

Qualitative Data Analysis In Communication Research: Foundations And Applications

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to highlight the importance of qualitative data analysis as a fundamental tool in communication research for deeply understanding communicative interactions beyond the confines of traditional quantitative analysis. The paper reviews the most prominent cognitive frameworks that underpin the process of qualitative data analysis and elucidates their role in organizing and comprehending data. It also discusses the main approaches used in qualitative data analysis, focusing on the essential steps followed in each. Additionally, it examines the challenges researchers face when dealing with large volumes of qualitative data and the multiplicity of interpretations, which necessitates advanced analytical skills and a systematic approach. Furthermore, the paper clarifies the difference between data analysis and interpretation, where interpretation represents a deeper stage aimed at deriving comprehensive social and cultural meanings from the data. It explores the conceptual tools of interpretation, its objectives, and methods of evaluation. The paper concludes that qualitative analysis possesses a unique ability to provide an in-depth understanding of human dimensions within their social and cultural contexts, and that the flexibility of different methods and approaches enables researchers to study phenomena from multiple perspectives. It also emphasizes the importance of integrating analysis and interpretation in developing theories and offering innovative explanations.

Keywords: Qualitative Analysis, Data, Communication Research, Interpretation.

Introduction

Qualitative data is a fundamental axis in understanding social and human phenomena, as it is concerned with qualities and meanings rather than numbers and statistics. This data relies

on studying human experiences, behaviors, and interactions in their natural contexts, making it a unique research tool for understanding the dimensions of complex phenomena that quantitative data cannot adequately address. Qualitative data analysis is defined in this context as a systematic process that seeks to organize, classify, and analyze non-quantitative data (such as texts, sounds, or images) in order to derive useful patterns and categories that contribute to explaining phenomena and supporting the construction of theories.

Despite the pivotal role that qualitative data analysis plays in communication research, following this type of analysis carries with it many challenges that make it more complex compared to quantitative analysis. The first of these challenges lies in dealing with the huge amount of non-quantitative data, as this requires careful organization to understand the underlying meanings and derive patterns effectively. In addition, the multiplicity of possible interpretations of the data increases the difficulty of making decisions related to coding, classification, and choosing appropriate theories to support the analysis. The process is also non-linear, meaning that the research problem may not be fully clear until the analysis has progressed, making research a dynamic process full of continuous modifications. Another challenge for the researcher is to balance interpretations that respect local contexts with those that are consistent with academic and theoretical frameworks, which adds an additional layer of complexity.

Based on the above, this paper addresses the following questions:

1-What are the most prominent intellectual patterns framing the qualitative data analysis process?

2-What are the most important approaches used to analyze qualitative data in communication research?

3-What are the basic steps followed to analyze qualitative data?

4-How can the qualitative data analysis process be evaluated?

5-What are the essential differences between analysis and interpretation?

6-What is the concept of interpretation? What are its most important conceptual tools? What are its objectives? And how can it be evaluated?

This paper gains special importance by highlighting qualitative data analysis as a fundamental tool in communication research to understand social interactions in depth. It also provides a comprehensive framework for dealing with the challenges associated with this type of analysis, which enhances its quality and ensures its credibility. It seeks to provide an integrated theoretical vision that helps researchers understand, analyze, and interpret qualitative data within the context of communication research.

1Methods of Thinking in Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis includes five main types of thinking methods as mentioned by Melissa Freeman: categorical thinking, narrative thinking, dialectical thinking, poetic thinking, and schematic thinking. Each of these types has a different approach that helps in analyzing data and drawing important insights from it. Below is a clear explanation of each type:

1-1-Categorical Thinking: Categorical thinking aims to classify and organize data into specific categories. This approach seeks to answer questions such as: “What does this story represent?” and “What category does it belong to?” Categorization works to group data into similar units to compare or relate them to other units, which helps to identify patterns or inconsistencies.

1-2-Narrative Thinking: Narrative thinking focuses on structuring and connecting events to form a coherent story. This approach is concerned with how individuals make meaning of their experience. Questions it asks include: “What elements make up this story?” and “What narrative lines emerge repeatedly?” This type helps the researcher understand how individuals frame their actions and interpret events from their personal perspective, reflecting their values and identity.

1-3-Dialectical Thinking: Dialectical thinking focuses on uncovering the contradictions and tensions inherent in human and social narratives, and analyzing them to reach transformations. Key questions that can be asked are: “What are the contradictory values and beliefs in this story?” and “How did dialogue help find solutions?”

1-4-Poetical Thinking: Poetical thinking seeks to access deep human experiences and feelings that transcend specific contexts. This type does not ask “What is the meaning of the story?” but rather “How does the story contribute to expanding our understanding of human existence?” This approach opens up the possibility of analyzing the story as part of a larger stream of human meanings and experiences, and calls for the use of imagination and symbolism to deepen understanding.

1-5-Diagrammatical Thinking: Diagrammatic thinking aims to deconstruct conventional patterns and reconfigure the relationships between the different elements (human and non-human) within the story. This type asks: “What emerges from the interactions between story elements?” and “How does this interaction help to rethink traditional topics?” This approach seeks to transcend traditional boundaries of language and meaning, and to innovate new concepts to understand complex relationships (Freeman, 2017).

2- Approaches to qualitative data analysis

2-1-Narrative Analysis

It is one type of analytical framework that researchers use to understand and interpret stories told in research contexts or in everyday life. This type of analysis relies on studying the different elements of the story to provide meaningful interpretations and conclusions. These elements may include the structure of the story, its functions, its content, and how it is performed. Researchers from various methodologies, whether quantitative or qualitative, or even traditional or postmodern, can apply narrative analysis, making it a broad and diverse field.

Researchers draw data for narrative analysis from a variety of sources. Stories may be collected intentionally from participants through interviews or oral histories that focus on specific experiences. It can also be extracted from documented materials in daily life such as diaries, posts on social media, or transcripts of dialogues in which stories are told such as personal conversations and public speeches.

Narrative analysis includes four main types that can be used together in one study, namely: structural analysis, which focuses on studying story elements such as plot and its structure; functional analysis, which is concerned with the purposes that the story achieves as a result of its narration; thematic analysis, which is concerned with the content of the story and identifying patterns and themes in it; and finally, dialogue/performance analysis, which studies how the story is performed and the contexts of the narrative and its impact on identity and interactions (Parcell & Baker, 2017.)

2-2Phenomenological Analysis:

It is a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals as they live them. It aims to reach the essence of the experience and its true meaning from the perspective of the participants, with a focus on the feelings and details that shape it. This approach relies on the use of open-ended questions and in-depth analysis of participants' narratives, which helps to fully understand their personal experiences. Phenomenology is based on the idea that reality is constructed from subjective experiences, making every human experience a unique and important source of knowledge. (Eid & Lagacé, 2007)

This approach includes a set of steps that begin with the researcher describing his personal experiences related to the phenomenon in an attempt to neutralize them, then extracting important phrases from the participants' data and dealing with them equally to group them into meaningful units or themes. This is followed by writing a textual description that focuses on "what" the participants experienced, a structural description that explains "how" the experience took place in its context and circumstances, and finally a composite description that integrates the textual and structural descriptions to present

the essence of the experience in a comprehensive manner. Phenomenological analysis schools vary, such as Moustakas' method, which focuses on the precise structuring of data, Giorgi's method, which transforms participants' expressions into psychological meanings, and Van Manen's method, which relies on reflective thinking to analyze texts comprehensively and in detail (Creswell, 2013).

2-3- Grounded Theory:

A qualitative approach that aims to develop rich and accurate theories based on field data, it was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss to understand complex social phenomena by extracting theory directly from the data. It relies on an iterative process that combines data collection and analysis using open coding to classify data, axial coding to link subcategories to major categories, and selective coding to focus on the central category. Analysis is carried out until saturation is reached, where the new data does not add any additional insights. Its outputs include proposed theories with specific assumptions or argumentative theories that integrate analysis with real-world examples.

It can be applied in different ways, such as the Glaserian approach, an approach developed by Glaser and Strauss. It is characterized by its focus on developing a new theory naturally from the data without being influenced by previous theories. The researcher here is interested in collecting data in an open and flexible manner, allowing the theory to evolve gradually based on what the data shows. The Straussian approach, developed by Strauss and improved by the contribution of Juliet Corbin. This approach is more organized and uses a methodological framework that links categories and relationships to understand the phenomenon. It focuses on linking processes and events to develop a comprehensive theory that explains the phenomenon under study through questions such as: Why does it happen? How does it happen? What are the results? The constructivist approach, developed by Kathy Charmaz, focuses on the role of the researcher in interpreting and understanding the phenomenon, as the researcher is considered a participant in building the theory through his interaction with the data. It is also characterized by flexibility and a focus on how the participants and the researcher interpret the phenomena, rather than focusing only on describing or predicting them. (Valde, 2017)

2-4-Ethnographic Analysis:

It is a qualitative approach that seeks to understand human behavior within the cultural context in which it occurs. It aims to describe a cultural group through long-term observation of daily life patterns, including behavior, language, customs, and interactions. In this approach, the researcher works as a student learning from participants who are considered

teachers, seeking to understand the meanings of their actions and experiences from their own perspective. The primary goal of ethnography is to uncover the implicit meanings that shape culture, focusing on the elements that guide the way a group thinks and interacts (Eid & Lagacé, 2007). It is a qualitative analytical approach that consists of three main stages: description, analysis, and interpretation. The researcher begins with an objective and accurate description of the environment and the group, focusing on narrating facts and events without analysis or commentary, allowing the reader to see what the researcher has seen. In the analysis stage, the data is sorted to highlight regular patterns, and tools such as tables and charts are used to display the results, with the possibility of comparing the cultural group (culture-sharing groups) to other groups or linking them to larger theoretical frameworks. Interpretation aims to extract deep meanings from data by questioning its implications, where the researcher presents personal or creative conclusions, such as using poetry or imagination (Creswell, 2013).

3-Basic steps in qualitative data analysis:

Qualitative data analysis in communication research includes a set of interrelated steps that aim to transform raw data into an evidence-based interpretation. These steps help researchers analyze qualitative data in depth to provide rich and multifaceted interpretations of the situations or phenomena they are studying. Creswell describes the process of qualitative data analysis as the analysis spiral, which means that non-linear and circular process, which includes continuous interaction between data collection, analysis, and writing the final research report, where these steps overlap rather than being separate stages. The researcher begins by dealing with data as texts or images and ends by creating a narrative or research report, and during this process he goes through repeated stages that include organizing the data, reading and taking notes, describing, classifying, and interpreting it, and then representing and visualizing it. Creswell likens this analysis to a spiral movement where the researcher goes through different aspects of the analysis multiple times, demonstrating the flexible and evolving nature of qualitative research in practice. (Creswell, 2013) Joann Keyton suggests the following steps:

1-Initial reading and understanding of the data: The researcher begins by reading all the notes or texts collected multiple times to understand the general content and begin to identify broad patterns and themes. For example, a researcher interviews a sample of journalists about their use of social media. In this step, the researcher reads all the texts or reviews the interview recordings multiple times to understand the general context and grasp the main ideas that the participants are talking about.

2-Writing analytical memos: Recording initial impressions and preliminary interpretations helps the researcher separate his or her thoughts from the data and helps him or her identify questions or themes that need further study. For example, the researcher writes memos that include notes about his or her initial impressions after reading the interviews. The researcher might write: "Most journalists seem to face challenges in balancing professionalism and public pressures on social media platforms".

3-Categorization and coding: The data is classified into meaningful units and given short codes or labels to represent different patterns or themes. Categories can be based on the literature or emerge inductively from the data. For example, the researcher might begin by categorizing the data into units such as "audience pressure," "journalistic professionalism," and "interaction strategies." He then assigns codes such as A1 (audience pressure), A2 (journalistic professionalism), and A3 (interaction strategies).

4-Review and develop categories: The data is read again and the categories are modified based on further understanding and analysis. Often, special cases or inconsistencies are discovered that lead to the categories being expanded or modified. For example, the researcher might notice that the category "interaction strategies" during the rereading needs to be subdivided to include "responding to negative comments" and "interacting with positive content," and the codes are modified to reflect this development.

5-Continuous iterative and comparative analysis: Different parts of the data are compared with each other to develop a comprehensive understanding of the patterns and relationships between them. For example, the researcher might compare data related to the category "journalistic professionalism" with data related to "audience pressure" to find overlaps between them, such as journalists' use of specific strategies to maintain a balance between professionalism and interaction with followers.

6-Coding: Categories are linked together in a meaningful way to enhance overall understanding. For example, a researcher might link categories such as "interaction strategies" and "professionalism" to other categories such as "ethical challenges" to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between these concepts.

7-Interpretation: Patterns and themes are interpreted and meanings and trends that emerge from the data are understood. This requires moving from the micro-level of analysis to a broader level to integrate the categories into a comprehensive framework. A researcher might conclude that "journalists use a mix of interaction strategies to maintain their professional credibility, which helps them deal with audience pressure without compromising their journalistic principles".

8- Confirming credibility and trustworthiness: Participant quotes, validation, peer review, and triangulation are used to verify the accuracy of the findings and enhance confidence in them. For example, a researcher might present the findings to a group of journalists to verify the accuracy of the interpretation and use quotes such as “Daily pressure from readers forces us to change the way we deal with the news.”

9- Theoretical saturation: The researcher stops collecting more data when he finds that all the data can be coded and classified into the existing categories and that there is no new information to add. For example, the researcher may find that after reviewing all the interviews, no new categories have emerged, and he notices that all the ideas are repeated within the already defined categories, indicating that the stage of theoretical saturation has been reached. (Keyton, 2023).

Qualitative data analysis according to Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor includes a set of steps, including:

Data Management: This involves organizing and storing data in a way that makes it easy to access and analyze. Manual tools such as paper files or software designed to organize data such as qualitative analysis software can be used.

Data Reduction: This involves focusing on evidence that is of greatest importance and ignoring data that may be unnecessary for the current analysis. This step helps determine the evidence that will be used to build hypotheses and concepts.

Conceptual Development: In this step, the data is used to create analytical concepts and categories. These concepts evolve over the different stages of the project, helping to connect the data more deeply and reveal patterns and relationships.

In-Process Writing: This involves ongoing analytical writing such as side notes, comments, and preliminary memos, which help the researcher think more deeply about the data and organize ideas.

Categorization and Coding: The process usually begins with initial open data coding and developing categories that emerge from the data. Codes are used as tools to organize and link the data to the categories that have been created.

Negative Case Analysis: Cases that do not agree with the initial hypotheses of the research are sought, and these cases are used to refine and modify the hypotheses to ensure a broader and more accurate interpretation.

Verification through Member Validation: This involves re-presenting the results to the participating members to ensure the accuracy of understanding and provide feedback.

Interpretation Development: Concepts and patterns are used to provide deeper interpretations of the data, using techniques such as inductive comparisons, inferences, and metaphors.

Validation Techniques: Techniques such as triangulation, multiple analysis, and negative case verification are used to ensure the reliability of the results (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The steps of qualitative data analysis according to Creswell include the following:

Data Management: The process begins by organizing the data into files, and converting them into text units suitable for analysis manually or using computer programs.

Reading and Memoing: Going through the entire data several times to capture key ideas and jotting down notes in the margins or alongside text and images.

Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting: Constructing detailed descriptions, developing codes or categories, and forming interpretations based on one's own perspectives or from academic literature.

Coding: Classifying text or visual data into smaller categories and associating texts with these codes. Initial codes are reduced to a few key categories or final themes.

Interpreting: Drawing general meanings from the data and providing "lessons learned," including connecting interpretations to existing academic literature or offering personal insights.

Representing and Visualizing: Displaying results with textual images, tables, or illustrations such as hierarchical charts or comparative tables. This stage may also include using metaphors and literary devices to analyze the data (Creswell, 2013). When comparing the steps of qualitative data analysis as outlined by Keyton, Lindlof & Taylor, and Creswell, we find several common points. All models begin with managing and organizing the data to ensure it is easily accessible and analyzable, and emphasize initial reading of the data to gain a deeper understanding. All models also include the process of categorizing and coding to identify key patterns. Developing categories and concepts and extracting patterns is a common step that helps to understand relationships among the data, with the ultimate focus being on interpreting these patterns to provide comprehensive insights. Additionally, the validity of the results is checked using techniques such as member checking and triangulation of the data. The analysis methods vary in some steps and details. Keyton highlights the importance of writing initial analytical memos to identify questions and themes, a step that is not explicitly mentioned by the other models. Lindlof & Taylor focus specifically on analyzing negative cases to refine and modify hypotheses, while Creswell focuses on visual representation of the data through tables and figures. Keyton also included an axis coding step to link categories together, a step not explicitly mentioned in the Lindlof & Taylor and Creswell method. The concept of theoretical saturation is addressed more explicitly by Keyton, while it appears implicitly in the other methods.

4-Criteria for Evaluating the Analysis: When analyzing qualitative data, the researcher relies on a set of criteria to ensure accuracy and credibility. These criteria include credibility, which is enhanced through good planning, comprehensive documentation, and continuous engagement with participants, in addition to using member verification to review initial results. Triangulation is also an essential element to improve the reliability of the results, and this is done by using multiple sources and methods to collect data or involving several researchers to analyze it. Theoretical saturation is a sign of the completeness of the analysis, where all data is classified into categories without new categories appearing. Participant quotes are used to support the analysis and highlight key points in a way that gives the reader a clear understanding of patterns and concepts. Transparency and continuous documentation, such as writing analytical notes, are essential to track initial ideas and review assumptions. Data is classified and coded to simplify it and identify categories or concepts, which may be inspired by the literature or stem from the data itself. Qualitative analysis relies on iterative analysis, where data is periodically reviewed and compared to understand relationships between categories and improve the analysis. Thematic analysis is also used to identify key themes based on criteria such as frequency, strength, and expression. Finally, ethical considerations must be taken into account to ensure that the analysis is consistent with the data and that interpretations do not conflict with the meanings of the participants and their contexts, which enhances the reliability and scientific value of the results. (Keyton, 2023)

5 The difference between data analysis and interpretation in qualitative research

Analysis in the context of qualitative research in the field of communication represents the first step through which raw data is dealt with in an organized manner, as analysis aims to break down this data into small parts, and classify them into categories or codes that reflect their common characteristics. It relies on methodological tools such as inductive reasoning (which deduces general rules from partial details) and deductive reasoning (which tests rules or hypotheses in new contexts). At the end of this stage, the goal is to build an organized structure that helps the researcher identify patterns and connections within the data, paving the way for the interpretation stage.

Interpretation is the next stage that moves the data from organization to deep understanding. Through the interpretation process, the researcher seeks to explore the cultural and social meanings and implications contained in the data. Interpretation relies on creative thinking in addition to considering the historical and social contexts of the

phenomenon under study. At this stage, the researcher uses theories, experiences, and imagination to link the data to new facts or innovative interpretations. Thus, the analysis turns into a broader vision that sheds light on the dimensions of the phenomenon under study.

6- Interpretation

6-1-The concept of interpretation

Interpretation can be defined as the process of giving meaning to patterns, themes, and concepts extracted from the data. It is considered the step that follows data analysis, where the researcher moves from a precise framework that includes coding and classification to a comprehensive framework that analyzes the data as a whole. In other words, interpretation expresses the translation of categories and concepts into an integrated whole and deeper meaning. (Keyton, 2023) It is also the process of translating the subject of analysis from a specific semantic framework to another semantic framework. Interpretation aims to build a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the data by linking the primary meanings derived from the open analysis with secondary meanings based on theoretical and interpretive concepts. In other words, interpretation can be understood as re-reading the data to understand its contexts and implications at broader levels using theoretical imagination and symbolic association. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011)

6-2-Conceptual tools for interpretation

The process of interpretation relies on the use of multiple conceptual tools that help the researcher interpret the data in a rich and complex way. The following are the most important conceptual tools used in interpretation:

Metaphor (Metaphoric) A metaphor is a tool used to link a certain social idea to something completely different to clarify the idea and enhance its understanding. For example: describing the different relationships within social groups with the metaphor of "division" or depicting public interaction in the media with the metaphor of "conversation".

Metonymic A relationship in which one part of a phenomenon is considered a symbolic representation of the whole. Example: Studying the problems of female journalists as a representation of women's issues in the media in general.

Irony Expressing the discrepancy between expectations and actual reality through irony or contradiction. Example: Studying the behavior of women in women's organizations that exhibit traits such as jealousy and envy despite positive stereotypes about women's management.

Syntagmatic Analyzing activities that follow recurring narrative or temporal patterns to understand their structure

and meaning. Example: Analyzing family stories to emphasize the importance of family ties.

Paradigmatic Using opposing sets of concepts to understand culture or social issues. Example: Studying Indian immigrants' perceptions of India using binaries such as "rural versus urban" or "poverty versus wealth" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

6-3-Objectives of Interpretation

- Transforming the extracted patterns into a clear and comprehensive vision of the phenomenon studied.
- Interpreting the data in a way that helps understand the deeper meaning of interactions and phenomena.

Interpretation is a vital part of qualitative analysis, as it enables the researcher to provide a comprehensive understanding of the data that goes beyond describing it to providing deeper and more comprehensive interpretations. (Keyton, 2023)

6-4-Evaluating Interpretation

Evaluating interpretation requires the use of many diverse and integrated methods, including validity and reliability testing, triangulation, negative case analysis, and member verification. This evaluation aims to provide a deep and reliable interpretation that reflects the complexity and specificity of social phenomena, with a focus on transparency and flexibility in the research process. The evaluation is carried out through several steps and qualitative tools.

Evaluating interpretation in qualitative research requires the use of a set of tools to ensure the quality and credibility of interpretations. The evaluation begins with a focus on validity, which includes internal validity to verify that explanations relate to the target phenomenon, conceptual validity to link empirical indicators to theory, and external validity to determine the transferability of results to similar contexts through extensive description. Reliability is also examined by assessing pattern stability or using more than one analyst to ensure that interpretations are consistent. Triangulation is essential for comparing multiple sources of data or methods, which enhances the credibility of the results. Negative case analysis is also added, which focuses on modifying interpretations when data appear that conflict with the main patterns, which leads to improving the interpretation and increasing the comprehensiveness of the results. In addition, member validation is also used, where the interpretation is presented to participants to verify its accuracy and fairness. Finally, crystallization is relied upon as an alternative to triangulation, where diverse perspectives and methods are combined to provide a rich interpretation that reflects the multiplicity of meanings and complexity of phenomena without claiming a comprehensive or objective interpretation.

These tools combine flexibility and transparency to ensure accurate and convincing interpretations that reflect the social and cultural complexity of the phenomena studied. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011)

Conclusion:

This research paper highlights the importance of qualitative data analysis as a methodological tool for understanding human interactions and behaviors in depth beyond the limits of traditional quantitative analysis. The paper discusses different methodologies for analyzing qualitative data, focusing on tools such as narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, and ethnographic analysis. It also highlights some of the thinking methods related to qualitative analysis such as categorical, narrative, dialectical, poetic, and schematic thinking, and their role in organizing and understanding data. This paper also addresses the practical steps of data analysis, starting from collecting and classifying data to extracting and interpreting patterns. In addition, the paper clarifies the difference between analysis and interpretation, where the latter represents a deeper stage for drawing comprehensive social and cultural implications from data.

The paper reached some conclusions, including:

1-The superiority of qualitative analysis: Qualitative analysis demonstrates its ability to overcome quantitative barriers by providing a deep understanding of human dimensions in their social and cultural contexts.

2-Flexibility of methods: The importance of different methods such as narrative analysis and reality-based theory is highlighted in enabling researchers to study phenomena from multiple angles.

3-Practical challenges: The paper showed difficulties related to dealing with large amounts of qualitative data and multiple interpretations, which requires advanced analytical skills and an organized approach.

4-Integration between analysis and interpretation: Interpretation is a vital step in transforming extracted patterns into a comprehensive vision that contributes to developing theories and creating innovative interpretations.

Finally, this paper emphasizes that qualitative analysis is not just a research method, but rather an integrated intellectual approach to understanding social phenomena. The paper suggests the need to invest more research efforts to develop qualitative tools and methods to keep pace with modern developments and provide comprehensive and accurate visions.

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