

Triangulated Autoethnography in Tourism Leadership Research: Findings from Crisis Governance in Malaysia

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i9/28826>

Published Date: 13 September 2026

Abstract

Tourism governance research has increasingly recognised the importance of leadership during periods of crisis and uncertainty. However, tourism leadership scholarship remains dominated by managerial and operational perspectives that often overlook the lived realities of governance practice in politically unstable and institutionally fragmented environments. This paper addresses a substantive gap concerning how public-sector tourism leadership is experienced, negotiated, and enacted from within Malaysian institutions, together with a methodological gap concerning how insider experience can be examined rigorously. Adopting a constructivist triangulated autoethnographic design, the study brings the researcher's reflexive journal and insider governance narratives into dialogue with a 79-minute focus-group discussion and chronological documentary materials, with the principal documentary episode concentrated between 2005 and 2012. Four interconnected themes were developed: leadership under political instability, fragmented institutional memory, adaptive governance and informal coordination, and emotional labour in crisis governance. The findings suggest that tourism crisis leadership is enacted through adaptive sensemaking, institutional negotiation, relational coordination, preservation of tacit knowledge, and the regulation of emotion under public and organisational scrutiny. Methodologically, the study illustrates how triangulation can contextualise and critically interrogate insider experience without treating it as self-validating evidence. Theoretically, it reconceptualises tourism crisis leadership as an adaptive, relational, and emotionally demanding governance practice.

Keywords: Tourism Leadership, Tourism Governance, Autoethnography, Crisis Governance, Adaptive Leadership, Interpretive Methodology, Malaysia

Introduction

Tourism governance has become increasingly complex in an era characterised by political instability, crisis disruption, reputational volatility, and rapidly evolving public expectations. The global tourism industry has experienced repeated disruptions, including terrorism, pandemics, aviation tragedies, geopolitical tensions, governance controversies, and economic crises. Such events have reshaped tourism governance priorities while exposing the vulnerability of tourism systems operating in highly interconnected global environments (Hall et al., 2018). Unlike industries that rely primarily on material production or domestic demand, tourism depends heavily on perceptions of safety, institutional trust, destination legitimacy, and mobility confidence. Crises affecting governance systems may therefore produce both operational and symbolic consequences for tourism destinations and institutions.

Existing tourism crisis management literature has contributed substantially to understanding destination recovery, stakeholder communication, crisis preparedness, and organisational resilience (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004). However, much of this scholarship remains operational and managerial in orientation, focusing heavily on systems, structures, and procedural responses while underexploring leadership itself as a lived governance experience. Tourism leadership research frequently conceptualises leadership indirectly through organisational management frameworks rather than examining how leaders navigate institutional instability, political uncertainty, reputational risk, and emotional pressure during crises.

This limitation becomes especially significant in public-sector tourism governance contexts, where leadership rarely occurs under stable political or administrative conditions. Tourism governance systems frequently operate through overlapping institutional structures shaped by ministerial transitions, bureaucratic restructuring, political sensitivities, media scrutiny, and public accountability pressures. Under such conditions, leadership extends beyond technical management into adaptive governance practice involving negotiation, relational coordination, emotional regulation, and institutional stabilisation.

The Malaysian tourism governance context provides an important setting for examining these issues. Since the mid-2000s, the sector has encountered institutional and reputational disruption alongside wider aviation-related crises, political transitions, and governance restructuring. The empirical episodes analysed in this paper are limited to those represented in the researcher's reflexive material, focus-group evidence, and selected documentary corpus; broader national crises are treated as contextual background rather than automatically assumed to be part of the dataset. This distinction is necessary because public context may shape leadership practice without independently verifying an insider's account of organisational experience.

Despite these developments, an important gap remains at the intersection of tourism leadership, crisis governance, and interpretive research. Existing tourism crisis scholarship has generated substantial knowledge concerning destination recovery, crisis preparedness, stakeholder communication, and organisational resilience (Faulkner, 2001; Hall et al., 2018; Ritchie, 2004). Governance research has similarly demonstrated the increasingly networked and relational character of tourism policymaking (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). However, these bodies of scholarship provide less insight into how public-sector

tourism leadership is experienced and enacted from within institutions when leaders must simultaneously navigate political instability, administrative fragmentation, reputational pressure, institutional relationships, and the emotional demands of maintaining organisational continuity.

This gap is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where tourism institutions have operated through periods of political transition, governance restructuring, aviation-related crises, and reputational uncertainty. Although such conditions have implications for organisational leadership and governance legitimacy, limited interpretive attention has been directed towards the lived processes through which tourism leaders make sense of uncertainty, negotiate institutional relationships, preserve tacit organisational knowledge, and coordinate action across formal and informal governance arrangements. Consequently, the internal relational and experiential dimensions of tourism crisis leadership remain insufficiently visible within predominantly managerial accounts of crisis response.

A related methodological gap concerns how these internal governance processes can be studied rigorously. Autoethnography provides access to lived organisational experience by connecting personal experience with wider cultural and institutional processes (Ellis et al., 2011), yet its use raises legitimate questions concerning subjectivity, analytical distance, and evidential credibility (Sparkes, 2000). This study addresses these interconnected substantive and methodological gaps through triangulated autoethnography, in which reflexive governance narratives are analysed alongside institutional developments, media narratives, crisis contexts, and relevant theoretical perspectives. The study therefore asks how tourism leadership is experienced, negotiated, and enacted during political instability and crisis disruption in Malaysian public-sector tourism governance, while examining whether triangulated autoethnography can provide analytically rigorous access to governance processes that are difficult to capture through conventional managerial approaches.

Interpretive methodologies therefore offer important opportunities for expanding tourism governance research. Autoethnography has emerged as a significant qualitative methodology because it enables researchers to connect personal experience with broader institutional and cultural analysis (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). However, autoethnography remains contested within governance and management research due to concerns regarding subjectivity, reflexive bias, and analytical legitimacy. Critics frequently argue that autoethnography risks becoming overly autobiographical or insufficiently rigorous for governance analysis.

This paper argues that triangulated autoethnography provides a rigorous methodological pathway for examining tourism leadership within crisis governance environments. Rather than relying solely on personal reflection, triangulated autoethnography integrates reflexive experience with institutional contextualisation, governance interpretation, media discourse, and theoretical analysis. Through this approach, lived governance experiences become analytically situated within broader organisational and political structures.

Grounded in reflective governance experiences within Malaysian tourism administration, this study examines how tourism leadership was enacted during periods of political instability and crisis disruption. The paper focuses particularly on how leaders navigated institutional

fragmentation, governance uncertainty, reputational pressures, and crisis coordination challenges. The study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how triangulated interpretive approaches strengthen autoethnographic rigor within tourism leadership research. The paper additionally contributes theoretically by reconceptualising tourism crisis leadership as an adaptive and relational governance process operating within politically unstable institutional systems.

Tourism Governance and Leadership Research

Tourism governance has evolved substantially from hierarchical state-centred administration toward collaborative and networked governance systems involving public institutions, private-sector stakeholders, local communities, international organisations, and media systems (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This transformation reflects broader governance changes in which governance increasingly operates through coordination, negotiation, and relational interaction rather than direct state control (Rhodes, 1996). Contemporary tourism governance therefore encompasses not only policy implementation and destination management but also stakeholder coordination, governance legitimacy, organisational resilience, and crisis adaptation. In conditions of turbulence, governance systems require robust responses that combine institutional stability with sufficient flexibility to address rapidly changing and unpredictable problems (Ansell et al., 2021).

Tourism governance is particularly vulnerable to instability because tourism systems depend heavily on destination image, public confidence, institutional trust, and perceptions of safety. Crises affecting governance legitimacy or political stability can therefore rapidly influence tourism demand, stakeholder relationships, and destination credibility. As Hall et al. (2018) argued, tourism resilience depends not solely on economic recovery mechanisms but also on governance capability and institutional adaptability.

Existing tourism crisis scholarship has focused extensively on preparedness, stakeholder communication, destination recovery, and organisational resilience (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004). Crisis-management research has also emphasised the interdependence of cognition, communication, coordination, and control in enabling organisations to respond to uncertain and rapidly evolving events (Comfort, 2007). These frameworks have strengthened understanding of operational crisis management in tourism systems. Nevertheless, recent synthesis indicates that strategic leadership research in tourism remains theoretically fragmented and methodologically uneven, particularly across the relationships among firms, destinations, communities, and policy actors (Abubakar & Belwal, 2026). This leaves room for interpretive work examining leadership as lived public-sector governance practice rather than solely as a set of organisational competencies or measurable outcomes.

Leadership during crises differs from leadership under stable organisational conditions. It involves uncertainty, incomplete information, emotional pressure, accelerated decision-making, and reputational sensitivity (Boin et al., 2017). Tourism crises also have symbolic and relational dimensions because destination legitimacy and public confidence are central to tourism governance systems. Leaders therefore operate not only as managers but also as institutional representatives responsible for preserving organisational credibility and stakeholder trust. Crisis governance consequently requires leaders to balance governance capacity—the ability to coordinate and implement effective responses—with governance

legitimacy derived from public confidence, accountability, and institutional trust (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020).

Adaptive Leadership Theory offers important insights into such conditions. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) conceptualised leadership as mobilisation under uncertainty rather than technical problem-solving alone. Adaptive leadership therefore involves interpretation, negotiation, flexibility, emotional regulation, and strategic adaptation. This perspective is particularly relevant within tourism governance because crises frequently evolve unpredictably and involve complex institutional relationships across multiple governance actors.

At the same time, tourism governance increasingly functions through governance networks rather than isolated bureaucratic systems. Actor-Network Theory conceptualises governance outcomes as emerging through interactions among institutions, technologies, stakeholders, policies, media systems, and crisis events themselves (Latour, 2005). Leadership therefore becomes relational rather than purely individual. Governance capability depends heavily on leaders' ability to negotiate across evolving institutional and stakeholder networks. Research on emergency networks further shows that effective multiagency response depends on communication systems, boundary-spanning relationships, and interorganisational ties that often operate alongside formal structures (Kapucu, 2006). Informal coordination in this study therefore refers to relational and communicative practices used to connect actors or accelerate action when established procedures are insufficient; it does not imply the absence of accountability.

Emotional labour provides an additional lens for understanding less visible leadership demands. Hochschild (1983) introduced emotional labour as the organisationally shaped management and display of feeling, while Grandey (2000) conceptualised it as emotion regulation undertaken to meet workplace expectations. In tourism and hospitality, emotional labour has been operationalised particularly in customer-facing service work (Chu & Murrmann, 2006). Far less is known, however, about how senior public-sector tourism leaders regulate emotion while representing institutional confidence during political, reputational, and organisational disruption. This paper treats emotional labour as an empirically examined dimension of leadership practice rather than assuming in advance that all emotional pressure constitutes emotional labour. Together, these less visible processes—tacit knowledge, informal coordination, institutional negotiation, and emotion regulation—support the use of an interpretive methodology capable of examining how governance is experienced from within.

Autoethnography and Interpretive Governance Research

Autoethnography combines autobiographical reflection with cultural and institutional analysis to connect personal experience with broader social phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Unlike conventional qualitative methodologies that position researchers as detached observers, autoethnography recognises lived experience as a legitimate source of analytical insight. Within governance research, this approach offers substantial value because many leadership and governance processes involve tacit organisational dynamics, emotional negotiation, political sensitivity, and relational coordination that are difficult to capture through surveys or external observation alone.

Tourism governance in particular involves symbolic representation, stakeholder negotiation, reputational management, institutional adaptation, and relational coordination. Such dimensions frequently remain hidden within formal organisational records or procedural documentation. Autoethnography therefore enables researchers to access governance realities that may otherwise remain invisible within conventional tourism management research.

However, autoethnography remains contested within governance and public administration scholarship. Critics frequently argue that autoethnography risks excessive subjectivity, insufficient analytical distance, and autobiographical self-indulgence (Sparkes, 2000). Concerns regarding rigor become especially significant within leadership and governance studies because insider perspectives may blur boundaries between personal reflection and analytical interpretation.

This study argues that triangulation strengthens autoethnographic rigor by situating personal experience within broader institutional and theoretical contexts. Rather than relying solely on autobiographical reflection, triangulated autoethnography integrates reflexive narratives with governance contextualisation, institutional interpretation, organisational analysis, and media discourse. Through triangulation, lived governance experiences become analytically connected to broader institutional structures and governance systems.

The study therefore positions triangulated autoethnography not as personal storytelling but as governance knowledge production capable of generating theoretically meaningful insights into tourism leadership and crisis governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist triangulated autoethnographic methodology to examine tourism leadership and crisis governance in the Malaysian public-sector tourism context. The design recognises leadership as a contextually situated and socially constructed governance practice shaped through interactions among personal experience, organisational processes, political conditions, stakeholder relationships, and public narratives. Rather than treating the researcher's experience as a self-contained autobiographical account, the study uses multiple forms of qualitative evidence to situate and critically interrogate that experience within its institutional environment. The reflexive material focused on selected governance episodes from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, while the principal documentary corpus was concentrated between 2005 and 2012. Later crisis examples raised in the focus group were used as contextual comparisons where relevant rather than treated automatically as part of the core documentary dataset.

Sources of Autoethnographic and Contextual Evidence

The empirical material comprised three interconnected sources: (a) the researcher's reflexive journal and insider governance narratives; (b) a verbatim transcript of a 79-minute focus-group discussion; and (c) chronologically organised documentary materials, including newspaper reports and official publications. The three sources were not treated as equally direct accounts of the same reality. Instead, each provided a different vantage point on personal meaning, organisational experience, and the public representation of governance events.

The reflexive journal constituted the central autoethnographic source and was compiled during the research process to reconstruct selected governance episodes rather than the researcher's entire professional career. Entries addressed the institutional setting, the researcher's professional role, leadership decisions and interactions, formal and informal coordination, political or administrative constraints, emotional responses, and subsequent reinterpretation. The material was treated as situated reflection subject to memory and hindsight rather than as a self-validating factual record.

Reflexive episodes were selected when they involved a significant crisis, institutional disruption, political transition, reputational challenge, or interorganisational response relevant to the study's research question and contained sufficient detail for interpretation. Routine administrative activity, events outside the analytical scope, and material that could not be reported without unacceptable confidentiality risks were excluded. This focused selection kept the analysis centred on leadership and governance experiences directly relevant to the paper.

A 79-minute focus-group discussion was conducted with purposively selected individuals who had direct professional knowledge of Tourism Malaysia and its wider stakeholder environment, including former senior tourism officials and long-standing agency or industry partners who had worked closely with the leadership under study. To reduce potential researcher influence, the session was facilitated by the supervisor on behalf of the candidate. Participants were selected because of their direct experience of leadership, institutional preparedness, stakeholder coordination, and the governance environment surrounding the selected episodes. The discussion was organised around human, organisational, and systemic domains. Participants were informed that the session would be recorded for research purposes, consent forms were obtained, and the discussion was transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The documentary corpus comprised chronologically organised newspaper reports and official publications selected for their direct relevance to the governance episodes under study. Materials were included when they documented the researcher's institutional role or provided relevant evidence of the public, legal, political, organisational, or reputational environment; duplicate or unrelated items were excluded. A concentrated documentary episode covered events between 2005 and 2012, while the principal newspaper reports in the supplied compilation were published between 2009 and 2012. This chronology encompassed the Pempena Dubai restaurant project, the researcher's suspension and legal proceedings, return to official duties, subsequent court proceedings, and the judicial outcomes reported in 2012. These materials were used to contextualise the public and reputational environment rather than to verify private emotional experience or undocumented internal processes.

Ethical Considerations

All focus-group participants received information about the study and signed attendance and consent forms. They were informed that the discussion would be recorded for research purposes. Identifying details were removed or generalised where necessary in the transcript and reporting. The researcher also considered the ethical implications of writing about

colleagues, institutions, and contested events from an insider position, and public documentary materials were kept analytically distinct from private organisational knowledge.

Triangulation of the Evidence

Triangulation was undertaken through comparison across these different evidential sources rather than by assuming that convergence automatically established factual truth. The researcher's reflexive interpretations were considered alongside verbatim material, relevant institutional developments, and newspaper narratives. Where different sources converged around similar governance experiences or processes, this convergence strengthened the interpretive basis for identifying recurring patterns. Where accounts differed, the divergence was retained analytically rather than automatically resolved, since differences in interpretation may themselves reveal the contested and relational character of governance. For example, reflections concerning political uncertainty were considered alongside participant accounts of leadership and organisational instability and against newspaper reporting documenting the wider political and reputational environment. Interpretations concerning institutional memory were examined through verbatim accounts describing organisational continuity, leadership transitions, tacit knowledge, and reliance upon experienced organisational actors. Similarly, interpretations of adaptive coordination were considered across accounts concerning formal procedures, informal communication, stakeholder negotiation, and crisis response. Emotional dimensions of leadership were interpreted through narratives concerning pressure, responsibility, uncertainty, public scrutiny, and the need to maintain confidence and organisational stability.

This process enabled triangulation to perform an interpretive rather than merely confirmatory function. The purpose was not to establish that the researcher's recollection was correct whenever another source appeared consistent with it. Instead, triangulation situated individual experience within a wider network of organisational, participant, media, and governance narratives, allowing similarities, tensions, and differences between sources to inform interpretation.

Analytical Treatment

The materials were analysed through an iterative interpretive process involving familiarisation, identification of recurrent governance experiences, comparison across sources, thematic clustering, theoretical interpretation, and reflexive reconsideration. Initial attention was directed towards recurring experiences and meanings associated with leadership uncertainty, organisational continuity, coordination, political conditions, institutional relationships, reputational pressures, and emotional demands.

The researcher subsequently compared these patterns across the autoethnographic narratives, collated verbatim accounts, and newspaper evidence. Related patterns were progressively grouped into broader thematic categories while attention was maintained to contradictory or divergent accounts. The analysis moved iteratively between empirical material and relevant theoretical perspectives rather than imposing predetermined theoretical categories upon the data.

Through this process, four interconnected themes were developed: leadership under political instability; fragmented institutional memory; adaptive governance and informal

coordination; and emotional labour within crisis governance. These themes represented interpretive patterns generated through comparison across the available evidence rather than categories derived solely from the researcher's personal narrative.

Theoretical triangulation was subsequently used to examine the explanatory significance of these themes in relation to tourism governance scholarship, adaptive leadership, crisis management, sensemaking, public administration, and Actor-Network Theory. Theory therefore served as an interpretive resource for examining the findings rather than as a predetermined coding framework.

The Focus Group Discussion transcript was systematically coded to establish a transparent analytical pathway between the verbatim evidence, research questions and higher-order themes. Speaker turns were retained as identifiable analytical units and differentiated between substantive evidence, contextual or procedural discussion, and non-substantive conversational material. Substantive passages were coded according to the relevant research question, crisis or governance event, analytical dimension, leadership or decision-making process, and in-vivo expressions where participants' own wording captured analytically significant meanings. Analytical memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions. Individual passages could receive multiple codes where they reflected overlapping human, organisational and systemic dimensions. Conceptually related codes were subsequently compared and clustered through iterative thematic interpretation, contributing to the development of the four higher-order themes reported in the findings. The coding matrix functioned as an audit trail rather than as a quantitative measure of thematic importance. Frequency of coding was therefore not interpreted statistically; instead, the matrix was used to strengthen analytical traceability and demonstrate the progression from participant verbatim to interpretive themes.

Reflexivity and Methodological Rigour

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process because the researcher's insider position provided both analytical access and potential interpretive limitations. Insider knowledge enabled access to tacit organisational processes, institutional relationships, historical context, and emotional dimensions of leadership that may be difficult for an external researcher to observe. At the same time, proximity to the events created the possibility that personal assumptions, retrospective interpretation, and organisational relationships could influence analysis.

The researcher therefore continually examined his positionality, assumptions, interpretations, and relationship to the events under study. Interpretations derived from personal experience were considered against other forms of evidence rather than presented as self-validating accounts. Verbatim materials provided perspectives beyond the researcher's individual interpretation, while newspaper reporting provided evidence of the wider public and reputational environment in which the governance experiences occurred.

Methodological rigor was therefore pursued through source triangulation, reflexive scrutiny, contextualisation, attention to convergence and divergence, preservation of participant verbatim material, and theoretical triangulation. These procedures do not eliminate the interpretive nature of autoethnographic research. Rather, they make the basis of

interpretation more transparent and provide readers with a clearer evidential pathway from lived experience and contextual material to the four themes reported in the findings.

Accordingly, triangulated autoethnography is used not as personal storytelling but as situated governance inquiry in which insider experience is examined through multiple evidential and theoretical perspectives. This design enables the study to investigate tacit organisational knowledge, institutional negotiation, informal coordination, relational governance, and emotional experience that may be difficult to capture through detached observation or formal organisational documentation alone.

Findings

The analysis generated four interconnected themes shaping tourism leadership in crisis governance environments. The findings below integrate reflexive evidence, anonymised focus-group quotations, and documentary context. Documentary material is used to establish the wider public and institutional setting rather than to verify the researcher's private experience.

Leadership under Political Instability

Leadership under political instability emerged as a central pattern. The accounts described governance environments marked by ministerial transition, bureaucratic restructuring, shifting policy priorities, and administrative uncertainty. Leadership therefore required continuing interpretation of changing expectations while operational priorities, political sensitivities, stakeholder demands, and staff morale were managed simultaneously. In reflecting on these events, the researcher recognised that organisational legitimacy often depended on maintaining constructive relationships across political institutions while preserving professional independence, requiring ministerial expectations, organisational priorities, stakeholder interests, and public accountability to be balanced at the same time. A focus-group participant captured the structural difficulty of this environment by observing that "tourism is federal matter... states wanted to go on their own." Newspaper reporting between 2009 and 2012 provided the wider political and reputational context surrounding investigations, suspension, legal proceedings, return to official duties, and subsequent judicial outcomes. Taken together, these sources indicate that political instability was experienced not as a distant background condition but as an ongoing governance pressure shaping leadership judgement and institutional legitimacy.

Fragmented Institutional Memory

The findings also indicated fragmentation of institutional memory. Repeated leadership turnover disrupted cumulative governance learning and weakened continuity in strategic and stakeholder relationships. Formal records did not always preserve the tacit knowledge required to interpret earlier decisions or reactivate established networks. One focus-group participant observed that "there is a lot of organisational memory," while another reflected, "We had crisis management courses... we knew what to do." The researcher similarly recognised that many organisational decisions were informed by lessons from previous crises and by experienced colleagues whose tacit knowledge of institutional practices, stakeholder expectations, and organisational history was not fully captured in formal documentation. The convergence of these accounts suggests that experienced organisational actors functioned as

repositories of governance knowledge and relational continuity, helping the institution respond to new crises despite leadership change.

Adaptive Governance and Informal Coordination

A third theme concerned adaptive governance and informal coordination. Formal bureaucratic processes were described as necessary for accountability but not always sufficiently rapid or flexible for evolving crisis conditions. Participants and the researcher referred to improvisation, direct communication, boundary spanning, and relational trust as mechanisms through which action was coordinated across institutional divisions. One participant illustrated this adaptive requirement through the practical example that the “Sydney office [was] operating with 2.1 million... you have to be creative.” From the researcher’s perspective, organisational adaptation was rarely experienced as a discrete event; it became an ongoing leadership responsibility involving continuous adjustment, negotiation, and strategic coordination in response to ministerial expectations, stakeholder concerns, and public perceptions. This pattern is consistent with adaptive leadership and with evidence that emergency coordination depends on pre-existing interorganisational communication relationships (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Kapucu, 2006). Informality was therefore interpreted as a relational supplement to formal governance, not as evidence that formal accountability was unnecessary.

Emotional Labour in Crisis Governance

The fourth theme concerned the emotional demands of leadership under crisis and reputational scrutiny. The narratives described pressure associated with public visibility, organisational responsibility, uncertainty, and the expectation that institutional confidence be maintained. In reflecting on the prolonged governance challenges, the researcher recognised that many leadership decisions were made while simultaneously managing uncertainty, protecting organisational confidence, responding to political expectations, and maintaining public trust; the emotional burden often remained invisible because effective leadership required projecting calmness during periods of significant personal stress. This interpretation was reinforced by focus-group observations that the leader was “very calm” and “very patient” under pressure, together with the view that he “really protects his staff” when pressure came from higher levels. Newspaper reports published between 2009 and 2012 documented the public and reputational setting surrounding the researcher’s suspension, return to official duties, court proceedings, and acquittal; they were used only to establish public context. Interpreted through emotional-labour scholarship, the data suggest that leadership involved regulating and presenting emotion in accordance with institutional expectations (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). The analysis does not equate all distress with emotional labour; the concept applies specifically where emotion was managed or displayed as part of the leadership role.

Discussion

This study contributes methodologically and theoretically to tourism leadership and governance research. Methodologically, it indicates that triangulated autoethnography can provide a transparent interpretive approach to governance processes that are difficult to access through surveys or detached observation alone. The contribution lies not in claiming that triangulation converts personal recollection into objective fact, but in making the

evidential basis of interpretation visible through comparison among reflexive, participant, documentary, and theoretical materials.

By integrating reflexive experience with governance contextualisation, institutional interpretation, and theoretical analysis, triangulated autoethnography strengthens methodological legitimacy while preserving interpretive richness. The study therefore contributes to ongoing methodological debates surrounding rigor, reflexivity, and insider positionality within governance research.

Theoretically, the findings reconceptualise tourism crisis leadership as an adaptive and relational governance process rather than purely technical management. Leadership capability depended not solely on formal institutional systems but also on institutional continuity, relational trust, emotion regulation, and adaptive coordination. Political instability emerged as a structural condition shaping organisational behaviour and governance adaptation. The findings also foreground sensemaking: leaders interpreted incomplete and changing information, constructed workable understandings of emerging events, and communicated those understandings across organisational and stakeholder relationships. This interpretation is consistent with Weick's (1995) account of sensemaking as an ongoing organisational response to ambiguity.

The findings extend tourism leadership scholarship in three related ways. First, they connect adaptive leadership to the institutional and political conditions of public-sector tourism governance, responding to the fragmentation identified in recent tourism leadership research (Abubakar & Belwal, 2026). Second, they show that informal coordination may operate as a boundary-spanning complement to formal authority during uncertainty (Kapucu, 2006). Third, they extend emotional-labour analysis beyond frontline tourism service by examining how a senior institutional actor managed emotion and projected stability under organisational and reputational pressure (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). These are context-bound interpretive propositions rather than statistically generalisable relationships.

Conclusion

This study addressed a gap in tourism crisis and governance scholarship concerning how public-sector tourism leadership is experienced and enacted from within institutions during periods of political instability, organisational fragmentation, reputational pressure, and crisis disruption. Whereas established tourism crisis research has generated substantial understanding of preparedness, destination recovery, communication, and organisational resilience, it provides less insight into the lived relational and institutional processes through which leaders navigate prolonged governance uncertainty. By examining Malaysian tourism governance through triangulated autoethnography, the study makes these less visible dimensions of leadership analytically accessible.

The findings indicate that crisis leadership in this setting was shaped by four interconnected processes: leadership under political instability, fragmented institutional memory, adaptive governance and informal coordination, and the emotional demands associated with maintaining organisational and symbolic stability. Taken together, these findings suggest that tourism crisis leadership cannot be understood solely as technical crisis management. Rather, it can be interpreted as an adaptive and relational governance process in which leadership is

enacted through sensemaking (Weick, 1995), institutional negotiation, preservation of organisational knowledge, formal and informal coordination, emotional regulation, and the maintenance of stakeholder confidence. This interpretation extends tourism crisis governance scholarship by bringing lived leadership experience into dialogue with adaptive leadership and networked governance perspectives.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the potential of triangulated autoethnography for examining governance processes that may remain difficult to observe through surveys, formal organisational records, or externally conducted interviews alone. The contribution does not rest on treating insider reflection as self-validating evidence. Instead, reflexive narratives are analytically situated alongside institutional developments, media narratives, crisis contexts, and relevant theoretical perspectives. Triangulation therefore functions as a means of contextualising and critically interrogating lived experience rather than eliminating the interpretive character of autoethnographic inquiry.

The study nevertheless has limitations. Its findings arise from a context-specific interpretive inquiry into Malaysian public-sector tourism governance and should not be treated as statistically generalisable to tourism institutions in other political or administrative systems. Autoethnographic interpretation also remains influenced by researcher positionality despite reflexive and triangulation procedures. Media materials provide evidence of the public and reputational environment surrounding governance events but cannot independently verify internal organisational experience. These boundaries should be recognised when interpreting the findings. The empirical record is also bounded by the availability and selection of journal entries, participant testimony, and documentary materials. Retrospective reflections, if applicable, may be shaped by memory and hindsight. The focus group provides informed but non-representative perspectives, and the documentary episode from 2005 to 2012 does not by itself substantiate every wider Malaysian political or aviation-related crisis mentioned as background.

Future research could examine whether the four processes identified here are evident across other national tourism organisations, destination governance systems, and crisis contexts. Comparative studies could investigate how different political-administrative systems shape the relationship between leadership, institutional memory, informal coordination, and emotional demands. Further research combining autoethnographic evidence with interviews, focus groups, archival records, or longitudinal organisational data could also test and refine the adaptive relational interpretation proposed in this study.

The central contribution of the study is therefore both substantive and methodological. Substantively, it suggests that understanding tourism leadership during political and governance instability requires attention to the relational, emotional, institutional, and adaptive processes through which organisational continuity and governance legitimacy are maintained. Methodologically, it illustrates how triangulated autoethnography can make these processes visible while retaining reflexive attention to the limits of insider knowledge. In this sense, the study responds to the identified literature gap by moving tourism crisis leadership analysis beyond predominantly operational accounts towards an interpretive understanding of leadership as lived governance practice.

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