provides detailed explanations of human behaviour, social relationships, communication processes, and cultural practices that are often difficult to capture through numerical data alone. As qualitative research continues to evolve, these paradigms remain essential guides for producing credible, meaningful, and socially relevant knowledge across many academic disciplines especially in media and communication. (Chanthanet & Sukhonthachit, 2023; Patterson et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

Documentary research method was adopted for this study where secondary literatures were reviewed and synthesised to gain deeper insight on Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review. Documentary research has as its fundamental objective to look for gaps in scientific knowledge and to interpret and direct approaches (Wills, 2022). The secondary literatures were discussed thematically in line with the objectives of the study. The Boolean strings used as the search strategy were qualitative research paradigms and Media and Communication research. Only materials found to be recent and relevant were included for the study. Most materials used were materials published from 2015 to 2026 so as to rely on literatures that discuss the current trend in qualitative research paradigms in media and communication research. Exemptions were given to few research articles and textbooks that are not recent but are crucial to the discussion of the given topic like Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Emerging developments that are shaping Qualitative Research in the Digital Era

Qualitative research has changed significantly in the digital era. Researchers are no longer limited to face-to-face interviews, paper records, and physical fieldwork. Digital technologies have created new ways of collecting, storing, analysing, and presenting qualitative data. These changes have expanded the range of participants that researchers can reach and have made it possible to study communication, behaviour, and social interaction in online spaces. At the same time, the digital era has introduced new questions about ethics, privacy, data quality, and the role of the researcher. Recent studies show that qualitative research is increasingly shaped by online methods, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and changing expectations about

responsible research practice (Magida, 2024; Williams, 2024).

One major development is the growth of online data collection. Researchers now use video interviews, online focus group discussions, email interviews, and messaging platforms to gather information from participants in different locations. This has made qualitative research more flexible and accessible, especially when participants are geographically dispersed or when physical meetings are difficult. Online methods also allow researchers to include participants who may not have been easily reached through traditional fieldwork. However, researchers must still consider whether online interaction provides the same depth of understanding as face-to-face communication. They must pay attention to issues such as internet access, participant comfort, and the quality of online engagement (Magida, 2024).

Another important development is the increasing use of digital platforms as sources of qualitative data. Social media posts, online discussions, blogs, podcasts, videos, and digital communities now provide valuable information about people's opinions, experiences, and social behaviour. Researchers can study how individuals express themselves, interact with others, and respond to public issues in real time. This has been especially useful in media and communication research, where online platforms often reflect public conversations about politics, health, culture, and social change. The availability of naturally occurring digital data has expanded the possibilities of qualitative inquiry beyond traditional interviews and observations (Magida, 2024).

The rise of artificial intelligence is also shaping qualitative research. AI tools can assist researchers with transcription, data organisation, coding, and the identification of patterns in large sets of qualitative data. These tools can save time

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

and make it easier to manage extensive interview transcripts, online comments, and other textual materials. Recent research notes that AI has the potential to support qualitative analysis by improving efficiency and helping researchers work with larger amounts of data (Williams, 2024). However, scholars also emphasise that AI should not replace the human researcher. Qualitative research depends on understanding context, emotion, culture, tone, and meaning, which often require careful human interpretation (Roberts et al., 2024).

The use of generative AI tools has created both opportunities and concerns. These tools can help researchers draft interview questions, summarise data, and organise themes. They may also make some research tasks easier for students and researchers who are working with large datasets. At the same time, researchers must be careful because AI-generated outputs may contain errors, oversimplify participants' experiences, or reflect hidden biases. Recent discussions highlight the need for researchers to verify AI-assisted analysis and remain responsible for the final interpretation of the data (Roberts et al., 2024; Marshall & Naff, 2024).

Ethics has become a central issue in digital qualitative research. When researchers collect data from online platforms, they must consider whether participants expected their information to be used for research. Questions about informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and data security are now more complex in digital environments. Even when information is publicly available online, researchers must think carefully about how it is collected, stored, and reported. Recent studies on AI and qualitative research also raise concerns about the protection of participant data and the responsible use of automated tools (Marshall & Naff, 2024). These ethical considerations are important because qualitative research often involves sensitive personal

experiences and detailed accounts of people's lives.

Another emerging development is the use of digital tools for qualitative data analysis. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software has been used for many years, but newer tools now offer more advanced ways of organising and searching data. Researchers can manage large numbers of interviews, documents, images, audio files, and online texts more efficiently. Digital tools can help researchers identify recurring ideas and keep track of coding decisions. However, scholars continue to stress that software should support analysis rather than determine the meaning of the findings. The researcher must still make thoughtful decisions about interpretation and ensure that participants' voices are represented accurately (Williams, 2024).

The digital era has also encouraged more flexible and collaborative forms of qualitative research. Researchers can now work with participants and research teams across different locations through shared digital platforms. Collaborative coding, online meetings, and cloud-based data storage have made it easier for research teams to discuss findings and compare interpretations. This can strengthen the credibility of qualitative research by allowing multiple researchers to reflect on the data. At the same time, collaboration requires clear communication about roles, data access, and ethical responsibilities.

Another important change is the growing use of multimedia data. Qualitative researchers increasingly analyse photographs, videos, audio recordings, digital stories, and visual content shared online. These forms of data can provide a richer understanding of people's experiences and communication practices. For example, visual and audio materials can reveal aspects of emotion, identity, and social interaction that may not be fully captured through written text alone.

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

The use of multimedia data has expanded the ways researchers can explore meaning in the digital environment.

The digital era has also highlighted issues of inclusion and inequality. While digital methods can increase access to participants, not everyone has equal access to reliable internet, digital devices, or online platforms. Researchers must therefore consider whose voices are included and whose voices may be excluded from digital research. This is particularly important when conducting research in communities with limited digital resources. Recent reviews note that more attention is needed to the use of digital qualitative methods in emerging economies and diverse social contexts (Magida, 2024).

Qualitative research in the digital era is being shaped by several important developments. Online data collection, digital platforms, artificial intelligence, digital analysis tools, multimedia data, and collaborative research practices have expanded the possibilities of qualitative inquiry. These developments have made research more flexible and have created new opportunities to study human experiences in digital spaces. However, they have also introduced new ethical, practical, and interpretive challenges. Researchers must continue to protect participant privacy, ensure responsible use of AI, and maintain the human judgement that is central to qualitative research. As digital technologies continue to evolve, qualitative research is likely to become more innovative while still relying on careful interpretation and ethical responsibility.

Qualitative Research methods and paradigmatic alignment

A method is a practical way of collecting or analysing data, while a paradigm provides the assumptions that guide how the researcher understands reality, knowledge and meaning. Thus, phenomenology is most commonly

associated with interpretivist and constructivist approaches, particularly when the aim is to understand how people experience and interpret a phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on lived experience and the meanings people give to those experiences, making it especially suitable for interpretive research (Køster & Fernandez, 2023; Oluka, 2025). However, it is not accurate to say that phenomenology can only be used within interpretivism. Different forms of phenomenology have different philosophical roots, and researchers may make slightly different assumptions about how experience should be studied. Similarly, interviews and focus groups are not automatically interpretivist or constructivist methods. They can be used within several paradigms depending on the research purpose. For example, an interview can be used in an interpretivist study to understand participants' meanings and experiences, while a focus group can be used from a social constructionist position to examine how participants develop, challenge and negotiate meanings during group interaction. Gill et al. (2008) note that interviews are useful for exploring people's views, experiences and beliefs, while focus groups make use of group interaction to generate qualitative data. Therefore, the paradigm should be identified from the assumptions and purpose guiding the study, rather than simply from the method used.

Ethnography and discourse analysis also require a similar distinction between method and paradigm. Ethnography is commonly associated with interpretive and constructivist research because it allows researchers to study people's activities, meanings and practices within their natural social settings. Nevertheless, ethnographic research can be conducted from different philosophical positions depending on what the researcher wants to understand. Discourse analysis is even more clearly an example of a method that can cross paradigmatic

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

boundaries. A researcher using ordinary or interpretive discourse analysis may examine how people use language to create meaning, construct identities or understand social events, which fits well with interpretivist or social constructionist research. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), however, is most strongly aligned with the critical paradigm when its purpose is to examine how language is connected to power, inequality, domination and resistance. Järvinen, Mik-Meyer and van Dijk explain that CDA examines how power and inequality are produced, maintained and challenged through text and talk, while also taking an explicit interest in exposing and challenging social inequality. Ziskin (2019) similarly demonstrates the close relationship between CDA and critical qualitative inquiry. Therefore, CDA should not normally be presented simply as an interpretivist method, although a study may use interpretive forms of discourse analysis without adopting the full critical position of CDA.

Consequently, the paper should present paradigm-method alignment as a matter of compatibility rather than a fixed one-to-one relationship. A useful way to express this is that interpretivism commonly works with phenomenology, interviews, focus groups, ethnography and interpretive discourse analysis; constructivism can work with phenomenology, constructivist grounded theory, interviews, focus groups and ethnography; social constructionism particularly supports methods that examine language, interaction and the development of shared meanings; while the critical paradigm strongly supports critical discourse analysis and other approaches concerned with power, inequality and social change. These are common alignments rather than strict rules. Burns et al. (2022), for example, show that researchers working within constructivist assumptions can choose between different qualitative methodologies according to their research

questions and study purpose, while Hood (2016) demonstrates that phenomenological and critical approaches can even be combined when a study needs to examine both lived experience and discursive practices. The important point for media and communication research is therefore that researchers should explain why a particular method fits the assumptions and research questions of the chosen paradigm, instead of simply listing interviews, focus groups, ethnography and discourse analysis under “qualitative methods.”

Application of Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research

Qualitative research paradigms play an important role in media and communication research because they help researchers understand how people create, share, and interpret messages in different social and cultural settings. Unlike quantitative research, which mainly measures patterns using numbers, qualitative research seeks to explain the meanings people attach to media content, communication practices, and everyday experiences. The choice of a qualitative paradigm guides the researcher in deciding how to collect data, interact with participants, and interpret findings. Recent methodological studies emphasise that a clear alignment between the research problem, the selected paradigm, and the research methods strengthens the quality and credibility of qualitative studies (Aguzzoli et al., 2024; Pretorius, 2024).

The interpretivist paradigm is one of the most widely applied paradigms in media and communication research. It is based on the belief that people understand media messages differently according to their personal experiences, social background, culture, and environment. Researchers using this paradigm

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

seek to understand how audiences interpret news reports, entertainment programmes, political messages, social media content, and advertising campaigns. For example, a study examining how young people understand political messages on social media would focus on the participants' personal experiences rather than assuming that everyone interprets the messages in the same way. Interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document analysis are commonly used because they allow participants to explain their views in their own words. This approach has become increasingly valuable as digital media provide diverse audiences with different opportunities to create and interpret content (Kim et al., 2023; Lim, 2025).

The constructivist paradigm is also widely applied in media and communication studies. This paradigm argues that communication and social reality are created through continuous interaction among individuals, groups, institutions, and media organisations. Researchers therefore examine how people jointly create meanings through conversations, media participation, and online engagement. Constructivist research is particularly useful for studying social media communities, digital activism, online identity, citizen journalism, and audience participation. For instance, researchers may investigate how users on platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, or Instagram collectively shape public opinion on national issues through discussions and shared experiences. Rather than treating audiences as passive receivers of information, constructivist researchers view them as active participants in the communication process. This perspective has become increasingly relevant because digital technologies have transformed audiences into both consumers and producers of media content (Kim et al., 2023; Permatasari et al., 2024).

The critical paradigm has become increasingly important in media and communication research because it focuses on issues of power, inequality, representation, and social justice. Researchers working within this paradigm examine how media organisations, governments, and powerful institutions influence public opinion and shape social realities. They also investigate whether certain groups are fairly represented in media content or whether they experience exclusion, discrimination, or negative stereotypes. Studies on gender representation, political communication, media ownership, election reporting, ethnic conflict reporting, and misinformation often apply the critical paradigm because these issues involve questions of fairness, power, and accountability. The findings generated from such studies are expected not only to explain existing communication practices but also to encourage reforms that promote ethical journalism, inclusive communication, and democratic participation. Recent scholarship continues to highlight the importance of critical approaches in addressing emerging communication challenges in the digital age (Razzante & Hanna, 2024; Pretorius, 2024).

Qualitative paradigms are equally valuable in journalism research. Researchers frequently apply interpretivist and constructivist perspectives to examine newsroom practices, editorial decision making, news framing, source selection, and journalists' professional experiences. Through in-depth interviews and observations, researchers are able to understand why journalists make particular editorial choices and how organisational culture, ethics, ownership, and public expectations influence news production. Similarly, studies of audience reception use qualitative paradigms to explore how different communities interpret media reports on politics, health, religion, security, and development. Such studies recognise that audience interpretations vary according to age,

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

education, culture, religion, and previous experiences. These insights are often difficult to obtain through survey research alone because they require detailed explanations from participants (Kim et al., 2023; Lim, 2025).

The rapid growth of digital communication has further expanded the application of qualitative research paradigms. Researchers now investigate online communities, virtual interactions, podcasts, streaming platforms, artificial intelligence, digital storytelling, and user-generated content using qualitative methods. Interviews, online ethnography, digital observation, and thematic analysis enable researchers to understand how people interact with emerging communication technologies and how these technologies influence communication practices. Recent studies also note that while artificial intelligence can support qualitative data management and analysis, researchers must continue to rely on appropriate qualitative paradigms, critical thinking, and ethical judgement when interpreting participants' experiences and meanings (Williams, 2024; Lim, 2025).

In media and communication research, the application of qualitative research paradigms enables researchers to produce rich and meaningful explanations of communication processes that cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone. Whether the objective is to understand audience experiences, examine media representations, analyse newsroom practices, investigate digital communication, or explore issues of power and social change, qualitative paradigms provide suitable philosophical foundations for the study. The continued growth of digital media, artificial intelligence, and participatory communication further strengthens the relevance of interpretivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms in explaining how communication shapes individuals and society.

As a result, qualitative research paradigms remain essential for producing credible, context-sensitive, and socially relevant knowledge in media and communication studies (Aguzzoli et al., 2024; Pretorius, 2024).

Challenges of Applying Qualitative Research Paradigms

The application of qualitative research paradigms has made significant contributions to understanding human experiences, social interactions, and communication processes. However, researchers often face several challenges when applying these paradigms in practice. One major challenge is the subjective nature of qualitative research. Since qualitative paradigms such as interpretivism, constructivism, and critical research focus on understanding people's experiences and meanings, the researcher's own background, beliefs, and experiences may influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Although researcher reflection and transparency help reduce this challenge, complete objectivity is difficult to achieve because researchers are actively involved in the research process (Chafe, 2024; Aguzzoli et al., 2024).

Another challenge is ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Unlike quantitative studies that rely on statistical tests, qualitative research depends on rich descriptions, careful interpretation, and the consistency of the research process. Researchers must therefore spend considerable time collecting detailed data, checking interpretations with participants where appropriate, and providing clear explanations of how themes and conclusions were developed. This process can be time-consuming and requires strong methodological skills. Recent scholarship continues to emphasise that maintaining quality in qualitative research requires transparency, reflexivity, and careful reporting throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Qualitative Research Paradigms in Media and Communication Research: A Conceptual Review

A further challenge relates to participant recruitment and data collection. Qualitative paradigms usually require researchers to interact closely with participants through interviews, focus group discussions, observations, or digital engagement. Gaining access to suitable participants, building trust, and encouraging honest responses may require substantial time and effort. In some cases, participants may be unwilling to discuss sensitive issues or may provide incomplete information because of fear, privacy concerns, or cultural beliefs. These challenges can affect the richness and completeness of the data collected (Burney et al., 2024).

The increasing use of digital technologies has introduced additional challenges in applying qualitative research paradigms. Researchers now collect data from online interviews, social media platforms, virtual communities, and artificial intelligence-assisted tools. While these technologies improve access to participants and large volumes of data, they also raise important ethical concerns regarding informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and data security. Furthermore, although artificial intelligence can assist with transcription, coding, and data management, it cannot fully understand the cultural context, emotions, and lived experiences that are central to qualitative inquiry. Human judgement therefore remains essential in interpreting qualitative data accurately (Williams, 2024).

Another challenge is the difficulty of transferring findings to other settings. Qualitative research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of specific individuals, groups, or communities rather than broad statistical generalisations. As a result, findings from one context may not apply directly to another because social, cultural, and environmental conditions often differ. Researchers are therefore expected to provide

detailed descriptions of the study context so that readers can judge whether the findings are applicable to similar situations. Despite these challenges, qualitative research paradigms remain valuable because they provide detailed and meaningful explanations of complex human experiences that are often beyond the reach of quantitative approaches. Careful planning, ethical practice, researcher reflexivity, and transparent reporting continue to strengthen the credibility and usefulness of qualitative research in contemporary scholarship (Chafe, 2024; Aguzzoli et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Qualitative research paradigms remain an essential foundation for media and communication research because they provide a clear guide for understanding how people create, interpret, and respond to communication within their social and cultural environments. This conceptual review has shown that interpretivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms enable researchers to examine communication issues from the perspectives of those who experience them, thereby producing deeper insights into audience behaviour, media practices, journalism, digital communication, public relations, advertising, and other communication processes. Unlike approaches that focus mainly on numerical measurement, qualitative paradigms recognise that communication is shaped by context, culture, values, and lived experiences. As media systems continue to evolve through digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence, these paradigms remain highly relevant for explaining emerging communication realities while ensuring that participants' voices and experiences remain central to the research process. The review has also demonstrated that although qualitative research paradigms present challenges such as researcher subjectivity, ethical concerns, and the increasing complexity of digital

research environments, these limitations can be addressed through careful planning, reflexivity, transparent reporting, and adherence to established ethical standards. Recent developments in digital communication and qualitative research methods have expanded the opportunities for researchers to study communication in more diverse and dynamic settings without reducing the importance of human interpretation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Institutions of higher learning in collaboration with African Council for Communication Education (ACCE) and African Communication Scholars and Practitioners (ACSPN) should organise training and workshop for communication scholars on current and emerging trends in qualitative research in order to keep them abreast with global best practices.

2. Communication scholars should consider the continued application of qualitative research paradigms to strengthen media and communication scholarship by producing rich, credible, and context-sensitive knowledge that can inform policy, professional practice, and future research while responding to the changing nature of communication in the digital era.

3. The National Educational Research Development council should put in place policies that will regulate challenges bedeviling the use of digital tools in qualitative research

References

Aguzzoli, R., Lengler, J., Miller, S. R., & Chidlow, A. (2024). Paradigms in qualitative IB research: Trends, analysis and recommendations. *Management International Review*, 64(2), 165-198.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11575-024-00529-5>

Asemah, E. S., & Edegoh, L. O. N. (2018). *Principles and practice of communication research*. Jos, Nigeria: University Press.

Berger, A. A. (2019). *Media and communication research methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2024). Reporting guidelines for qualitative research: A values-based approach. *Qualitative Research*, 24(4), 399-438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2024.2382244>

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Burney, V., Arnold-Saritepe, A., & McCann, C. M. (2024). How can qualitative methods be applied to behavior analytic research: A discussion and suggestions for implementation. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 17, 431-441. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-024-00917-1>

Burns, M., Bally, J., Burles, M., Holtslander, L., Peacock, S., & others. (2022). Constructivist grounded theory or interpretive phenomenology? Methodological choices within specific study contexts. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221077758>

Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315715421>

- Buzzanell, P. M. (2016). Interpretive research. In *The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n273>
- Chafe, R. (2024). Different paradigm conceptions and their implications for qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241282871>
- Chanthanet, W., & Sukhonthachit, P. (2023). A review of research paradigms in the social sciences. *Romphruek Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 41(2). <https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/romphruekj/article/view/260508>
- Chen, Y.-Y., Shek, D. T. L., & Bu, F.-F. (2011). Applications of interpretive and constructionist research methods in adolescent research: Philosophy, principles and examples. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 23(4), 265–274. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijamh.2011.022>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for therapists: Researching the lived world*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119975144>
- Flick, U. (2018). *Designing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204, 291–295. <https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). SAGE Publications.
- Hood, R. (2016). Combining phenomenological and critical methodologies in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 15(2), 160–174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015586248>
- Järvinen, M., Mik-Meyer, N., & van Dijk, T. A. (2023). Critical discourse analysis. In *Qualitative analysis: Eight approaches for the social sciences*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529721263.n15>
- Kim, J. N., Chiu, M. M., Lee, H., Oh, Y. W., Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Park, C. H. (2023). Mapping media research paradigms: *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly's* century of scientific evolution. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 100(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990231213376>

- Køster, A., & Fernandez, A. V. (2023). Investigating modes of being in the world: An introduction to phenomenologically grounded qualitative research. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 22, 149–169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09723-w>
- Lim, W. M. (2025). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australian Journal of Management*, 33(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 97–128). SAGE Publications.
- Magida, A. (2024). Qualitative methods in the digital era: A systematic review of literature. In Proceedings of the 8th World Conference on Qualitative Research. <https://proceedings.science/wcqr-2024/papers/qualitative-methods-in-the-digital-era-a-systematic-review-of-literature>
- Marshall, D. T., & Naff, D. B. (2024). The ethics of using artificial intelligence in qualitative research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 19(3), 92–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15562646241262659>
- McQuail, D., & Deuze, M. (2020). *McQuail's media and mass communication theory* (7th ed.). London: Sage.
- Mohajan, H. K. (2018). Qualitative research methodology in social sciences and related subjects. *MPRA Paper No. 85654*
- Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>
- Oluka, A. (2025). Phenomenological research strategy: Descriptive and interpretive approaches. *F1000Research*, 14, 725. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.166273.1>
- Patterson, E. W., Ball, K., Corkish, J., & Whittick, I. M. (2023). Do you see what I see? Enhancement of rigour in qualitative approaches to inquiry: A systematic review of evidence. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 23(2), 164–180. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2022-0086>
- Permatasari, D. A., Sastrodiharjo, I., Samad, M. Y., & Edward, O. T. (2024). Navigating communication paradigms in the digital age: A comparative review. *Insight Journal*, 11(2).
- Phillips, M. J. (2023). Towards a social constructionist, criticalist, Foucauldian-informed qualitative research approach: Opportunities and challenges. *SN Social Sciences*, 3, 175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00774-9>
- Pretorius, L. (2024). Demystifying research paradigms: Navigating ontology, epistemology, and axiology in research. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(10), 2698–2715. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.7632>

- Razzante, R. J., & Hanna, K. N. (2024). A double helix of critical inquiry: Dialogic methods of critical pragmatism. *Review of Communication*, 24(4), 190-205.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2024.2344701>
- Roberts, J., Baker, M., & Andrew, J. (2024). Artificial intelligence and qualitative research: The promise and perils of large language model (LLM) assistance. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 99, 102722.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2024.102722>
- Ryan, G. S. (2019). Postpositivist critical realism: Philosophy, methodology and method for nursing research. *Nurse Researcher*, 27(3), 20–26.
<https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.2019.e1598>
- Schwandt, T. A. (2015). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2020). *Qualitative research* (latest ed.). London: Sage.
- Williams, R. T. (2024). Paradigm shifts: Exploring AI's influence on qualitative inquiry and analysis. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 9, 1331589.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2024.1331589>
- Wills, W. M. (2022). Reviews and documentary research methods in a scientific article. *International Journal of Research (IJR)*, 9(9), 1-6.
- Ziskin, M. B. (2019). Critical discourse analysis and critical qualitative inquiry: Data analysis strategies for enhanced understanding of inference and meaning. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(6), 606–631.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1609118>