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# Developing General Analytical Inductive Qualitative Research Strategy to Explore Small Enterprise Growth in Turbulent Economies

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to examine the application of General analytical inductive qualitative approach within the field of entrepreneurship and management research. It critically assesses the research design and analytical processes that facilitated the development of a framework for understanding how small enterprises (SEs) grow and develop in turbulent economies. The study adopts a qualitative research design unlike the dominant quantitative designs in studying small enterprises. An Interpretivist approach (Blaikie, 2007) guided this study to understand (verstehen) how people make sense of their world where human actions are based upon the actor's interpretation of events, social meanings, intentions and beliefs (Gill and Johnson 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In this research, therefore, as individuals the owners/Entrepreneurs of Small Enterprises were thought likely to view the phenomenon of growth and development differently in a turbulent economy. The research design followed Thomas's (2006) analytic inductive approach and the outcomes of this paper demonstrates how an analytical inductive analysis, that is a systematic procedure of data analysis and refers to detailed readings and interpretations of raw data, can be rigorously used to drive the identification of concepts, themes, and models. Sri Lanka, as a turbulent economy, was the context of this research. Data was collected from Sri Lankan small enterprises throughout one year period using 21 in-depth interviews and 7 informal conversations in three phases. As a part of data analysis, interviews were transcribed and a provisional list of common features and divergent cases identified. Then similarities between categories were established. Deviant features were accommodated either by linking them with other common features or by generating a new category with unique feature. Eventually, cross case analysis within and between data from SEs led to the emergent of themes, which forms the discussions section of the study. This process was followed with the aim to 1) condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format; and 2) to establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure that these links are both transparent and justifiable given the objectives of the research (Thomas, 2006). The challenges of this method of data analysis are also discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** general analytical inductive approach, analytic analysis, qualitative research strategy, small enterprises, turbulent economy

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the application of General analytical inductive qualitative approach which was developed by Thomas (2006) within the field of an entrepreneurship and management research. It is based on an empirical study and critically assesses the research design and analytical processes that facilitated the development of a framework for understanding how small enterprises grow and develop in turbulent economies. A review of the literature on small business closure (Stokes and Blackburn 2001) found that most studies focused on the factors associated with the relative 'success' or 'failure' of small businesses, and a large number of studies have also adopted a positivistic approach and have used quantitative designs and attempted to build or test models on business failure (Blackburn and Kovalainen, 2009). The study adopts a qualitative research design unlike the dominant quantitative designs in studying small enterprises.

Small enterprises are critical to economic growth, given their capacity to create new jobs (Acs and Mueller 2008, Henrekson and Johansson 2010). Although the impact of the environment on growth of firms has been extensively explored, there were only a limited number of relevant studies exploring small enterprise growth in post war turbulent economies (Nichter and Goldmark, 2009; Ishengoma and Kappel, 2011; Njanja, Ogutu and Pellisier, 2012). Bongomin et al. (2018) found that business skills, capital adequacy, access to finance, access to market, entrepreneurial education, and government support have significant and positive impacts on Small business survival in post-war communities in Northern Uganda. Most past studies have mainly focused on the large high growth firms and micro start-ups (Parker, Storey and Witteloostuijn, 2010). Established small enterprises have received a little attention (Delmar, Davidsson and Gartner, 2003; Moreno and Casillas, 2007; Barbero, Casillas and Feldman, 2012). This paper therefore tried to study about established SEs growth in a turbulent economy using general analytical inductive strategy.

Sri Lanka is an island, in the South Asian region, which is known as 'the pearl of the Indian Ocean'. Sri Lanka is an emerging economy, which is passing through a process of rapid transformation. The key factors behind this transformation were the end of long-standing internal conflict and the subsequent changes aimed at improving the country's socio and economic conditions. The current environment in Sri Lanka, hence, provided an attractive landscape for a comprehensive study on the way small enterprises reacted in a macro environment in a turbulent emerging economy. After reviewing the literature, the following research questions formed

- What are the challenges for growth of High Growth Small enterprises over the turbulent environment?
- What are the characteristics, which contribute to the growth of High Growth Small Enterprises over the turbulent environment?
- What are the growth strategies of these high growth Small Enterprises in this turbulent environment?

In order to explore the answers to the research questions, the research design will be explained in the following order: 1) Discuss the interpretive approach followed by the underlying philosophical assumption of the research, 2) the research methods utilised including the data collection technique 3) data analysis approach - general analytic induction- followed by Johnson, 1998, 4) step by step data analysis procedure followed by Thomas, 2006, 5) the process of data reduction and emerging themes. This will follow by a discussion on the challenges faced and strategies utilised to overcome them.

## **2. An interpretive approach in exploring small business growth**

Different worldviews and philosophical underpinnings can affect the way research is conducted. Any research has an appropriate research paradigm, according to the traditions it follows. Paradigms in the human and social sciences help us to understand phenomena (Creswell, 1994). Different types of paradigms have been described by others in many ways as the constructivist approach, the interpretivist approach, the post-positivist approach or the postmodern paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Carson and Coviello, 1996).

Interpretivism was the guided philosophy of this study and it was compatible with the explorative and qualitative nature of the research questions in this study. We didn't adopt the most prevalent approach in Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) literature; positivist paradigm and considered that knowledge, meaning and understanding were socially constructed and was not concentrated to search for an objective reality. Interpretive researchers assume that access to reality is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Myers, 2009). Hence, the focus was upon the details of characteristics, challenges and strategies used by small enterprises, the reality behind these details and the subjective meanings of each stakeholder selected as our research participants. We endeavoured to make sense of how SEs grows through participants lenses. Gill and Johnson (2010) argue that the aim of interpretivist approaches is to understand (verstehen) how people make sense of their worlds. This study hare the same belief with Blaikie (2007) that people are constantly involved in interpreting and reinterpreting their world - social situations, other people's actions, their own actions, and natural and humanly created objects. Hence owners, managers and employees of SEs were thought likely to view the phenomenon of growth differently . The definitions of the firm growth vary and had measured by utilizing various levels of sales growth over a defined period or by considering employee growth (Moreno and Casillas, 2007). Sales volume is a common growth measure and it can be argued that it is affected by external factors like inflation and exchange rates (Kirkwood, 2009). On the other hand, employment growth is not dependent on such external factors (Delmar et al., 2003). It is also noted that, regardless on the definition of high growth, very few firms had actually achieve high growth (Barringer et al., 2005). That was our main reason for collecting qualitative data and adopting an interpretivist analysis for this study.

## **3. Data collection method**

Interviews and informal conversations

Semi-structured in-depth interviews was the main method of data collection. The owners of the SEs as the best source of knowledge were identified and interviewed to ensure the richness and detailed qualitative data was gathered. Through these interviews, the details of the respondents own perception and accounts is explored. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognised as a useful way to capture qualitative data (Qu and Dumay, 2011; Silverman, 2005; Have, 2004; King, 2004).

Through the interviews the focus was on understanding how these SEs grow in a turbulent emerging economy. These interviews were carefully conducted to ensure a reliable set of data.

We were able to enter into the SE owner’s perspective and were able to find out things which we couldn’t directly observe (Patton, 1990). These interviews allowed us to build a thick description and to triangulate with other sources (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2013; Stake 1995; Patton, 1990).

21 semi structured in-depth interviews with SE owners/entrepreneurs conducted throughout one year period in 3 phases. The details of these 3 phases were given in table 1.

**Table 1:** Three phases of interview process

Phase	Time period	Information collected/areas covered	Purpose
One	2015 November – 2016 January	Background information on the SE and owner/founder	To establish rapport with the participants and get general feeling about the participants thoughts on the research. To gain background information of participants.
Two	2016 February – 2016 April	Challenges faced	To understand on the challenges and barriers came across when operating in a turbulent environment
Three	2016 July – 2016 September	Strategies utilized	Gain an insight into how the SEs faced the challenges and how they overcome them.

To gain quality data, we have to build a good rapport with the participants. The lead author built that relationship with participants as she was living in the country. This was achieved by conducting three interviews with each and every owner of the SE. Similarly to Polkinghorne (2005), it was considered that the interview needed to engage with participants in more than one shot 1 hour session. All the interviews were conducted in familiar environments for the participants and this ensured them safety and they were comfortable to reveal even the deeper personal feelings and information (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Seven Informal Conversations (IC) were carried out with some managers and employees in the SEs. These ICs provided a holistic view and to cross check some of the owners’ comments. ICs with secondary informants gave plethora of information to enrich the collection of data. The data gathered through the semi structures in-depth interviews conducted with owners compared and cross checked with the data gathered through Information Conversations conducted with managers/employees. Through this methodological triangulation was achieved.

*Maximum variance sampling technique*

In this exploratory research design it was not required the sample to be representative of the population. Besides this is not considered as a weakness for researchers pursuing qualitative research designs. Hence probability sampling technique which was dominant among positivist researchers was not adopted and instead non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling was utilised for this research. Among the 16 types of purposive sampling techniques presented by Patton (1990), maximum variation sampling technique (MVST) was used for this study and it is the most useful strategy for the naturalistic approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Naturalistic approach means qualitative assessment is focused on understanding how people make meaning of and experience their environment or world (Patton, 2002).

A survey was conducted among the Sri Lankan SEs, using a questionnaire to get their basic information before applying the MVST. Afterwards the following inclusion criteria was utilised to select the most suitable sample;

- Businesses Started before 2008
- Number of permanent employees less than 100
- Continuous operations for 5 years or more

Finally utilising the MVST, the final sample of 7 companies was selected after considering the boundaries of this research (Cresswell 2003; Silverman 2005). Contrasting cases from different industries were selected in order to generate new insights. Tourism, food, manufacturing, shipping line, catering and distribution industries represented by the sample selected. By selecting companies from different industries it gave the opportunity to compare between the barriers and specific characteristics employed on the respective industries. Contrasting cases in terms of demographic factors and composition allowed to develop insights on different perspectives. All the owners of these SEs were selected as the participants. There were mainly two reasons for them to be selected for the interviews; first they know everything on the company and secondly their support was a main concern for the success of this study in granting access to the company and other data collection methods.

A topic guide was used to conduct the interviews. Drawing on the main findings of SE literature, a list of interview questions and guide such as 'how did they start their business?' was designed to explore on growth of these SEs in a turbulent emerging economy. We used some useful prompt to encourage the interviewee to talk about specific issues if they do not come up spontaneously. This topic guide helps to maintain the consistency across all the interviews. Most of the questions were open-ended which allows them to talk freely and laddering questions were used to attain more clarification.

All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. All of them were verbatim transcriptions which is an essential raw data for qualitative analysis. We found "getting inside" the data much easier through writing field notes, and transcribe data by the lead author of this paper. After that each and every interview transcript was shown to the participant for their consent and confirmation on the content. Both authors of this paper independently coded interviews for similarities and differences in terms of how the entrepreneurs at SEs talk about their growth in post-war turbulent environment. This independent coding assured the inter-coder reliability (Yin, 2003) and adds the credibility of the study.

#### **4. Data analysis approach**

Analysis of qualitative data is a creative process and the creativity depends on the researcher, hence, there is no right way to organize, analyse and interpret qualitative data (Patton, 1990; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2003 and Miles et al., 2014). It was challenging to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce the bulk of information through identifying significant patterns and communicate the message that the data trying to reveal. Among the dozen ways of analysing qualitative data, General Inductive Approach which was identified in the past decade as a systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data in which analysis is guided by specific evaluation objectives (Maxwell, 2005; Silverman, 2005; Thomas, 2006) was adopted.

##### *General Analytical inductive analysis (GAIA)*

Data analysis began with the first interview itself since qualitative research studies analysis should be concurrent with data collection (Miles et al., 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Tobin and Begley, 2004; Stake, 2010). GAIA strategy (Thomas, 2006) which involves five steps: initial reading of text data, identification of specific text segments related to the objectives, labelling the segments of the text to create categories, reducing overlap and redundancy among the categories, and creating a model incorporating most important categories, was adopted. This strategy was followed with the aim of reducing the massive amount of data guided by evaluation objectives, which is to explore on characteristics, challenges faced and strategies utilized by SEs in the turbulent emerging economy, through coding, development of categories into themes. Three main themes namely; 'crises and challenges', 'path to resilience' and 'relationships and networking' were emerged from data analysis.

#### **5. Data reduction process**

Data was managed both manually and electronically using NVivo software. All the transcriptions and field notes were read for several times. As Thomas (2006) suggested, inductive coding begins with close readings of text and consideration of the multiple meanings that are inherent in the text. Miles et al. (2014) stated that coding is deep reflection about and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data's meanings. When it comes to coding Miles et al.'s (2014) method was followed, by beginning first cycle of coding, then code the coding (Saldana, 2016), after that second cycle of coding and later deriving more general themes. Coding is not simply labelling the data, it is linking the data. As Richard and Morse (2013) mentioned, it leads the researcher from the data to the idea and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea. Coding was an integral part of this study.

First cycle of coding

We used descriptive coding, In Vivo coding, process coding, values coding, attribute coding and versus coding as different approaches of coding. Some of the examples of these codes are given in table 2.

**Table 2:** Types of coded used

	Category	Meaning	Examples from the coding
1	Descriptive Coding	A word is given as a label to summarise the data in a paragraph.	Niche strategy, New markets, Agreements with customers
2	In-Vivo Coding	Use words/ phrases from participant’s own language in data records	“Zero government support”, “Never get bored”, “Gut feeling on business”
3	Process Coding	Used gerunds (“-ing” words to connate observable action in the data)	Understanding the competitors position, Evaluating the potential markets, Accepting employee mistakes
4	Values Coding	These codes reflect a participant’s values, attitudes and beliefs.	Government is hopeless, Ignore the rules, Family attachment
5	Attribute Coding	Notion of basic descriptive information such as participant characteristics/demographics	Age, Number of years in operation, Case
6	Versus Coding		Father Vs Son, Micro-management Vs Macro management, International market Vs. local market

We used the inductive coding, where we allowed codes to emerge progressively during the data collection. This method is different with deductive coding, where the coding list comes from conceptual framework and research questions, where it was accepted that inductive coding is better grounded empirically and it was visible that we were open to what the field was suggesting (Miles et al., 2014; Boyatzis, 1998). In the first cycle of coding every sentence and phrase were coded based on the authors interpretation of the raw data. The words and ideas which repeated in several places, the important things happened in participants’ lives, the things which directly connect with the study objectives, and surprising data were coded. This was done for each and every interview conducted separately. Both authors were involved in this process. Important insights emerged from the different ways in which two of us look at the same set of data, a form of analytical triangulation (Patton, 1990).

This process itself acted as a data condensation task by giving opportunity to retrieve the most meaningful material and to assemble chunks of data that go together. After the first level of coding we found that there were instances where it had coded same thing in various terms as synonymous; employee satisfaction, motivation to work, reasons to work, reasons to stay, employee benefits. Then with coding the codes, we were able to reduce the initial number of codes. As Saldana (2016) suggested, through coding the codes, one can condense the data through lump codes. Moreover Thomas (2006), had referred to the same thing giving another term as overlapping coding. Afterwards all the codes were taken out from the transcriptions with their relevant phases and separate tables were developed under different cases with their participants’ relevant quotes. A numbering system was assigned for the participant quotes. For example, if a quote from the 1st interview of founder of the case A, taken out that was named as AF1 and if it is the 2nd interview of the Owner of the case C, the number was CO2 (Table 3). This separation was helpful when it came to cross-case analysis. This enabled us to easily distinguish the quotes among the cases as well as within the cases. With this exercise the first level of coding was finished.

**Table 3:** First level of coding

Company A – 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview with the Owner		
No.	Code	Statement
1	Origin	Well.... It is an interesting question and the answer is also very interesting. .... was started by my father and his ex-girlfriend. My father’s ex-girlfriend’s name is ..... and my father’s name is ..... So they put the first letters of their names and come up with a name called “....” (.... + ....) [AO1]

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Company A – 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview with the Owner		
No.	Code	Statement
2	Sole Proprietor	..... started with 4 people as a sole proprietor in 1968 and the technical support got from Japan. [AO1]
3	Technical Support from Japan	My father started with 4 people as a sole proprietor in 1968 and the technical support he got from Japan. From 1968 to 1975 the company grow in a very slow rate with the backing from Japan. [AO1]
4	Competition	When China came, the market was flooded with ceramics. [AF1]
5	Loss of customers	50% of the USA customers were taken over by China [AF1]
6	Heavy losses	in 2002-2003 ..... was making heavy losses. [AF1]
7	People idling	People were idling
8	Family requirement	Then in 2004 dad asked me to come to Sri Lanka to take over the marketing function of ..... . [AO1]
9	Moving from comfortable zone	At that time I was in USA after my studies. Then I took the most difficult decision in my life to come back to Sri Lanka. Because all my plans were to stay in USA. At that time I was an American citizen too. [AO1]
10	Family attachment	But at that moment my father needed me more than anything else. So I decided to come back to Sri Lanka. [AO1]
11	Mass-scale production	We were concentrating at that time on the mass scale production [AO1]
12	Niche strategy	I decided to move from mass scale production to high quality handmade niche strategy. [AO1]
13	Generation Gap	You know my father's generation. They do not like to take a risk. So I wanted to convince them. [AO1]

*Second cycle of coding*

We entered the phase of second cycle of coding to develop pattern codes. Pattern coding is a way of grouping the summaries of first cycle codes into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles et al., 2014). They combine massive junk of data from first cycle of coding to a more meaningful unit of analysis. All the developed tables with the codes were read carefully again. After that the codes were printed and they were cut into 3\*3 data cards. Then all the data cards were scrutinized by putting them on the ground. The similar topics were highlighted with the same colour in all the cases. Then similar codes were taken together separately and piled them. An excel work book was maintained allocating separate sheet per pattern code developed through this process. Then the best fitting label was assigned for the cluster of the codes.

The substantial amount of categories developed through data reduction, became a challenge. The relevant categories were selected among the pattern codes emerged by referring to the objectives of the study. According to the GAIA approach, the upper-level or more general categories are likely to be derived from the evaluation aims. Some of the categories needed to be combined and some categories simply discarded due to their inapplicability and incomparability with the objectives of the study. Some of the categories were left behind. This was accepted as, for the findings to be useable and acceptable the authors had to take a decision about what is most significant in terms of objectives and what is less significant in the data (Thomas, 2006). Hence the methodological challenge of selection of the most appropriate data was resolved by concentrating and focusing on the objectives of the research (Thomas, 2006). Then, it end up with three main themes; 'crises and challenges', 'path to resilience' and 'relationships and networking'. Development of theme 1 is given in figure 1. The development of themes as described by the voices of the participants of this study, provided thick descriptions of their experiences and opinions on growth of their respective company, in a turbulent economy.

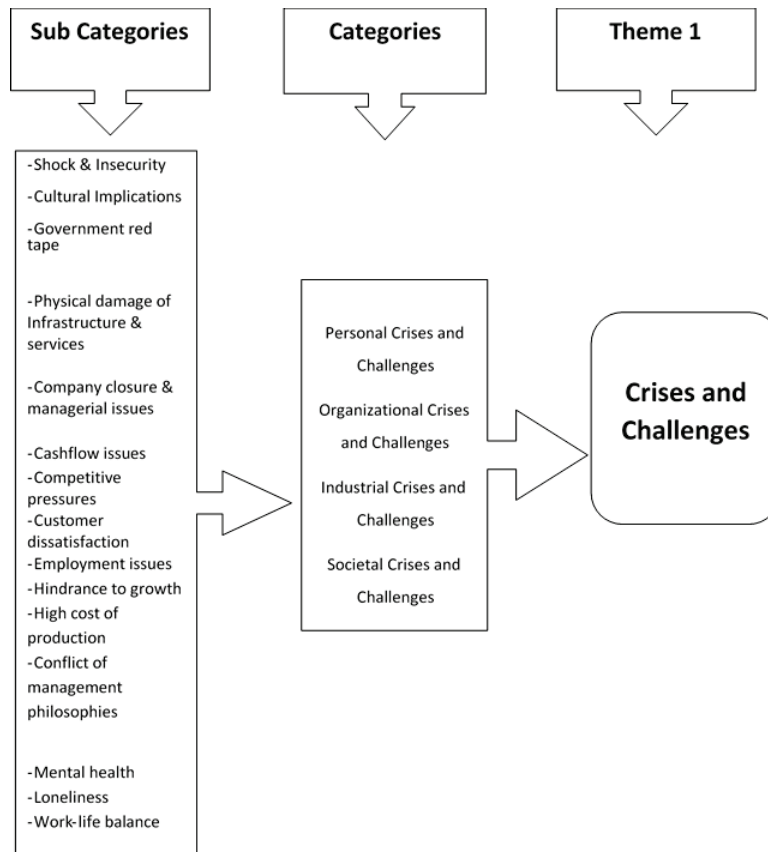


Figure 1: Development of theme 1

## 6. Research output

The final output of this study is the development of a framework for understanding how small enterprises grow and develop in turbulent economies. This framework incorporates the three main themes that we developed from the findings of this study.

## 7. Methodological challenges and strategies utilised to overcome them

The most practical challenging thing faced in this study was to get a list of small enterprises in Sri Lanka. There is no proper institution, record or database related to the small enterprises in Sri Lanka. To overcome this challenge we utilised maximum variation sampling technique. Dennis (2004), stated that there are two main occasions to use maximum variation sampling; when the sample size is too small or when no population information is available. Hence due to the non-availability of population information maximum variation sampling technique was the best option to overcome the challenge.

Another challenge was to prove and achieve the trustworthiness of the results. We followed various strategies to overcome this accusation imposed by quantitative researchers. Using multiple methods of data collection, semi-structured in-depth interviews and informal conversations facilitates the validation of data through triangulation. Member checks were carried out to attain the credibility. Member checking is where, “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.314). Peer examination and expert advice were taken on the research methodology especially with topic guides, sampling procedures and analytical procedures. Confirmability refers to the researcher’s ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants’ responses and not the researcher’s biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). We understood the importance of being neutral and impartial throughout the data collection, data preparation, data condensation and interpretation and developing conclusions phases, even though an interview is a conversation between the interviewer and interviewee (Esterberg, 2001), which is not a neutral tool for at least two people creating the reality of the interview situation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). To achieve the neutrality this purpose we maintained a reflective journal, which recorded all the decisions taken throughout the process.



The final challenge was related to using an audio file recorder. In the very first interview, in one occasion the recorder battery was not charged. As a result of that one hour interview was missed. As a strategy we wrote down all the words uttered by the interviewee. It was a daunting task as it wasn't easy to concentrate on the conversation with the interviewee. With that scenario, more attention was paid to details and preparation before conducting an interview.

#### Lessons learnt

We realised that after collecting data from 7 information rich companies and after finishing analysing them that the quotes of the participants were repeated among themes developed. This paper was based on the PhD study done by the principle author, and only 7 cases were used for the purpose of this paper. Later it was decided to increase the sample to 12. Cope (2014), claimed that in reporting qualitative research, confirmability can be exhibited by providing rich quotes from the participants that depict each emerging theme. Researcher fulfilled this when presenting finding and elaborating on the development of themes and by increasing the sample size to 12 companies.

We learnt that depending too much on audio recorder is a risk and to maintain manual note taking simultaneously with tape recording.

## 8. Conclusions

This study mainly focused on the design of a general analytical inductive qualitative research Strategy. Justifications of the selection of interpretivism as the guided philosophy was presented and it's compatibility with the research objectives were clearly justified. An Interpretivist approach (Blaikie, 2007) guided this study to understand (verstehen) how people make sense of their world where human actions are based upon the actor's interpretation of events, social meanings, intentions and beliefs.

Through a practical application of the research approach, research strategy, research design, data collection and data analysis approach, this study demonstrates the credibility of the general analytical inductive research strategy as a qualitative research methodology; a straight forward method which defensibly address evaluation objectives. In addition, dealing with bulk amount of qualitative data, and condensing raw data can be devastating and challenging. This paper gradually explained the procedure of analysing 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews from the data preparation stage to developing themes stage. Both the technology and manual data management was used in an intelligible and transparent way which is a new approach to qualitative data analysis, and can be useful in particular to early career researchers and doctoral students.

We believe this research contributes to the SE literature by exploring the growth of small enterprises in a turbulent emerging economy using an inductive qualitative approach which was a rare selection among the past researchers and scholars. In this manner, key benefits for companies are understanding the characteristics, challenges and strategies utilised by SEs under turbulent environments.

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