

Navigating the Qualitative Research Landscape: Methodological Insights from a Study on Gentrification in Johannesburg

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1 ABSTRACT

Any academic inquiry involves the application of appropriate investigative methodologies. Research methodology serves as a vital tool in understanding and addressing research problems. It is the art of exploring, explaining, and envisioning phenomena by connecting ideas, uncovering meaning and making sense of complex realities. Whilst there are several research methodological approaches, this paper explores the applicability of qualitative methodology employed in a study examining gentrification and urban sustainability in Johannesburg's Braamfontein area. Grounded in an interpretive research paradigm, the study adopted a case study research design and used applied purposive and snowball sampling to gather diverse perspectives from participants. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, field observations, aerial photographs analysis, photographic surveys and spatial analysis, with analysis conducted through Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. The paper discusses the rationale behind methodological choices, the challenges encountered during data collection, and the strategies employed to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability. By examining the methodological processes used in this study, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on qualitative research, offering practical insights for researchers navigating complex urban studies.

Keywords: Gentrification, qualitative research methodology, case study design, interpretive research paradigm, data collection methods

2 INTRODUCTION

Every academic inquiry requires the application of research methods and methodologies. Research methodology serves as a vital tool addressing research problems. It is the art of exploring, explaining, and envisioning phenomena by connecting ideas, uncovering meaning and making sense of complex realities (Khan et al., 2023). Every research needs to follow a clear, structured and systematic approach to ensure reliable and meaningful results. Research methodology provides the logical foundation for this process, serving as the procedural framework that guides the development of theory and the overall conduct of the study (Haradhan, 2018). The concept of gentrification can be traced back to nearly half a century, with urban geographer Ruth Glass first coining the term in the 1960s to describe the influx of upper-middle-class households purchasing and renovating properties in London's impoverished East End (Holland, 2016). Initially, gentrification was mainly observed in cities of the Global North. However, with the onset of globalization, this phenomenon has increasingly manifested in cities across the Global South (Ah Goo, 2018). Over time, a rich body of literature has emerged, documenting the extent of change and its impact on gentrified neighbourhoods. While much of this research focuses on the processes and consequences of gentrification, there remains a notable gap in works that examine the methodologies used to study this phenomenon (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2019).

This paper examines the applicability of qualitative methodology employed in a study on gentrification and urban sustainability in Johannesburg's Braamfontein area. The study is analysed in relation to its key objectives: (1) To assess physical changes that have taken place in the form and structure of Braamfontein over the past 20 years; and (2) To investigate the socio-economic and institutional developments emanating from gentrification processes and practices in Braamfontein neighbourhoods. This study adopts a structured and systemic approach to inquiry, drawing on the analysis of underlying assumptions (Hancock et al., 2007). It further assesses whether gentrification, as a consequence of urban renewal, effectively contributes to urban sustainability in its broader dimensions – environmental, socio-economic, and institutional development.

This paper explores the qualitative research methodologies employed in studying gentrification and urban in Braamfontein. It begins by contextualising gentrification within broader urban transformation processes, highlighting key theoretical debates. The discussion then shifts to a comparative analysis of research methodologies used in gentrification studies, examining the strengths and limitations of various qualitative and quantitative approaches. The paper further delves into the interpretive research paradigm that underpins this study, explaining its alignment with the research objectives. Following this, the research design, sampling strategies, and data collection methods – including interviews, field observations, and spatial analysis are detailed, providing insight into the study's empirical foundation. The data analysis section outlines how thematic analysis using Nvivo was applied to interpret qualitative findings, complemented by GIS-based spatial analysis to assess land use changes. Finally, the paper reflects on the challenges encountered with methodological choices and their implications, this paper contributes to broader discussions on qualitative inquiry in urban studies.

3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES IN GENTRIFICATION STUDIES

While this study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine gentrification in Braamfontein, gentrification research globally has utilised a range of methodological approaches, each with distinct strengths and limitations. The choice of methodology is often shaped by the research objectives, data availability, and the sociopolitical context in which the study is conducted. Studies in the Global North and South frequently employ qualitative methodologies to capture the lived experiences and socio-cultural transformations associated with gentrification. For example, Brown-Saracino (2009), through interviews and ethnographic research in Chicago, categorizes gentrifiers into three distinct groups based on their goals and motivations: urban pioneers, social homesteaders, and social preservationists. While Loretta Lees (2003) uses ethnographic methods to examine displacement in London. In contrast, Hammel and Wyly (1996) note that most quantitative studies on gentrification take a broad, census-based approach, focusing on large-scale demographic and economic trends rather than the lived experiences of those affected. Such studies offer measurable indicators of gentrification but may overlook the nuanced experiences of affected communities. Some researchers integrate qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a more comprehensive analysis. For example, Hwang and Sampson (2014) explore gentrification in Chicago by combining qualitative and quantitative data, drawing from census records, police reports, community surveys, city investment data, and Google Street View observations to capture both statistical trends and neighbourhood-level changes. While Atkinson (2019) employs both policy analysis and resident interviews to assess the intersection of governance and urban changes. The case study research design used in this research offers deep, context-specific insights into gentrification, particularly in cases driven by policy interventions and commercial redevelopment. For instance, similar qualitative research approaches have been used in studies of state-led gentrification in Shanghai (He, 2010) and Johannesburg's Maboneng Precinct (Murray, 2020). However, its broader applicability is limited for large-scale comparative studies, which could benefit from integrating spatial modelling or longitudinal demographic analysis to capture wider trends.

4 PARADIGMS ADOPTED IN THIS STUDY

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, a philosophical approach that is naturalistic, anti-positivist, humanistic, and constructivist, emerging as a response to positivism in the study of human and social reality (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013). The interpretive paradigm is particularly concerned with understanding context-dependent phenomena, emphasizing how different elements of complex environment shape what is observed and experienced. In this study, it informs the analysis of structural and physical changes that have occurred in Braamfontein over the past 20 years (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A core assumption of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is accessed through social constructs such as consciousness, shared meaning, language, and social interactions (Myers, 2008). To capture these diverse perspectives, interviews were conducted with participants from various linguistic, racial, age, and professional backgrounds. This diversity influenced how each participant interpreted and made sense of gentrification. The study highlights how different individuals perceive the same reality – namely, the structural and physical transformations in Braamfontein – through distinct personal lenses, shaped by their experiences and motivations (Alharahshel & Pius, 2020; Bhattacharjee, 2012).

From an ontological perspective, this study adopted a relativist stance, recognizing that multiple realities exist. The interpretivist approach supports qualitative inquiry, allowing for an in-depth examination of Braamfontein as a case study area. Within this paradigm, understanding is inherently subjective, as participants were encouraged to interpret reality based on their own experiences. This approach facilitated a rich, descriptive analysis using qualitative techniques. Furthermore, the study acknowledged the monistic relationship between the researcher and participants, where their interactions contributed to the co-construction of knowledge. Subjective engagements allowed deeper access to participants' lived realities, reinforcing the idea that the world does not exist independently of human perception but is instead shaped through experience and simultaneously encounter and influenced the reality under study (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013; Grix, 2010).

5 RESEARCH DESIGN EMPLOYED IN THIS STUDY

This study adopted an exploratory research design to investigate a topic with limited prior research, allowing the researcher to gather new insights. The main purpose of exploratory research is to develop a deeper understanding of an issue or situation. It helps lay the foundation for more detailed and structured studies in the future (Davis, 2000; Zikmund, 2000; Cooper & Schindler, 2006). This approach ensures that the evidence collected directly addressed the research question – whether gentrification as a means of urban renewal had achieved urban sustainability in Braamfontein in the environmental, socio-economic and institutional development sense. The exploratory research was conducted using a case study design, where persons with diverse experiences – those who felt the impact of change, were involved in it, or lived in Braamfontein area were interviewed through in-depth interviews. This design ensured that the issue is not explored from one lens but is rather explored through a variety of lenses, allowing for a deeper understanding and revealing various aspects of the phenomenon (Sileyew, 2019).

6 RESEARCH APPROACH

Since the study examines whether gentrification practices as a means of urban renewal are working to bring about and achieve urban sustainability in terms of environmental, socio-economic, and institutional development; a qualitative approach was adopted, where different features of qualitative data were collected.

Qualitative research takes an informative and naturalistic approach, meaning that the research often studies phenomena in their natural settings. The aim, even in this study, is to understand and interpret these phenomena through the perspectives and experiences of the people involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study is subjective in nature and seeks to understand the social changes that have occurred in Braamfontein as a result of gentrification. Since qualitative research does not follow a rigid methodology or belong to one particular discipline – in this study, the data was presented through a variety of forms, including images, words, and sounds (Askarzai & Unhelkar, 2017). Data was collected over a long period in a real-world setting, allowing for a deeper understanding of that would not be possible through other research methods (Gay & Airasian, 2000). The data collected in this qualitative study, which will be presented in the finding's chapters, was textual, highly detailed and rich in information (Moriarty, 2011).

7 SAMPLING METHOD

A sample represents a group, where each selected component typically reflects the characteristics of a specific number of individuals in the population (Lohr, 1999). For this study, purposive and snowball sampling methods were used, which are explained in the following subsections.

7.1 Purposive sampling – its used to identify and pick on the appropriate research participants

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide valuable insights into the gentrification processes in Braamfontein. Participants were chosen based on specific criteria, including their involvement in the area for 10-20 years (between 2001 and 2021), such as municipal officials, business owners, residents, employees, estate agents, and developers. The purposive sampling method ensured that participants had relevant firsthand experience and knowledge of Braamfontein's urban transformation. This approach was both time and cost-efficient, allowing the researcher to focus on key stakeholders directly involved in the gentrification process. Interviews were conducted primarily through virtual platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, with a few in-person meetings requested by participants.

who preferred face-to-face interaction. Before each interview, participants were informed of the study’s purpose and gave their informed consent, either written or verbal. All interviews were recorded, and confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonymous and securely storing the recordings. The flexible approach to interview scheduling, taking into account participants’ availability and preferences, ensured a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives on the ongoing urban changes in Braamfontein (Lewis & Sheppard, 2006).

7.2 Snowball sampling

Snowballing sampling was another method used to identify participants. As an ongoing process snowball sampling depended on time, and the selection / identification of participants continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new information was emerging (Naderifar et al., 2017). In snowball sampling, one participant refers the researcher to another, who then suggests a third, and so on, creating a chain of referrals (Vogt, 1999 cited in Letlape, 2018). In this study, the researcher was referred to various participants who met the criteria for the interviews. For instance, Participant A, a resident of Braamfontein, referred the researcher to Participant B, another resident of Braamfontein. In turn, Participant B referred the researcher to Participant C, a business owner in Braamfontein. Snowball sampling leveraged the social connections of the selected participants, providing the researcher with an expanding list of potential contacts. The researcher chose snowball sampling because it helped gain access to key informants who might have been difficult to locate through other sampling methods. This approach was also cost-effective, as most of the individuals referred to the researcher could be easily contacted directly via phone or email.

8 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The primary and secondary data collected for this study provides a bridge between theory and practice, enriching ongoing debates and discourses on urban transformation while offering insights into strategies for enhancing urban sustainability in the city. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, complemented by direct and indirect observations. Observations were conducted through site visits, systematic walking tour of the study area and remote analysis using Google Earth alongside photographic surveys to capture spatial and environmental dynamics. The interviews followed an open-ended, semi-structured format, allowing respondents to articulate their experiences, perspectives, and insights in their own words. Saturation was reached after interviewing 23 participants (see Table 1 for a summary).

Secondary data was drawn from a wide range of documentary sources, including books, scholarly articles, research papers, policy documents and urban development frameworks. Additionally, spatial data from the South African National Land Cover (SANLC) datasets were utilised to create land use maps for the years 2001, 2013 and 2021, providing a visual representation of changes in land use over two decades. These maps were instrumental in identifying shifts in land use patterns, intensification of development, and potential drivers of gentrification within the study area. Aerial photographs were also used to trace the changes from a bird’s eye view of changes in structures that have occurred in Braamfontein over a period of two decades (2001, 2012 and 2021). The data collection approach functioned as a guiding framework, enabling the researcher to strategically plan and execute tasks, identify key stakeholders, and allocate time and resources efficiently (Degu & Yigzaw, 2006).

Category	Number of participants
COJ Spatial transformation official	3
COJ Land use Planner	1
COJ GIS official	1
Business owners	3
Employees	4
Residents	9
Estate agent/developer	2

Table 1: Categories of interviews

8.1 In-depth interviews

Gentrification has unfolded in different ways and at varying speeds. To understand its impact, the researcher conducted a preliminary investigation to identify key stakeholders who have directly experienced these changes. The researcher gathered qualitative data through in-depth interviews with individuals who have been involved in local government and other relevant sectors. After conducting 23 interviews, saturation was

reached, meaning no new insights were emerging. These conversations explored a range of themes, including physical, economic, social and cultural changes, as well as broader transformations in Braamfontein due to gentrification. The categorisation of interviewees is detailed in Table 1.

8.2 Field observations and photographic surveys

This study used field observations during off peak hours on weekdays, to examine the environmental, socio-economic and institutional transformations in Braamfontein driven by gentrification. By walking through selected streets, the researcher engaged directly with the evolving urban landscape, documenting physical and structural changes in a journal and capturing them through photography. To contextualise these transformations, historical photographs of Braamfontein were sourced from online archives, offering insights into the area's urban evolution. These were complemented by contemporary photographs taken during site visits, highlighting key shifts in urban space, architecture, and spatial configuration. Additional images retrieved from various online sources further enriched the visual narrative, illustrating the patterns and processes shaping gentrification in Braamfontein.

9 DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was conducted using Nvivo to systematically organise and interpret interview data. The process unfolded through the following stages:

9.1 Step 1: Establishing analytical categories

The researcher developed a structured set of categories to guide the organisation and analysis of the data. These categories were identified by examining recurring themes, patterns, and concepts within the interview transcripts. The analytical categories were derived inductively from the data, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than being imposed based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives, but it also introduced the possibility of researcher bias in the identification of themes. The absence of a predetermined theoretical framework may have allowed for richer data interpretation, but it risks overlooking important concepts that could have emerged from an alternative, more structured approach (e.g. deductive analysis) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the inductive method's open-ended nature could have led to a narrower focus on immediate patterns rather than a broader exploration of complex underlying dynamics.

9.2 Step 2: Coding and Data Organisation

Using Nvivo, the researcher manually coded the data by applying the predefined categories as labels to relevant excerpts from the transcripts. While this method ensures systematic organisation, it also introduces potential subjectivity in coding. To enhance reliability, an intercoder reliability check was conducted, where a second researcher review a subset of the transcripts to verify consistency in category application. This reliability check improves the transparency of the coding process but relies on the assumption that coders shared similar interpretive lenses. It would have been valuable to clarify how discrepancies between coders were resolved and whether the coding process involved iterative refinement (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, the reliance on predefined categories may have constrained the depth of thematic discovery, especially if categories were too rigidly applied.

9.3 Step 3: Thematic Analysis

Once the data was categorized, the researcher engaged in an in-depth analysis, examining the relationships between themes, identifying underlying meanings, and tracing broader social dynamics reflected in the data. Nvivo played a crucial role in synthesising complex narratives by highlighting connections across different categories. One key example was the ability to cluster co-occurring themes, providing a clearer understanding of economic pressures within Braamfontein. However, the software's algorithmic clustering may not fully align with human interpretation, as it lacks the nuanced judgment of a researcher familiar with the local context. This raises the question of whether Nvivo's categorisation could potentially obscure more subtle or complex relationships, which might emerge through manual or alternative forms of analysis (Bazeley, 2007).

9.4 Step 4: Interpretation and Conclusion Drawing

In the final stage, the researcher synthesized the findings, drawing on theoretical insights to interpret the data within its broader sociological context. This involved making sense of participants' perspectives, exploring the implications of identified themes, and formulating conclusions that contribute to a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. Acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, steps were taken to mitigate researcher bias, including triangulation with multiple data sources (for example interview transcripts, policy documents, and spatial data). However, as with all qualitative research, findings are shaped by the researcher's lens, and alternative interpretations may exist. While triangulation is a valuable tool to strengthen the validity of findings, its effectiveness depends on the degree of congruence between sources. In this study, contradictions across data types could have been explored more explicitly to identify underlying tensions between different perspectives or data sets (Flick, 2018).

Lastly, spatial data retrieved from the South African National Land Cover (SANLC) datasets were used to generate land use maps for the years 2001 and 2021. These maps were then analysed using ArcGIS to assess changes in land use patterns over time. While SANLC datasets provide valuable longitudinal land data, limitations include variations in resolution and classification methods across different years. These discrepancies may influence the accuracy of land-use classifications, especially when comparing data from two distinct time periods (Longley et al., 2005). To address this, spatial cross-verifications was conducted using historical aerial imagery and municipal zoning records. While this approach strengthens the validity of the spatial analysis, it would benefit from a more detailed discussion of how discrepancies between SANLC and aerial imagery were addressed. Furthermore, supervised classification and change detection analysis techniques, while powerful, can be influenced by user input and assumptions, which may affect the final outcomes (Jensen, 2005).

10 FIELD WORK REFLECTIONS

Conducting photographic surveys in Braamfontein presented significant challenges, particularly regarding the researcher's personal safety, as they were not intimately familiar with the study area when navigating it on foot. Additionally, historical visual documentation of Braamfontein proved difficult to source, as there was limited recorded literature detailing the physical and structural transformations that have taken place over the past two decades (2001-2021). Scheduling interviews was another logistical difficulty, as aligning mutually convenient times with participants was often constrained by the researcher's full-time employment and demanding schedule, as well as the time constraints of the interviewees. Furthermore, identifying long-term residents who had lived in Braamfontein for the past 10 to 20 years was particularly challenging. This difficulty stems from Braamfontein's historical function as a predominantly commercial district, where individuals commute for work rather than reside permanently. Additionally, the area's high concentration of student housing means that many residents are transient, relocating once they complete their studies. To mitigate these challenges, some interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom or Microsoft Teams – an approach that was further necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic – while others took place telephonically, including through WhatsApp calls. Interview scheduling was adapted to accommodate participants' availability, with one interview conducted as late as 8pm and others arranged over weekends. Regarding photographic data, the study relied on a combination of images sourced from various online platforms, archival materials, and photographs taken directly by the researcher.

11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Ensuring rigor in qualitative research necessitates establishing trustworthiness within the study. To achieve this, strategies for enhancing trustworthiness were incorporated from the early stages of the research and sustained throughout the research process (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2005). A key methodological approach employed was triangulation, which involved the use of multiple data sources, investigators, methods, and theoretical perspectives. This approach serves as a procedural mechanism through which both the interpretive and participant communities could evaluate the study's credibility and validity (Kennedy, 2015). Qualitative analysis played a crucial role interpreting the collected data by generating meaningful insights, addressing the study's central research questions, identifying thematic patterns, and recognising emerging trends (Patton, 2015). The study relied on multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of Braamfontein's transformation over the past two decades. In addition to in-depth interviews that captured the

participants' lived experiences, land use maps and aerial photographs were analysed to identify structural and land use changes in the area. This multi-method approach enhanced the study's depth by providing both subjective narratives and spatial evidence of urban transformation.

11.1 Credibility

Credibility in this study was ensured through in-depth interviews, allowing participants to share their knowledge and lived experiences. To further strengthen credibility, interview transcripts were carefully constructed to be immediately recognisable to those familiar with the phenomenon while remaining comprehensible to outsiders (Kennedy, 2015). The study upholds credibility by ensuring that findings authentically reflect participants' perspectives and provide an accurate analysis of their experiences. Triangulation was achieved by incorporating diverse viewpoints on the physical, economic, social, and cultural transformations brought about by gentrification in Braamfontein, Gauteng.

11.2 Dependability

Dependability in research is established when future researchers can replicate the study's processes and potentially arrive at similar findings (Shenton, 2004). This study maintains methodological rigor by ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis. All interview recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, preserving the integrity of participants' responses. Additionally, the researcher upholds academic and ethical standards by making all relevant research documents available as required by the university and ethics committee.

11.3 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that the research findings are rooted in the data rather than the researcher's assumptions or biases. By incorporating triangulation and direct excerpts from interview transcripts, the study mitigates subjective interpretation and enhances the trustworthiness of the analysis. To uphold transparency and accountability, the researcher will make all necessary documents available as required.

11.4 Transferability

Transferability speaks to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied beyond its specific context. In the case of Johannesburg's Braamfontein there is a notable gap in the literature on whether gentrification as a means of urban renewal strategy fosters urban sustainability, particularly in terms of environmental, socio-economic, and institutional development. This gap often leads to misconceptions about the effectiveness of gentrification in achieving sustainable urban transformation. By exploring the lived experiences of those affected, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the physical, economic, social, and cultural shifts shaped by gentrification, offering insights that may be applicable to similar urban contexts.

11.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical integrity is essential at every stage of the research process (Creswell, 2013). Ethical concerns may arise during data collection, analysis, and the presentation of findings, requiring careful attention to ensure the study's validity and credibility (Miles, et al., 2014). To uphold ethical standards, the researcher sought and received permission from the City of Johannesburg's metropolitan municipality to conduct research in municipal areas, obtaining a Gatekeeper's consent letter. Ethical approval was also secured from the University of Johannesburg's ethics committee, valid for 12 months. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Consent was obtained for interview recordings, and anonymity was safeguarded using pseudonyms. Additionally, participants granted permission for verbatim excerpts to be used in the study, were informed of the expected interview duration, and were made aware that no monetary compensation was provided for participation. The researcher also sought consent to capture photographic surveys of buildings and streets where individuals might be present and obtain approval from the individual who posted the historical photographs of Braamfontein on the web for their use in the study. Through these measures, the study upheld ethical principles of transparency, confidentiality and respect for participants.

12 CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive exploration of the qualitative methodology employed to investigate gentrification and urban sustainability in Johannesburg's Braamfontein. Grounding in an interpretive research paradigm, the study adopted a case study approach, utilizing multiple data collection methods – including in-depth interviews, field observations, and spatial analysis – to capture the complexities of urban transformation. Through the lens of lived experiences, the research has highlighted the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional shifts associated with gentrification, offering a nuanced understanding of its implications for urban sustainability. By ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, the study has contributed to methodological rigor in urban research, demonstrating how qualitative approaches can uncover the multifaceted nature of gentrification. The findings underscore the importance of contextualized, human-centered inquiry in assessing urban change, emphasizing that gentrification's impact extend beyond physical alterations to influence community dynamics and governance structures. Moving forward, further research should expand on these insights, exploring how policy interventions and community participation can shape more inclusive and sustainable urban renewal processes.

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