Content Analysis as a Research Method

Nguyen Thanh Dung
Foreign Trade University
Hanoi, 28 July 2020

According to Krippendorff (2018), “content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use.” Content analysis is not restricted to written materials (texts) only, but also includes images, sounds, symbols, ..., as long as they deliver meanings about particular phenomena. Given the diverse meanings of texts, they must be placed in a specific context for further inference and analysis by researchers (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991).

Content analysis has a wide range of applications in social sciences research. Among 17 uses listed by Berelson (1952), most relate to communication activities, from spotting trends in communication content to describing people’s responses to communication. Typically, content analysis is employed to describe how controversial issues are covered in media, such as article Nationalizing a global phenomenon: A study of how the press in 45 countries and territories portrays climate change (Vu, Liu, Tran, 2019).

In conducting a content analysis, a research design is fundamental. The simple framework for content analysis begins with data (texts) as input and ends with results as output, both placed within a given context. The content analysis should enable researchers to answer their research questions. The content analysis includes unitizing, sampling, recording, reducing, inferring, and narrating. The first four components play the role of transforming raw data into computable data while inferring and narrating help with the interpretation and discussion of the results.

Content analysis has many advantages over other methodologies used in social research. First of all, unlike controlled experiments, interviews, focus groups, and surveys, content analysis avoids interaction with the subjects and thus, prevents distortions in data. Secondly, they can deal with unstructured data and allow for individuals' differences, which could go beyond answers collected from a structured questionnaire. Thirdly, they analyze issues within a particular context, with significant meanings for particular people in comparison with other context-insensitive methods.

Meanwhile, since context analysts have to deal with data in different formats and used with different purposes, they may not be able to find needed data or fully understand the meanings of the terms from the source of the text. This needs to be acknowledged by researchers in the limitation section of the research papers for further improvement in subsequent research (Vuong, 2020; White & Marsh, 2006).

References

- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content Analysis in Communications Research*. New York: Free Press.
- Kolbe, R. H., & Burnett, M. S. (1991). Content-analysis research: An examination of applications with directives for improving research reliability and objectivity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(2), 243-250.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. New York: SAGE Publications.
- Vu, H. T., Liu, Y., Tran, D. V. (2019). Nationalizing a global phenomenon: A study of how the press in 45 countries and territories portrays climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 58, 100942.

- Vuong, Q. H. (2020). Reform retractions to make them more transparent. *Nature*, 582(7811), 149.
- White, M. D., & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 22-45.
- Worthington, R. L., Soth-McNett, A. M., & Moreno, M. V. (2007). Multicultural counseling competencies research: A 20-year content analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(4), 351-361.