



Qualitative Content Analysis:

A Reflection

Paul Moffett and William H. Weare, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

Like many public services librarians, we spend much of our time focused on improving service quality. We think of excellent service quality as meeting or exceeding customer expectations consistently over time. One approach for fostering consistent service delivery for libraries is to implement standards like those found in a service philosophy statement. A service philosophy statement communicates directly to users what they can—and should—expect from library services. We decided to study service philosophy statements in a formal way using qualitative content analysis to learn how one might benefit our own public services units. This chapter addresses key questions we had about our research project: Where do we begin? What method or approach is most appropriate to answer our research question? How will we learn to use this method? This chapter describes the challenges we faced while simultaneously learning and applying the method of qualitative content analysis to our study of service philosophy statements.

OUR PROJECT

Service philosophy statements are often used in retail, hospitality, and other organizations that provide service. They may appear under a variety of names, such as customer service principles or customer service pledge, but all have a similar objective: to plainly communicate how an organization intends to deliver their service. While it is customary for academic libraries to communicate mission, vision, values, and goals, these documents do not convey to users the specific ways that service will be delivered. Service philosophy

statements, by contrast, speak directly to the user about how services and resources will be delivered during everyday interactions with library staff.

We began with the notion that understanding the form and content of service philosophy statements provided by academic libraries would not only help us to learn how they communicate about a library's commitment to service but also guide the development of service philosophy statements at our respective libraries. Our research focused on the identification of themes, trends, and ideas within the content of service philosophy statements found at other academic libraries. One of our most significant challenges with this research was that the documents we found displayed a high degree of variability within their structure. This meant we needed a qualitative research method that would enable us to work through the variations and find connections between them by examining the language and concepts found in the statements.

Our initial challenge was to figure out what method was most appropriate for our research. We surveyed books that introduced qualitative research techniques and conducted online searches through the open web and LIS databases. We identified a number of methods for analyzing written communication, including content analysis, discourse analysis, document analysis, narrative analysis, textual analysis, and thematic analysis. Having never studied written documents in a formal way, all of these initially sounded promising. But as we explored further, we found it difficult to parse these out because of their similarities; we struggled to find clear definitions, consistent descriptions, or delineations between them as an approach, a method, or a technique.

Of the aforementioned approaches, the exception was content analysis. The descriptions of content analysis resonated with us and gave us confidence that it was the right approach to answer our research question. It stood out as a flexible method that could help us achieve our research objectives: to identify relevant information within a set of documents and organize that information in order to compare it, understand it, and interpret meaning. That said, much of the research using content analysis appearing in the literature of library and information science is quantitative. For instance, there are studies that examined LIS position announcements for the frequency of occurrence of particular phrases or headings like computer skills, foreign language skills, educational requirements, and work experience. While a small component of our analysis was quantitative, we were primarily interested in a qualitative approach to content analysis because the focus is "more often on providing a detailed description of the material under analysis,"¹ rather than frequency, amount, intensity, or other quantitative measurements. Using a qualitative approach helps us to understand *how* service philosophy statements communicate to customers what they can and should expect from the library.

GETTING STARTED

Though both of us have some experience conducting research, neither one of us had used qualitative content analysis as a method, nor did we have experience with coding or analyzing data. We were also not sure how to go about selecting documents to study and what criteria we would use to decide whether or not a document should be included in

our study. However, we did not allow our lack of knowledge to deter us from pursuing this line of research and we set out to find a methods text to guide our work.

We first came upon the work of both Krippendorff² and Neuendorf.³ These seminal texts would be useful for those who are primarily or exclusively focused on quantitative content analysis. We also found a chapter on content analysis in a methods book by Beck and Manuel⁴ as well as an article on document analysis by Bowen.⁵ Each introduced key terms, processes, and concepts, which gave us a more complete understanding of content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon⁶ provided the most useful definition of qualitative content analysis: “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.”⁷

Ultimately, we found two works by Schreier that were most beneficial to us: *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*⁸ and “Qualitative Content Analysis,” a chapter from the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*.⁹ Both focused exclusively on a qualitative approach to content analysis and provided the step-by-step guidance we needed for all phases of our research.

CONDUCTING OUR CONTENT ANALYSIS STUDY

Schreier outlines several steps to conduct qualitative content analysis, including determining the research question, selecting documents, building the coding frame, segmenting the material, trial coding, modifying the coding frame, and analyzing data. We discuss each in the sections that follow.

Determining the Research Question

Following Schreier’s steps, we began formulating our research question. What was it about the statements we found on the web that led us to define them as service philosophy statements? What would we need to know in order to develop our own statement? Having found no formal study of service philosophy statements in the literature of library and information science, we decided that we wanted to explore a set of existing statements to identify salient themes, trends, and ideas. We wanted to know specifically how these statements successfully communicated service expectations to users. In our study, we asked what a service philosophy statement is and how its form and content communicates service expectations to the user.¹⁰

Document Selection

Determining which documents would be included was the next step in our study. Service philosophy statements do not appear to be widely recognized by the larger library community, as evidenced by our search of the library literature. And although we could have simply found examples of service philosophy statements through an open web search, we

wanted to be intentional about our selection process. As academic librarians, we wanted to study academic libraries rather than public or school libraries. However, we were open to exploring statements from all types of academic libraries, including those serving public and private colleges and universities, community colleges, four-year colleges, and large universities offering a variety of graduate and professional degrees. We selected the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) as the target group because of its diverse membership. Both authors had worked at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a member of CUMU, and thus were familiar with the organization.

We searched ninety CUMU member library websites; fourteen sites included documents other than mission, vision, values, and goals, which suggested a focus on customer service. We then recognized that we needed to refine our selection process to identify which statements to include. We found it challenging to determine if the fourteen documents we had located matched what we thought a service philosophy statement should look like and include based on our models, and so we developed more specific criteria for inclusion. We looked for examples of statements that included these criteria:

- those focused specifically on the way in which service is delivered
- those that addressed user needs
- those speaking directly to users
- those that appeared to be written by staff delivering service
- those delivering a promise or pledge to users

Our criteria for inclusion functioned more like a set of guidelines; we were concerned that if our standards for inclusion were too strict, we would not find enough statements to analyze. In fact, none of the fourteen statements included all five of these characteristics, but eight of them included at least some combination of the characteristics we were looking for and were thus retained.

Next, we needed to determine which parts of each service philosophy statement would be appropriate for analysis. We found that the central portion of seven of the eight statements was comprised of a list of bulleted phrases or sentences; one was in paragraph form. But as mentioned before, these documents also had other notable variations. For example, several of the documents were also accompanied by preliminary, expository text. While these portions of text were part of those documents, their inclusion made it more difficult to make comparisons to those without a preamble. After much discussion, we decided not to use the preliminary text; welcoming language or information regarding eligibility for access to collections and services was outside of our primary focus.

Building our Coding Frame

With the statements selected, we could then begin analyzing them. Following Schreier's steps, we next needed to build a coding frame, which is a table or other arrangement that organizes concepts as categories and subcategories.¹¹ In our case, the coding frame was comprised of two primary categories, form and content, each with its own set of subcategories. *Form* addresses the ways in which the statements are presented to users (such as a bulleted list), while *content* describes the concepts and ideas communicated by the text. Then we developed five subcategories for form and six for content. These concept-driven

categories, based on previous knowledge or ideas, represented what we expected to find in the service philosophy statements. Building a coding frame is an iterative process, and categories and subcategories can be added, removed, or modified throughout the coding process.

Segmenting the Material

Our next step was segmentation, a key component of the coding process.¹² A segment is a portion of text communicating a unique concept or idea. It is imperative that each segment contains one idea only, as each will be assigned to a single subcategory by coding. A code is a word or short phrase that describes the text that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute.”¹³ In our case, the names of the subcategories and the codes were the same. For example, the phrase “Users are entitled to courteous assistance from library staff” (a segment) was coded “Courtesy” (a code *and* a subcategory).

Because the two of us planned to code the text separately, we needed to ensure that we would be assigning codes to identical blocks of text, and so we worked together to identify individual segments. Some sentences were complex and communicated several ideas; we needed to isolate individual concepts within them. In the example below, we took a single sentence that communicated more than one idea, made a copy of the sentence, and modified each so it expressed only one idea:

1a. Our customers (such as students, potential students, parents and guardians, faculty, administrators, colleagues, co-workers, and the community) are valued as people, ~~and shown courteous and concerned attention to their unique needs:~~

1b. Our customers (such as students, potential students, parents and guardians, faculty, administrators, colleagues, co-workers, and the community) are ~~valued as people,~~ and shown courteous and concerned attention to their unique needs.

The two ideas expressed in the original sentence were treated as separate segments. The first focused on valuing customers as people, the second focused on courteous and concerned attention to the unique needs of customers. Thus, each idea could be assigned a single, appropriate code.

Trial Coding

We jointly selected and segmented two of the eight service philosophy statements to test the coding process. Then, each person did the coding independently. We started the process with only six subcategories in our coding frame for content: courtesy, efficiency, effectiveness, continuous improvement, safety/security, and dignity/respect. We coded each segment with a single subcategory. Figure 14.1 provides an example of coded segments.

Segment	Subcategory
We will display empathy in our treatment of others—considering and respecting their points of view.	Dignity / Respect
We will communicate on the level of the customer—avoiding all jargon and explaining concepts clearly.	Effectiveness
We will be alert and attentive as we move throughout the library, ready to offer assistance.	Courtesy

Figure 14.1. Example of coded segments.

In cases in which more than one person is coding, the coders discuss their coded portions of the same segments in an effort to seek agreement as to how each segment is coded. This is usually referred to as intercoder agreement or inter-rater reliability; when agreement among coders is high, the reliability of the coding frame is strengthened. A codebook—an instructional guide created by the coders—can be a useful tool because it provides a shared understanding of the meaning of codes. It helps ensure agreement and can “guard against inconsistencies over time and amongst coders.”¹⁴ When we finished coding, we met to compare our individual decisions and come to an agreement about those segments of text that we either did not agree on or that did not fit into an existing subcategory.

Modifying the Coding Frame

Our comparison resulted in an interesting development. Schreier asserted that in qualitative content analysis, “your coding frame itself may be your most important finding.”¹⁵ During the coding process, we discovered that a large number of segments were related to themes not represented by the original six content subcategories. We agreed that new subcategories were necessary to appropriately contain them. In addition to the original six concept-driven subcategories, we identified six new data-driven subcategories. Data-driven subcategories are those derived from the material rather than determined beforehand. We then re-coded the segments of the two pilot statements that required new codes.

We coded the six remaining statements, using the original subcategories as well as the newly-created data-driven subcategories. We repeated the process used in trial coding and again met to compare our coding and reach an agreement on segments we coded differently. We found that coding, like research itself, is an iterative process.

Concept-driven	Data-driven
Courtesy	Focus/Priority
Efficiency	Environment
Effectiveness	Accommodation
Continuous Improvement	Confidentiality
Safety/Security	Access
Dignity/Respect	Attentive/Listening

Figure 14.2. Concept-driven and data-driven sub-categories

Data Analysis

Next came analysis, and we were unsure whether we would analyze the data correctly and if our findings would be relevant or useful. Nevertheless, we moved forward with our analysis by arranging our data into a master spreadsheet using the same subcategories employed in coding. The spreadsheet displayed all of the subcategories for form and content and showed how we assigned each segment to its subcategory. Though our work was qualitative, the spreadsheet made it easy to spot quantitative trends within the data. Noting the frequency of particular attributes in these statements made it possible for us to identify prominent trends and themes.

We completed a second exercise in which we printed the subcategories (including the corresponding segments) and cut those printouts into like-sized cards that we could physically arrange and group in a variety of ways. This helped us to examine our data in different ways and see connections among subcategories that we may not have otherwise uncovered.

Finally, motivated to be as thorough as possible in our examination, we decided to look at our data with an entirely fresh perspective and examine segments in ways that grouped them outside the original assigned subcategories. We had come to realize that many of the documents were not meeting our initial expectations, in that they were not always addressing the delivery of service. So, if they were not describing service delivery, what were they describing? We took a fresh look at our data table and discovered a second overarching theme that called attention to library collections or facilities. We had assumed that service philosophy statements would make pledges about the provision of service by frontline staff; we had not anticipated that these statements would make nearly as many pledges regarding collections or the facility—aspects of the library over which frontline staff have little or no control. This process reminded us that analysis is often ongoing and a fresh examination of the data can yield new insight and discoveries.

Despite our initial concerns and lack of confidence, we were largely satisfied with the results of our analysis. Although we do not know what we may have overlooked, we did identify themes and trends that we did not anticipate, and our multi-faceted approach to analysis helped us to form opinions about what characteristics are present in an effective service philosophy statement.

REFLECTIONS

Qualitative content analysis provided us with a structured approach to answer our research question. Using this method gave us a clear path to follow: formulating a research question, selecting the material for analysis, building a coding frame, segmenting the data, coding, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, and analyzing and presenting the data. Qualitative content analysis made it possible for us to identify themes, trends, and ideas found in service philosophy statements.

That said, in reflection, we recognize several areas where we would have done things differently. We now see that we would have liked to have kept better notes and records

to document the process; this would allow us to be more reflective about our work and replicate this approach in future projects. We also might have paid more attention to the life of the individual service philosophy statements. For instance, knowing when the statement was developed and published would have allowed us to make comparisons and to explore what has changed in both libraries and in these types of statements over the course of time. Finally, while we learned a great deal about how to segment and code our documents, we would have liked to learn about and apply additional techniques for interpreting our findings. We were happy with what we found, but (perhaps like most qualitative researchers) we wondered about what we did not discern or discover.

Our biggest takeaway from this project is that research is messy. We do it anyway. We want to know the answers to our research questions. We are not going to get answers if we do not push ourselves into unfamiliar territory. That notion is daunting— but also exciting! For us, using qualitative content analysis was an opportunity to gain hands-on experience. And while it was not easy and we made mistakes, we ultimately accomplished what we set out to do, which was to learn something new. A few additional lessons we learned may also be helpful:

- What are you curious about? Share your ideas, discoveries, or “stupid questions” with colleagues. Your ideas may be of interest to others and may be topics that call for further exploration.
- Do not be discouraged by what you do not know or do not fully understand. Have the courage to press on even if the path forward may be unclear or unfamiliar.
- Spend time exploring research methods and choose one that aligns with the objectives of your research project. It is unlikely that you are inventing something new, so keep looking. The right match is out there. Once you have identified an appropriate method, find a text that gives you guidance to apply that method to your project. Library literature provides a starting point, but consider searching more broadly within social science research methods.
- Remember that analysis is ongoing, and an examination of the data in multiple ways can yield new insight and discoveries.

NOTES

1. Margrit Schreier, “Qualitative Content Analysis,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: Sage, 2014), 173, doi:10.4135/97814462822432014.
2. Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013).
3. Kimberly A. Neuendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017).
4. Susan E. Beck and Kate Manuel, *Practical Research Methods for Librarians and Information Professionals* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2008).
5. Glenn A. Bowen, “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method,” *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40, doi: 10.3316/QRJ0902027.
6. Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88, doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.
7. Hsieh and Shannon, “Three Approaches to Qualitative Content,” 1278.
8. Margrit Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (London: Sage, 2012).
9. Schreier, “Qualitative Content Analysis.”
10. Paul Moffett and William H. Weare, Jr., “Service Philosophy Statements in Academic Libraries: A Qualitative Content Analysis,” *Public Services Quarterly* 14, no. 2: 119–34, doi:10.1080/15228959.2017.1394246.
11. Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. Chapters 4–6 outline this process.

12. Ibid., 126.
13. Johnny Saldaña, 2016, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 4.
14. Beck and Manuel, *Practical Research Methods*, 51.
15. Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beck, Susan E., and Kate Manuel. *Practical Research Methods for Librarians and Information Professionals*. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2008.
- Bowen, Glenn A. "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method." *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40. doi: 10.3316/QRJ0902027.
- Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang, and Sarah E. Shannon. "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis." *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1277–88. doi:10.1177/1049732305276687.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013.
- Moffett, Paul, and William H. Weare, Jr. "Service Philosophy Statements in Academic Libraries: A Qualitative Content Analysis." *Public Services Quarterly* 14, no. 2: 119–34. doi:10.1080/15228959.2017.1394246.
- Neuendorf, Kimberly A. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017.
- Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016.
- Schreier, Margrit. *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. London: Sage, 2012.
- . "Qualitative Content Analysis." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, edited by Uwe Flick, 170–83. London: Sage, 2014. doi:10.4135/9781446282243.

