

**CONTENT ANALYSIS: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ADVERTISING RESEARCH****Samson Thomas*, Dr.Eby. N .Elias**

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ABSTRACT

To sum up, content analysis is a useful research technique for analyzing large bodies of text. It offers objective guidelines in the coding of the text and to draw inferences from the data. It helps in the coding of the text according to systematic and objective rules and in drawing inferences from the data. A successful content analysis study is the outcome of a series of good decisions. The process starts from the point of deciding whether the method is suitable to study the research topic under question. After clearly setting out the objectives of the study, the researcher proceeds to make decisions relating to units of analysis, developing content categories, sample and the sampling period. Orienting coders, checking inter coder reliabilities and selecting appropriate statistical designs for presenting results are some of the essential tasks, which add rigor to the study.

INTRODUCTION

Content analysis is a research method that has come into wide use in marketing in recent years. It is the study of the content with reference to the meanings, contexts and intentions contained in messages. In 1952, Bernard Berelson published Content analysis in Communication Research, which heralded recognition for the technique as a versatile tool for social science and media researchers. Some scholars adopted it for historical and political research as well (Holsti, 1968). However, the method achieved greater popularity among social science scholars as well as a method of communication research (Wimmer and Dominick, 1994:163). The development of content analysis as a full-fledged scientific method took place during World War II when the U.S. government sponsored a project under the directorship of Harold Lasswell to evaluate enemy propaganda. The resources made available for research and the methodological advances made in the context of the problems studied under the project contributed significantly to the emergence of the methodology in content analysis. One of the outcomes of the project, the book entitled Language of Politics published in 1940s (Lasswell et. al. 1965), still remains a classic in the field of content analysis. Later on, the method spread to other disciplines (Woodrum, 1984).

Definition and purpose of Content analysis

Content denotes what is contained and content analysis is the analysis of what is contained in a message. Broadly content analysis may be seen as a method where the content of the message forms the basis for drawing inferences and conclusions about the content (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976). Further, content analysis falls in the interface of observation and document analysis. It is defined as a method of observation in the sense that instead of asking people to respond to questions, it “takes the communications that people have produced and asks questions of communications”

(Kerlinger, 1973). Therefore, it is also considered as an unobtrusive or non-reactive method of social research. A number of definitions of content analysis are available. According to Berelson (1952) content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Holsti(1968) says that it is any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages.

Kerlinger (1986) defined content analysis as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Krippendorff (1980) defined content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. As for Weber (1985) it is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about sender(s) of message, the message itself, or the audience of



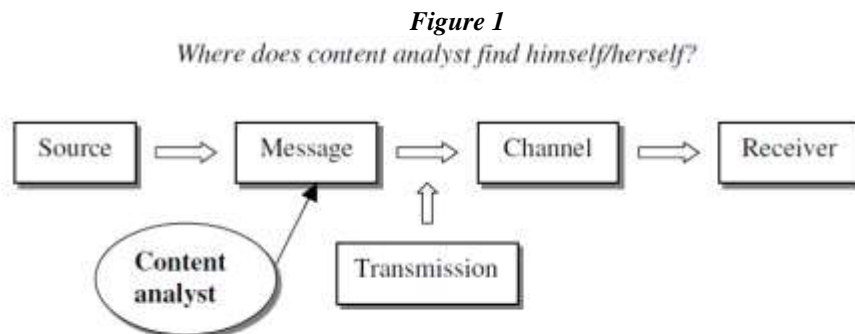
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message. According to Stone, content analysis refers to any procedure for assessing the relative extent to which specified references, attitudes, or themes permeate a given message or document.

A careful examination of the definitions of the method show emphasis placed on aspects such as system, objectivity, quantification, context and validity - with reference to the inferences drawn from the communication content about the sender, the message or the receiver of the message. Thus, content analysis is all about making valid, replicable and objective inferences about the message on the basis of explicit rules. The material for the content analysis can be letters, diaries, newspaper content, folk songs, short stories, messages of Radio, Television, documents, texts or any symbols. Further, like any other research method, content analysis conforms to three basic principles of scientific method. They are:

1. Objectivity: Which means that the analysis is pursued on the basis of explicit rules, which enable different researchers to obtain the same results from the same documents or messages.
2. Systematic: The inclusion or exclusion of content is done according to some consistently applied rules where by the possibility of including only materials which support the researcher's ideas – is eliminated.
3. Generalizability: The results obtained by the researcher can be applied to other similar situations.

Now, if content of communication forms the material for content analysis, where does a content analyst find himself/herself in the communication process? Figure 1 shows the communication process and where the analyst figures.



As can be seen, the analyst figures at the point of the message, and as Holsti (1968:601) points out, draws inferences about sender(s) of message, characteristics of message itself, or the effects of the communication on the audience – that is the researcher interprets the content so as to reveal something about the nature of the audience or of its effects. Lasswell incorporated these components in his classical formulation:

WHO says WHAT to WHOM with WHAT EFFECT?

Table 1 adopted from Berelson (1952) gives a comprehensive picture of the different uses/applications of the method of content analysis.



Table 1 The Purposes of Content Analysis

Purpose	Questions	Research problems
<i>To describe the characteristics of content</i>	<i>What?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To describe trends in communication content. ▪ To relate known characteristics of sources to the messages they produce. ▪ To check communication content against standards
	<i>How?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To analyze techniques of persuasion ▪ To analyze style
	<i>To whom?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To relate known characteristics of the audience to messages produced for them. ▪ To describe patterns of communication.
<i>To make inferences about the causes of content</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To secure political and military intelligence. ▪ To analyze psychological traits of individuals ▪ To infer aspects of culture and cultural change ▪ To provide legal evidence
	<i>Who?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To answer questions of disputed authorship.
<i>To make inferences about the effect of content</i>	<i>With what effect?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To measure readability ▪ To analyze the flow of information. ▪ To assess responses to Communication.

ADVANTAGES OF CONTENT ANALYSIS

1. It goes beyond the common observations about the phenomena and can help you make a quantitative expression about the phenomenon i.e. express it in numbers, in percentages, which will be more specific, and objective.
 2. It is an unobtrusive research technique useful to study sensitive research topics.
 3. It is context-sensitive and therefore can process symbolic meanings of data.
- Though predominantly seen as a quantitative method, it can effectively capture qualitative content as well (Stempel, 1989:121). The context-sensitivity of the method will be useful in articulating the qualitative dimensions such as for example, the direction of coverage of news items as favorable or unfavorable.
4. It is a safe method in the sense that if the researcher found that a portion of the necessary information was missing or incorrectly coded, it is possible to return to the text and supplement the missing data. This is not always possible in experimental or survey research (Woodrum, 1984).
 5. It can deal with very large volumes of data. Processing may be tedious but of late computers made the job fairly easy.
 6. It is a cheap methodology, which is typically people oriented and requires minimum investment.

DISADVANTAGES OF CONTENT ANALYSIS



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1. Its inferences are limited to the content of the text only. Similarly, symbols are processed and coded according to the attribution given by the researcher or coder. There is no guarantee that the sender or receiver shares the same attributed meaning.
2. When it deals with semantic differences or differences in regard to the meanings of words, the findings can be less valid and reliable.
3. It is argued that content analysis which confines itself to counting the individual units and their frequency of occurrence such as for example the number of times the word 'globalisation' appeared, may fail to capture the meaning or significance with which these symbols are used in the texts analyzed.
4. The reliability and validity issues in content analysis still remain unresolved (Krippendorff, 1980)
5. The method cannot be used to test casual relationships between variables (Chadwick, et. al., 1984).

LIMITATIONS OF CONETENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis has got its limitations. What it does not tell us is about causal connections between variables under study. It cannot answer why there were changes in the subject content. Further, though a popular research method, it is still used as a technique to supplement the findings of mainstream research designs such as survey research. Woodrum (1984) rightly argues that "content analysis remains an under utilized research method with great potential for studying beliefs, organizations, attitudes and human relations. The limited application and development of content analysis is due more to unfamiliarity with the method and to its historic isolation from main stream of management science than to its inherent limitations".

Method to do content analysis

Content Analysis begins with a specific statement of the objectives or research questions to be studied. The researcher asks the question 'what do I want to find out from this communication content' and frames the objectives for study. The researcher must therefore locate a source of communication relevant to the research question and ask questions that can be solved by content analysis. The objective of content analysis is to convert recorded "raw" phenomena into data, which can be treated in essentially a scientific manner so that a body of knowledge may be built up. In fact, the researcher who wishes to undertake a study using content analysis must deal with four methodological issues: selection of units of analysis, developing categories, sampling appropriate content, and checking reliability of coding (Stempel, 1989).

More specifically studies using content analysis usually involve the following six steps:

1. Formulation of the research question or objectives
2. Selection of communication content and sample
3. Developing content categories
4. Finalizing units of analysis
5. Preparing a coding schedule, pilot testing and checking inter coder reliabilities
6. Analyzing the collected data

Formulation of the research questions or objectives

As already mentioned, by making a clear statement of the research question or objective, the researcher can ensure that the analysis focuses on those aspects of content, which are relevant for the research. Content analysis is a method for analyzing textual content. Therefore, the selection of topic should be one that can be answered by analyzing the appropriate communication content. In other words, what is it that we would hope to be able to say about something by analysing the communication content or a body of text?

Selection of communication content and sample

Locate relevant communication content to answer the research question and to determine the time period to be covered. If the body of content is excessive, then a sample needs to be worked out. Though sampling in content analysis is not so much different from sampling in surveys, because of the unique nature of the source material used in this method, there developed some special sampling techniques for content analysis. Thus, depending upon the nature of the communication content – whether it is a new item, editorial, short story or a TV serial – the sampling techniques differ.



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Developing content (subject) categories

Content categories can be defined as compartments or “pigeon holes” with explicitly stated boundaries into which the units of content are coded for analysis. They in fact flow from the research question and should be anchored in a review of relevant literature and related studies. Content categories are constructed in response to the query: What classification would most efficiently yield the data needed to answer the research questions raised?

The first step in category construction is preliminary examination of the communications by the researcher on a small-scale or as a pilot study so that such examination will result in the identification of possible content categories into which material can be coded. Usually one experiments with several categories before finalising a set of categories that can be used for the study. Sometimes, category systems already developed by other researchers may also prove useful for your study. Developing the category system to classify the body of text is the heart of content analysis. Berelson (1952:147) rightly points out: “Content analysis stands or falls by its categories. Particular studies have been productive to the extent that the categories were clearly formulated and well adapted to the problem and the content”.

To be useful, every content category must be completely and thoroughly defined, indicating what type of material is and is not to be included. Such definitions in most of the cases should be written down before coding begins. These form the operational definitions of categories. According to Chadwick et al., (1984), categories must be mutually exclusive so that a word, a paragraph or a theme belongs in one and only one category. Also, the categories must be exhaustive so that all units examined fit in an appropriate category. Sometimes, a ‘miscellaneous or residual category’ is added for units that occur rarely or are un-codable for other reasons.

Finalizing units of analysis

At this stage, that is, once the categories are identified and defined in terms of the research objectives, the content analyst asks two interrelated questions. They are:

- a. What unit of content is to be selected for classification under the categories? and
- b. What system of enumeration will be used?

Preparing a coding schedule, pilot testing and checking inter coder reliabilities

Defining categories and preparing coding schedule for the analysis and coding of content are simultaneous steps. A coding schedule resembles a survey questionnaire and contains different dimensions of the communication content to be coded. Next, piloting the coding schedule is a crucial step before launching the full-scale content analysis. Test coding of a small sample of the material to be analyzed helps reveal inconsistencies and inadequacies in the category construction.

Analyzing the collected data

How should the data be analyzed? The definition of the research problem gives direction to data analysis, the patterns to be examined, and the relationships to be explored. As in the case of analysis of survey data, the starting point can be the description of the profile of the main categories such as for example characteristics and types of content by period, actors, and so on. Later, the analysis can move to conduct more complex analyses comparing two or more dimensions, periods or data sets.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, content analysis is a useful research technique for analyzing large bodies of text. It offers objective guidelines in the coding of the text and to draw inferences from the data. It helps in the coding of the text according to systematic and objective rules and in drawing inferences from the data. A successful content analysis study is the outcome of a series of good decisions. The process starts from the point of deciding whether the method is suitable to study the research topic under question. After clearly setting out the objectives of the study, the researcher proceeds to make decisions relating to units of analysis, developing content categories, sample and the sampling period. Orienting coders, checking inter coder reliabilities and selecting appropriate statistical designs for presenting results are some of the essential tasks, which add rigor to the study.

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