

Differences Between Thematic Analysis and Content Analysis: Exploring Environmental and Sustainability Education Resources

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Abstract

This case reflects on key differences between thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis. I describe how I pivoted from a thematic analysis to a content analysis mid-way through a project analyzing environmental and sustainability education resources. My research question and the assumptions I had about the status of the data I was analyzing were more suited to qualitative content analysis, with its systematic procedures for reducing data and producing descriptive (though interpreted) statistics. Many of the mistakes I made with this project can be traced back to me using a tried and tested approach to analysis rather than critically reflecting on my assumptions and the best “fit” between method, methodology, and data. I write this case in the hope that other researchers can choose between these apparently similar approaches by arguing that the two have quite different underlying logics behind them.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

- Compare and contrast thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis
- Choose between thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis for your own data analysis projects
- Identify your own epistemological assumptions about the practice of qualitative data analysis

Project Overview and Context

I have a longstanding interest in how consumers respond to normative pressures to act in sustainable and responsible ways. My work has looked at Fairtrade consumption, recycling, and ready-made food consumption ([Wheeler, 2012](#), [Wheeler, 2018](#); [Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015](#)), and in pursuing these projects, I became aware that a great deal of attention has been placed upon educating children and young people to become sustainable consumers. The project this case is based upon was a mixed-methods study to analyze environmental and sustainability education (or Education for Sustainable Development [ESD]) resources and to interview those that created these resources. The project was funded by a BA-Small Grant, entitled “Education young people as sustainable citizen-consumers.”

There are many ESD resources available online, produced by a range of different actors—from private companies (like EDF Energy and Tesco) to NGOs (like World Wildlife Fund [WWF] and Oxfam and Fairtrade Foundation). There is no centralized support for sustainability education in the UK system, despite UNESCO policies that have made an ESD is a key priority (though this is a devolved issue and England stands out as the nation without clear policies on ESD). My research sought to explore how the various interested nonstate organizations are communicating messages about sustainability to young people through their resources.

My research questions were:

- What models of consumer responsibility, citizenship, and behavioral change are communicated through these educational resources?
- What motivations do different organizational actors have for offering ESD resources, and how do they communicate these values through their educational provision?

To answer these questions, I both had to explore the content of educational resources and speak with those who created them. This case only focuses on the analysis of the educational resources.

Because I was interested in analyzing the key themes and messages within these educational resources, I originally decided that a thematic analysis would be the most appropriate tool to employ. Thematic analysis (TA) is an approach I am familiar with and had employed on earlier projects with qualitative interview data. However, I came to realize this was not the most appropriate method as I developed my analysis. I made several mistakes with this research project which have forced me to clarify the boundaries between TA and qualitative content analysis (QCA). This case is a reflective review of some of the key differences between TA and QCA within this research project. Although there are many blurred boundaries between the two, this case shows there are distinct differences that researchers ought to consider when choosing between these methods of analysis.

Section Summary

- The project this case is drawn from involved content analysis of education for sustainability (ESD) resources.
- There are key differences between QCA and TA.

Choosing Between TA and QCA

In this section, I discuss some of the key similarities and differences between TA and QCA. Through the rest of this case, I show how I came to realize it was the latter that I needed to employ on this research project.

Defining TA and QCA

TA involves searching a sample of documents for recurring and distinctive themes which are usually inductively developed by the researcher who has fully familiarized themselves with the data corpus through immersive and repeated reading. There is no one approach to TA, though the reflexive and active model of analysis from [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) is often cited. Coding for key themes is probably the most common form of qualitative data analysis and has its roots in the iterative stages of coding proposed by grounded theorists ([Charmaz, 2014](#); [Gibbs, 2007](#)). Codebook approaches (e.g., where the researcher develops a list of codes and assigns segments of text to these) are common within this family of methods ([King et al., 2019](#); [Spencer et al., 2014](#)) and probably the most similar type of analysis to qualitative content analysis.

QCA involves the systematic reading of a body of texts and the application of a consistent coding framework to capture and categorize manifest and latent content within these texts so as to infer meanings from them. The method has its roots in the analysis of newspapers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but has been applied within broader social sciences since the 1940s (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012). Earlier forms of content analysis were mostly concerned with manifest content and so counted occurrences of words and themes in order to create frequencies or statistics. But qualitative approaches were later developed, often from media and communication studies, which emphasized the importance of context when interpreting counts of themes/words (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000; Schreier et al., 2019; Schreier, 2012). There are again different varieties of QCA, but this definition by Schreier (2012, p. 1) offers a summary of this approach—“a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material... by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame.”

Comparing TA and QCA

Definitions of qualitative TA and QCA reveal many similarities—both involve analyzing qualitative forms of data through the construction of a coding framework, both look for meanings and latent content, both acknowledge the role of researcher reflexivity in the process of coding, and both pay attention to the context within which meaning from data can be constructed. There is limited literature comparing TA and QCA (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), but this literature suggests that the key differences between the two relate to underlying philosophical assumptions, the treatment of the dataset, and the position on quantification.

Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest differences between these methods may be in name only and that TA and QCA should be seen as close cousins. However, it is my contention that there are important differences between the two methods of analysis. Table 1 provides a useful comparison between the two approaches—though it should be highlighted that these reveal tendencies in the two approaches as there is no one approach to TA or QCA.

Table 1. Comparing TA and QCA.

Research design	TA	QCA
Underlying philosophy	Interpretive and constructionist	Interpretive and realist
Type of qualitative data	Often researcher-generated data but can use existing documents	Often existing documents, but can use researcher generated
Goal of	Nuanced and complex elaboration of key themes	Reduction of data through

Research design	TA	QCA
analysis		systematic classification
Approach to sampling	Purposive	Purposive
Dataset	Is important insofar as it illustrates key themes	Is central to the interpretation of results
What is analyzed?	Manifest and latent content	Manifest and latent content
Code development	Inductive (though researcher influenced)	Inductive and deductive
Focus of analysis	Themes are developed	Content is explored and classified
Position on mutual exclusivity of codes	Does not matter if same piece of text is coded under two or more dimensions of the same overarching category	Coding units should only be coded once in relation to one category.
Position on quantification	Discouraged	Descriptive quantification must be contextualized and interpreted
Role of researcher reflexivity	Central to development and interpretation of themes	Acknowledged but not necessarily part of the process
Reliability and validity of coding process	Extensive use of memos and research diaries to record ongoing process and decisions made, clear reporting of findings including assumptions that have influenced analysis	Can be verified through member-checking and public justification of coding frame application.

QCA, qualitative content analysis; TA, thematic analysis.

Choosing Between TA and QCA on This Project

The analysis of ESD resources sought to understand both how young people were educated about the environment and sustainability and what messages were being communicated by different organizations. I

was not only interested in the manifest content (what students were taught and what activities they were asked to undertake) but also to interpret what these messages might mean in the context of broader debates about sustainability education (latent content). This interpretivist focus lends itself to either TA or QCA, and the decision between the two came down to how descriptive or how interpretive my analysis would be and the assumptions I made as a researcher about the data I was analyzing.

Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that QCA is a descriptive method when compared to TA which is highly interpretive. My decision was thus influenced by the type of data I was analyzing which was fairly standardized in a way interview data rarely is. The educational resources were often in the form of a lesson plan or short educational video or game with clear learning objectives and outcomes. Interview data, by contrast, are complex and contradictory and so more attention is needed to interpret, understand, and construct an analysis that can narrate the diversity of experiences. While QCA can certainly be employed with interview data, I concur with Braun and Clarke who believe a reflexive TA is a more appropriate approach with this form of data. The goal of my analysis was to systematically explore and describe recurring content across a relatively large set of resources, with the aim of reducing the data. I wanted to report some basic descriptive statistics to show the differences between the ways different organizations taught about sustainability. Though many interpretations of these educational resources were possible, I had more of a realist assumption in my approach to the content within these resources. In other words, the underlying philosophy of my research approach was that I felt this data corpus could be more straightforwardly classified and quantified than interview data. In this case, QCA was a more appropriate tool to achieve the goals of this analysis.

Section Summary

- A key similarity between TA and QCA is the use of a data-driven coding framework to capture latent and manifest content/ideas within qualitative data.
- Key differences between TA and QCA include the possibility of reporting on the quantification of coding processes and the treatment of data as “content” to be reduced rather than themes to be expanded.
- The analysis of ESD resources was more suited to QCA because the aim of the project was to systematically describe and reduce the data.

Generating a Sample

In this section, I first explore how I sampled the resources before discussing why clearly specifying how many texts or units of analysis are used in a study is a defining feature of QCA. While having a clearly justifiable sample is also important in TA, the purpose of the dataset in TA is to illuminate key themes. It was because I had a desire to say something about the variations between units in my sample that QCA was the most appropriate method to employ.

Practicalities of Sampling the Resources

The sampling of the texts for this project was purposive, and I located resources from a range of different types of organizations in order to best explore my research question. I selected seven organizations from NGO, private, and public sectors—these were the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Eco-Schools, Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), The Fairtrade Foundation (FTF), EDF Energy, Tesco, and UN World's Largest Lesson (WLL). Given the abundance of NGO-led provision, I tried to capture different types of organizations that traditionally place different emphasis on consumer-led (MSC and FTF) versus citizen-led actions (WWF and Eco-Schools). I wanted to include resources from Department for Education, but I found no resources provided by the central government (in keeping with their hands off approach), so the UN resources provide the public sector perspective.

I initially visited the organizations' websites between December 2017 and February 2018 and downloaded most of the resources at this point. The resources were freely available through online platforms. Following the interviews in September 2018, some additional resources were sourced, and in preparing the papers in 2021,¹ checks were made to discover whether resources were still freely available. The Tesco resources were the only ones no longer promoted following the end of the "Farm to Fork" scheme in 2017.

The challenge was to select sufficient examples from each type of organization across a diverse range of topics and activity formats. The number of resources available from Tesco, Eco-Schools, and MSC were limited to 1–3 key resource collections. Whereas the other organizations (FTF, EDF Energy, WWF, and WLL) had many resources and it would have been difficult to include them all. For those organizations where only a handful of resources/collections were available, all were included in the sample. For the other organizations, the samples selected were informed by the themes and topics already covered by low-resource organizations (e.g., commodity type [fish, bananas or cocoa], eco-clubs, waste and recycling, oceans), or on the basis of the importance of the campaign. A maximum of three resource collections were selected for each organization.

The Importance of the Dataset in QCA

In total, over 200 resources were downloaded, and after some time, I realized these needed to be further sorted into units that were comparable for content analysis. The treatment of the units within the dataset is one of the important distinctions between TA and QCA. While both types of analysis can deal with complex and diverse types of resources, within QCA, it is more important to have a clear idea of what the units of analysis comprise and how they will be divided for coding purposes.

According to [Schreier \(2012\)](#), there are three distinct units that need to be considered when undertaking a content analysis: (1) the unit of analysis—each case on which the analysis is conducted (this might be each interview or article, for instance); (2) the units of coding—how the unit of analysis is segmented into sections for coding purposes; and (3) the context units—the material surrounding the coding unit that facilitates its interpretation. As [Schreier \(2012, p. 128\)](#) notes "there is nothing wrong with discovering relevant concepts in your material, exploring them further, and having them guide your analysis" but this is not QCA, and the

strength and aim of the method is to systematically explore all segments of the data separately.

Having started the analysis as TA, I originally overlooked this stage. What matters in TA are the themes and capturing their diversity and nuance within the overall corpus of data. There is no desire to quantify the outcome of the analysis, and the dataset only matters in so far as it illuminates the key themes. Of course, what materials were included and the diversity of the sample of texts should be reported, but these play a limited role in the interpretation of the themes. In my case, this distinction mattered because my research question focused on exploring key differences within the sample of documents. The fit between my research question and TA was poorly aligned.

Practically realizing the unitizing among the 200 resources was challenging. Some of my resources were in the form of long teacher packs with multiple lesson plans, whereas others were separated into discrete activities that formed one part of a lesson plan. Some files were pages long, whereas others were just one page of text or an image. Some resources were duplicated and appeared in a lesson plan and as a separate resource. I made the decision to divide and merge the resources into units that were roughly comparable and exclusive. Resources were divided by resource type (which were identified as either a lesson plan, a learning resource [standalone activity or information not directly tied to a lesson plan], a video, a game, an eco-club resource, an assembly, or a resource overview). This led to a sample of 123 documents or units of analysis.

Section Summary

- The original sample of ESD resources was messy, and I had to think carefully about how to divide and merge resources so the units of analysis could be accounted for in a meaningful and useful way.
- It is more important to divide your data into comparable units of analysis when using QCA rather than TA.

Method in Action

This section focuses on the process of developing codes and how this process is broadly comparable if using a codebook TA or QCA approach. I then provide an example of my coding framework and discuss some of the issues related to validity and reliability when undertaking QCA.

Developing Codes

Having collected the sample resources together, I leaped straight into the analysis. I uploaded all the files to the qualitative software package, MAXQDA, and read through a selection of resources from a range of different organizations. My approach to TA was informed by the approach to coding from [Spencer et al. \(2014\)](#), which advocates the development of a codebook where data are initially indexed according to recurring ideas, then sorted into categories, with themes meaningfully interpreted from these categories at a later stage of the process. In this way, the actual process of developing a codebook using TA and QCA was relatively closely aligned. Indeed the comparison of TA and QCA in [Vaismoradi et al. \(2013\)](#) concurs that

developing a coding frame in both approaches follows similar procedures.

Given my research focus, I developed a coding framework that captured the following key aspects in these resources; how sustainability was represented, who was represented as responsible for the current sustainability crisis, who can enact change and by what means, what sorts of activities do children do as part of their learning, and what form of eco-literacy is facilitated by the resources. The categories were mostly data-driven (or inductive), though the eco-literacy category (see [Table 2](#) for a description) was drawn from existing literature ([Huckle, 2013](#); [Kahn, 2008](#)) and needed most elaboration when undertaking intercoder reliability checks with a student researcher. The content explored was mostly manifest but latent content was often needed to contextualize these. Both TA and QCA can work with inductive and deductive coding categories as well as manifest and latent content.

Table 2. Example coding frame and how TA themes were adapted for a QCA coding frame.

TA themes	QCA adaptation notes	When to use this category	Examples in my data
Representations of sustainability	Divided into: Representations of sustainability	Examples of what it means to be sustainable	A local farming initiative run by a community
	Representations of unsustainability	Examples of how sustainability crisis is communicated and visualized	Images of polar bears on melting ice
Forms of eco-literacy (adapted from Huckle, 2013) • Technical • Cultural • Critical	This code stayed but was transformed into a categorical document variable	Where science and technologies are put forward as the solution to understanding more about sustainability and how to encourage behavioral change	Use of solar or wind power Undertaking a survey to count recyclable items thrown away, and develop a campaign to promote more recycling
		When awareness is shown of the way different cultures comprehend and value nature or support sustainability	Banana producers using songs and poems to communicate their plight
		Evaluating sustainability in context of political economy and reproduction of systems of production and consumption; and/or critically evaluating current or alternative forms of democracy	Reflection on communal garden project in a deprived area

QCA, qualitative content analysis; TA, thematic analysis.

Segmenting Data Into Coding Units

That said, there are important points of difference which had I started the research as QCA, I might have done differently. First, relates to the segmentation of text into coding units and context units so the categories can be systematically applied to the corpus of data. I did not undertake this step and I instead took the decision to consider the unit of analysis and coding units simultaneously. The reason why coding units are usually smaller than units of analysis is that it can be difficult for the researcher to apply a coding framework consistently over many pages of text (Schreier, 2012). However, my data were in the form of relatively short lesson plans, discrete activities, and videos, so this was a compromise I could live with.

However, this did lead to issues in relation to the mutual exclusivity of code application across each unit. This is a key principle of QCA—that each subcategory of a code can only be applied once to one coding unit. Again, on this issue, I exercised judgment and asked myself whether it really mattered? In some cases, I felt it did matter. Whether a unit could be coded as technical, cultural, or critical eco-literacy seemed an important argument to systematically report, but whether a unit used more than one lesson activity (maybe an audit, game, and a debate) was of less concern. Because I had coded the data in MAXQDA, it was possible to transpose my coding categories for form of eco-literacy into a categorical document variable. The program worked out how often and how much coverage each subcategory was applied to a unit and then assigned that unit according to the subcategory employed the most. Where the subcategory could not be determined, I revisited each document and made a judgment using my coding framework (see Table 2). The use of categorical document variables is similar to the way Mayring (2000) (paragraph 16) coded units with different levels of teacher self-esteem (though not described exactly in this way).

The Coding Framework

It is beyond the scope of the case to give a full overview of all the codes within the framework and how they were adapted. Instead, in Table 2, I have taken two themes which were originally identified through the TA and then adapted to conform to QCA.

Validity and Reliability of Coding

In TA, it is accepted the themes are reflexively generated by the researcher in relation to the research question. Therefore, attempts to “test” for the accuracy of the theme development through intercoder reliability are not in keeping with the constructivist underpinnings of this mode of analysis. Credibility and validity in TA can be shown through continued reflection on the choices made in the analysis process and reflexive reporting of this.

In QCA, on the other hand, more attention is paid to coding consistency. The validity of content analysis can be publicly justified with a clear coding key and examples of how text segments have been coded (Mayring, 2000). Both Krippendorff (2004) and Schreier (2012) advocate for member cross-checking to ensure consistency in the application of the coding frame. I lean more toward Mayring’s position but I did employ a student researcher to undertake some trial coding of a small sample of the texts so we could discuss

how well the coding framework captured the content. This discussion revealed that the deductively developed code to evaluate the form of eco-literacy presented in the resources required more elaboration and reflection.

The eco-literacy theme was not only one of the most important themes or categories in my analysis but also one of the most difficult to identify and categorize. It relied on judgments about latent content and my understanding of the broader field of sustainability education and policy. My discussion of this category will form the basis of a standalone paper, and in the end, my analysis of this feature was a hybrid of TA and QCA. Though I have quantified the coding units exclusively into one of the three codes, most units were characterized by technical eco-literacy but often used in conjunction with a weak attempt at systems thinking. The quantification must therefore be interpreted, and I do still question whether using numbers and mutually exclusive categories adds anything to the arguments I have made.

Section Summary

- Data coding began as a codebook style TA which is very similar to QCA in terms of generating a code list and systematically applying this to the data corpus.
- Key considerations when converting the project to QCA related to how to define units of coding and deal with the mutual exclusivity of subcategories.
- Demonstrating consistency of coding is more important in QCA than TA.

Practical Lessons Learned

I made a number of mistakes with this project because I fell back on my tried and trusted approach rather than consider what the dataset I had created really needed and the sorts of argument I could make. In this section, I reflect on the practical lessons learned—the most important of which is to recognize that the purpose of any qualitative analysis is to capture meanings and so it is important not to treat method like a baking recipe that must be followed precisely to ensure a successful outcome ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#), p. 589).

1. *Ensure your method and research question/purposes are aligned.* First, questions of method and methodology should never be too far from your mind when planning a research project. It can be tempting to fall back on approaches to data analysis you know well, but it is important to spend time interrogating the assumptions guiding your analysis. In my case, though TA and QCA are closely aligned, a lot of extra work was created by moving to the latter mid-way through the project (e.g., sorting the dataset into units of analysis, considering how or whether codes needed to be mutually exclusive), which involved repeating the analysis. I did this because the units of analysis were key to the claims I needed to make and because I realized some interpreted quantification of the coding frame would be beneficial. In this way, my approach was more informed by a realist ontology of capturing content than a constructivist one of reflexively generating themes.
2. *Do not just stick to what you know.* Closely related to the above, this project has made me more aware of my own preferences as a qualitative analyst and some of the dangers of sticking in my comfort zone. It was not until I came to prepare a conference presentation on my analysis that I

realized what I had done was hard to communicate given the nature of the dataset I had constructed. For example, I had duplications of lesson plans in my original dataset because materials were not sorted into exclusive units. I had not duplicated my analysis because I recognized the material as a duplication and chose to ignore this—working with the mindset that themes were what mattered not the documents they were based on. I came back from the conference and started reading extensively around the differences between QCA and TA and only then realized my errors and the work required to fix this.

3. *Do not get bogged down in the procedure.* This project forced me to clarify some of the key distinctions between TA and QCA, with a realization that the latter is more guided by procedures and structured steps than the former. However, as a reflexive qualitative researcher, I was continually asking myself when repeating parts of the analysis—does it really matter? Does being able to quantify my coding frame make my claims and ideas any stronger? If I was using TA, then I would not quantify my results but would be describing and interpreting the strength of different ideas in the data. QCA may have enabled me to be clearer about the basis on which my claims are made, but I did worry throughout the process that I was getting too bogged down in procedure, or “methodolatry” (Chamberlain, 2000). Meaning is what matters, and there is no one way to get at this.
4. *Reflexivity matters.* Finally, the research further strengthened my conviction that good qualitative research is based on reflexive practice. As researchers, we must continually reflect on what we are doing and why, how these assumptions are influencing the data we produce, and how they shape the claims we make. Research is discovery, and this project has opened my eyes to a different way of analyzing qualitative data. These lessons can be shared with others (like within this case) and will inform my approach to future qualitative analysis projects.

Section Summary

- Researchers should ensure a fit between their research assumptions, the method they employ, and their research question and be mindful of mismatches between these.
- Qualitative research analysis is about generating meaning from our data—there are different ways to get to this, and the researcher should not get so bogged down in procedure that they lose sight of this.

Conclusion

This case has reflected on some of the key differences between TA and QCA and how these differences impacted upon a project exploring ESD resources. I have discussed how the dataset I created was best suited to QCA because I wanted to be able to show systematic differences between the different units of analysis using some descriptive quantification. By offering descriptive statistics to support my claims, I was operating with a different assumption about the nature of data and analysis (more realist in orientation) than would have been appropriate if using a constructivist approach like TA.

Conducting the project using QCA rather than TA (although in some cases more of a hybrid between the two) has enabled me to show that different types of organizations communicated different messages around sustainability, with the majority of resources conforming to technical eco-literacy (scientific or technocratic solutions) and only those produced by labeling organizations (FTF and MSC) and the UN sometimes offered a more critical lens. Whether this analysis is stronger with the statistics to qualify them is still a matter I have not resolved.

If others are grappling between whether to undertake TA or QCA, I would recommend you think carefully about the status of your data and your position as an analyst in relation to it. Though this case has highlighted key points of divergence between the two methods, there is not one version of TA or QCA. A “codebook approach” rather than a “reflexive approach” to TA (see [Braun & Clarke, 2021](#)) shares many similarities with “conventional” QCA ([Hsieh & Shannon, 2005](#)). Learning from my experiences, I encourage you to explore the various literatures within these respective methods *before* you embark on your analysis.

Section Summary

- Using QCA, I have been able to show that most learning resources analyzed offer only technical solutions to sustainability problems rather than a critical engagement with various alternatives.
- Though the two approaches share many similarities, I would recommend making the decision to use QCA before you begin your analysis rather than halfway through.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What are the key differences between TA and QCA?
2. Is QCA more appropriate with structured secondary data rather than more messy interview data? What would make you choose to use QCA with interview data?
3. When might quantification of qualitative analysis be appropriate? And when might it not be?
4. What might be some of the implications of not unitizing your data when using QCA? Discuss whether you think it matters.

Further Reading

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Notes

1. Please note the researcher had a period of maternity leave between 2019 and 2020, so this is the reason for the delay between collecting and analyzing the data and this writing up period.

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