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TRADITIONAL, INTERPRETIVE, AND RECEPTION BASED
CONTENT ANALYSES: IMPROVING THE ABILITY OF
CONTENT ANALYSIS TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF
PRAGMATIC AND THEORETICAL CONCERN

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues for a subtle but important shift in the way we view content analysis which allows for the introduction of two new variants on this methodology. Previously, content analysis has been seen as a method for quantifying the *content* of texts. This paper argues that we should view content analysis as a method for counting *interpretations* of content. Based on this reconceptualization, this paper suggests two new varieties of content analysis. *Reception based content analysis* allows researchers to quantify how different audiences will understand text. *Interpretive content analysis* is specially designed for latent content analysis, in which researchers go beyond quantifying the most straightforward denotative elements in a text. These new forms of content analysis are contrasted with traditional content analysis, and the appropriate conditions for their use are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Content analysis has previously been defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative method of describing the content of texts (Kassarjian, 1977). In this paper, “content analysis” will be used as a more general term for methodologies that code text into categories and then count the frequencies of occurrences within each category¹. This broader definition retains the idea that content analysis is quantitative, but leaves open for discussion when researchers should strive for “objectivity” (replicability might be a better term) and systematization.

Figure 1 (Appendix II) presents an overview of the traditional content analytic sequence. Suppose researchers wanted to know if the percentage of female spokespeople in U.S. magazine ads had increased since 1950. From the total body of U.S. magazine



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advertising since 1950, the researchers would select a representative sample of ads, which are labeled in figure 1 as the focal texts. The researchers would then train coders_{1–n} (also called raters) in a system of explicitly formulated rules for classifying the ads into categories. The raters would follow these rules to produce codings_{1–n} indicating whether or not the ad had a female spokesperson. If all goes well, the coders should agree on whether any given ad has a female spokesperson, such that high levels of agreement among the coders constitutes an important indicator that the coding was successful. These codings then form the data to be analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. In the present example, the researcher would look for changes over time in the percent of ads coded as having female spokespeople.

This simplified description of traditional content analysis is based on a synthesis of past work,² and is consistent with Kassirjian's (1977) paper on this subject. Since its publication, Kassirjian (1977) has become the normative procedure for content analysis within consumer research (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). Papers rarely reach this status without containing much that is good, and I do not advocate abandoning what has become the standard content analytic methodology. Instead, I want to take the next step forward and move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to content analysis. As a compliment to traditional content analysis, I advocate two new methodologies – *interpretive content analysis* and *reception based content analysis*, which are discussed in detail below.

Two caveats are in order. First, these methodologies are intended to be flexible. The precisely correct methodology to use in any situation may differ from the prototypes I am presenting here, and may combine some aspects of each of them. Second, the purpose of this paper is to introduce two techniques and discuss when it is most appropriate to use them. Further details of their implementation at a workbench level will have to be worked out in subsequent papers after researchers have accumulated experience in their use. This article begins by discussing interpretive and reception based content analysis in turn (see Table 1 [Appendix I] for an overview), followed by a more detailed discussion of when they should be applied.

INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Traditional content analysis is often divided into manifest and latent content analysis (Lasswell, 1941). Manifest content analysis looks at the most obvious and straightforward meanings of a text (e.g. does the ad explicitly claim that the car has more than 100 horsepower), whereas latent content analysis ferrets out a text's subtler meanings (e.g. does the ad position the car as powerful). Manifest and latent content analysis look at different aspects of a text, but they use the same traditional content analytic methodology to conduct the research. It has long been recognized that traditional content analysis presents special difficulties when applied to "latent content" (Lasswell, 1941). These difficulties center around the coding procedure and training coders, and manifest themselves in low levels of interrater agreement about how a text should be coded. "The extreme difficulty of this validation task (i.e. gaining acceptable levels of interrater agreement) became apparent in the 1930s and 1940s when the pioneers of content analysis attempted to expand their technique beyond explicit message content" (Ringold and Calfee, 1990, p. 31). These problems with latent content analysis are traceable to the complexity of its analytic categories.

[T]he use of complicated and sophisticated categories creates serious problems in reliability. This is the problem of the balance between reliability of the procedures on the one hand and the richness of the categories on the other. What does it matter that we gain reliability if in the process we lose all our insights? This critical area of content analysis, i.e., the reliability of complex categories, still needs to be adequately handled (Berelson, 1952: p. 514).

Berelson wrote that passage over 40 years ago, but the problem "still needs to be adequately handled" today, and is growing in importance with the increased use of qualitative data and textual analysis within consumer research. In an attempt to address this problem, interpretive content analysis is suggested as a method for latent content analysis and other more complex coding tasks.

To understand interpretive content analysis, we need a clearer understanding of the difference between manifest and latent content. The semiotic theory of denotative and connotative meanings can be helpful here (Berelson, 1952: p. 20). Denotative meanings (manifest content) identify parts of the text; they are the "first-order signification (Eco, 1976) and correspond to common sense, obvious meaning

(Fiske, 1982)“ (Mick and Buhl, 1992: p. 320). For example, Figure 2 (Appendix II) contains denotative meanings in both visual images and text. Some of the denotative meanings in Figure 2 are that a man is standing in front of a partially assembled automobile body. Connotative meanings (latent content) are arrived at by combining individual elements in a text to understand the meaning of the whole. For example, part of the text in Figure 2 reads, “When I see one of our freshly painted cars, I feel it’s a piece of art.” By combining the denotative (commonsense, obvious) meaning of the sentence with the denotative meaning of the visual image, we understand the connotations (latent content) of this ad: (a) the man in the photo has painted the car, (b) his physical stance conveys confidence and pride in his work, (c) his beard, handlebar mustache, and white hairnet pushed out to one side like a French beret lend him an artistic persona.

Lasswell distinguishes between latent and manifest content by calling latent content “an interpretation” (1941: p. 2), implying that manifest content is somehow *not* an interpretation. I argue that both manifest and latent content are interpretations. Random House’s Webster’s Dictionary defines interpretation as “the assignment of meaning to abstract symbols.” Any time we look at black marks on a piece of paper and recognize them as a meaningful word, we are making an interpretation. Likewise with visual images, when we perceive patches of color as meaningful objects like a person or an auto body, we are also making an interpretation (Scott, 1994). Denotative interpretations are so highly conventional and frequently practiced that we often create them without being aware that we are performing an interpretive act. This can create the illusion that the denotative meanings we perceive are parts of the physical text itself, not interpretations. But manifest content analysis is not a sign-vehicle³ analysis in which “the results describe a physical property of the communication,” i.e. “black-marks-on-white” (Janis, 1943: p. 430). Both manifest and latent content analysis are forms of “semantic” analysis, which is to say they are both about the interpretation of meanings, not physical ink on paper. The fact that both manifest and latent content are interpretations is important, because, as we will see, it suggests a possible method for improving the ability of content analysis to deal with connotative (i.e. latent) mean-

ings. But before I can present the proposed solution to our problem, we need to explore the problem itself in more detail.

The Need for Interpretive Content Analysis

Traditional content analysis can be divided into three stages: selection of the focal texts, coding the focal texts, and interpreting the results of the coding. It is during the middle step – coding the data – that connotative categories cause problems. These problems arise primarily because for connotative interpretations: (a) coding cannot follow a series of coding rules, (b) the amount of training needed for the coders may be prohibitive, and (c) properly making interpretations requires “theoretical sensitivity” (Glaser, 1978) which not everyone possesses in equal measure and which can be maximized through collaboration rather than independent judgments.

Connotation and coding rules. Since its inception in the 1940s and 1950s, traditional content analysis has advocated the use of formal coding rules to increase intercoder agreement. For example, if the researchers were interested in the percentage of women shown in job settings who had clerical vs. managerial positions, they might devise a coding rule which says that women shown typing are to be coded as secretaries. This promotion of coding rules was more than a convenient way to increase interrater reliability: it was a procedure based on a theory about how people derive meaning from texts. When traditional content analysis methodology was first developing, social scientific thought was generally consistent with Parsons’ view that people followed rules of interpretation that allowed them to find meaning (Feldman, 1995). If the process of finding meaning in a text is essentially a matter of following rules, then it seems natural and appropriate to make these rules explicit and have raters follow them when coding.

Later, this view was successfully challenged by Garfinkel (1967) who showed that interpretation is completely context-dependent. As Feldman (1995) summarizes Garfinkel’s position:

Thus the whole notion of rule becomes inadequate because for each context there would have to be another rule. Because every context is unique and contexts are constantly emerging, there cannot be a set of preexisting rules that are waiting to be followed (p.11).

While coding rules can successfully increase interrater agreement, they do so at a price. Generally, they do a poor job of dealing with context effects that influence how a given piece of text will be understood. The role of context can be seen in Figure 2 where the model takes on an artistic persona, but in a different context the same model in the same outfit might lack any association to the arts. In theory, one could develop a very complex set of coding rules that would specify how textual element X is to be coded if it is found in context Y. As a practical matter, though, the number of possible contexts is infinite. So this strategy would likely prove intractable. Coding rules have a hard time dealing with context effects. Since context has a particularly strong effect on connotative interpretations, coding rules are inappropriate for interpretive content analysis.

As Spiggle (1994) writes,

In interpretation the investigator does not engage a set of operations (i.e. coding rules). Rather, interpretation occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning, as in deciphering a code (p. 497, italics and parenthetical comment not in original).

Connotative coding requires expertise. Connotative coding also frequently requires a prohibitively high level of expertise. The researchers coding qualitative data may have spent dozens of hours conducting interviews, hundreds of hours conducting participant observations, and years conducting background reading in developing their perspectives. It's not realistic to expect that students or other assistants could easily receive the training necessary to do the coding properly. When the focal texts are mass media publications, the level of expertise can also be quite high. For example, historical analysis may require a detailed understanding of the historical context in which the focal texts were created.

Connotative coding is best done collaboratively. This high level of expertise is needed because connotative interpretation is frequently difficult. Connotative interpretation requires theoretical sensitivity, which is "a personal quality of the researcher, . . . an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of the data" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: p. 41). Because people differ in their levels of theoretical sensitivity, achieving interrater agreement for connotative codings is

not always possible. More importantly, connotative coding is best conducted collaboratively because the theoretical sensitivity of a group of researchers working together is likely to be higher than any member of the group working alone. Unfortunately, traditional content analysis is incompatible with coding data collaboratively since coding needs to be done independently to compute interrater reliability statistics.

DESCRIPTION OF INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Since coding for connotative meanings should avoid coding rules, can require high levels of expertise, and is best done collaboratively rather than independently, we can see that there is a serious inconsistency between the needs of connotative coding and traditional content analytic methodology. Interpretive content analysis is proposed as an alternative to traditional content analysis for quantifying connotative interpretations (see Table I). Interpretive content analysis differs from traditional content analysis in the way the coding is done and in how coding quality is assessed. In traditional content analysis, multiple coders each independently follow coding rules to code the texts. In interpretive content analysis, multiple coders are recommended because collaborative work is likely to be of higher quality, but in principle a single coder is sufficient. When multiple coders are used, they work cooperatively rather than independently.

Traditional content analysts may not code the entire focal text; instead they may focus on a part of the text, such as the headline in a magazine ad. Unfortunately, as Kepplinger (1989) writes, in the coding process “related information . . . is divided into meaningful parts . . . In dividing related information into parts, the relationship between the parts is usually neglected” (p. 177). Interpretive content analysis may also focus on a part of the text such as the ad headline as the unit of analysis. But in coding the headline, researchers would be careful to take a holistic approach and consider how the rest of the text would influence the interpretation of the part being coded. Current thinking on how people come to understand texts stresses that readers interpret any part of the text, such as a word or phrase, in light of the rest of the text (i.e. based on a “hermeneutic circle”

Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1994). Coding selected parts of a text is a legitimate technique, but in interpretive content analysis the process of coding these parts does not treat them as if they existed in isolation apart from the rest of the text from which they were taken. Because interpretive content analysis is not restricted by coding rules, it has the flexibility to take context more fully into account.

In traditional content analysis, the quality of the coding is assessed through interrater reliability. Interpretive content analysis substitutes *public justifiability* for interrater reliability. To achieve public justifiability, the researchers include the focal texts, their codings, and, if necessary, a justification of their codings along with the manuscript when submitting it for publication. In this way, the quality of their coding can be directly assessed by the reviewers. In general, all the focal texts would be included as an appendix along with the paper when it was submitted for publication. However, in instances where a very large number of texts were coded, a random sample of the coded texts could be submitted. Because this would be a random sample, it would prevent authors from cherry picking the clearest coding examples for submission.

For example, suppose one wished to determine if hard-sell magazine advertising had become less prevalent in the past 20 years. Determining if an ad is hard sell requires connotative interpretation. Researchers would develop a definition of hard sell advertising, but they would not create a rigid set of coding rules to operationalize that definition. Instead, they would carefully examine each text to judge, based on the text as a whole considered within the context of its creation and reception, whether it should be categorized as hard sell. When submitting the paper for publication, they would attach an appendix containing a copy of the ads they analyzed and indicating how they coded each ad. If some of the codings were not straight forward, the authors could include a brief justification for their coding. The reviewers would then look through as many of the focal texts as it takes to satisfy them that the authors' codings accurately reflect the authors' definitions of hard and soft sell.

Interrater Reliability or Public Justifiability?

Eliminating the interrater reliability statistic is a significant change that requires further discussion. Summarizing the previous literature, Kassirjian (1977) includes “objectivity” in his definition of content analysis. This objectivity stems from the application of coding rules (Holsti, 1968) and is measured by interrater reliability. Unfortunately, objectivity is not the best word to use for this construct⁴ because it obscures the difference between physical properties of objects which exist whether we know they’re there or not, and meanings which only exist when someone perceives or experiences them. Therefore, instead of objectivity, it is clearer to talk about intersubjectivity, or better still, the independent replicability of interpretations.

What does independent replicability do for us? First, it provides a measure of quality control. If coding was done carelessly, one would expect a high degree of randomness which would lead to low levels of independent replicability. In interpretive content analysis, this quality control function is handled directly by the reviewers, and when work is done collaboratively, quality should also be ensured by the co-authors. In traditional content analysis, independent replicability provides evidence that the coding rules were followed. Since there are no coding rules in interpretive content analysis, this point becomes moot. It should also be noted that in traditional content analysis, the coders have received training in how they should code the texts and are following coding rules rather than their own intuitions. Therefore interrater reliability in no way indicates that the codings reflect a popular or widespread interpretation of the texts.

It is also sometimes claimed that independent replicability “gives scientific standing to content analysis” (Kassirjian, 1977: p. 9; see also Berelson 1954; Holsti, 1968; Janis, 1943). However, justifiability is just as scientifically legitimate as interrater reliability. In Figure 1, arrow E depicts the interpretation of the codings by the researcher. Interpreting the coded data, like interpreting experimental or survey data, requires the construction of a complex connotative interpretation. In creating these connotative interpretations, researchers do not turn their data over to graduate students, hoping that if three students independently come up with the same interpretation they have proved their point. After all, the graduate

students may not do the best job of interpreting the data. So long as the researchers can justify their interpretations to their peers, it doesn't matter if other researchers looking at the same data would have independently come to the same conclusions. As this example illustrates, justifiability, not interrater reliability, is the standard scientific approach for dealing with connotative interpretations.

Why, then, is the denotative coding of focal texts in traditional content analysis (Figure 1, arrow C) treated differently from the final connotative interpretation of data by the researcher (Figure 1, arrow E)? The difference, I argue, is one of degree, not kind. Coding texts and interpreting data are both the same kind of activity—they are both interpretations. But as interpretations become more complex, it makes sense to shift from interrater reliability to public justifiability. Therefore, as content analysis shifts from denotative to connotative coding categories, we should also shift from interrater reliability to justifiability. Because interpretive content analysis allows journal reviewers to directly examine the coding of the texts, it increases their power in the publication process. With this increased power comes a need for restraint based on a sophisticated understanding of the nature of interpretation. Interpretations are not objective, but as Figure 1 shows, the researcher makes an interpretation from a particular perspective. Because the researchers and reviewers may differ in the perspective from which they approach the data, there will always be room for rival interpretations. In Thompson's (1990) terms, these interpretations are "conceptual gestalts" in which "the evaluator may disagree with the interpretation while still seeing how the interpretive pattern derives from the data" (p. 28). Therefore, the reviewers' role is to make sure that the interpretations can be compellingly justified by the data, even if they are not identical to their own interpretations.

Some readers may object that this seems to violate one of the basic principles of good science. After all, isn't the goal of research to generate a pattern of data that allows for only one plausible explanation? In experimental research, if a reviewer can present an explanation for the data which is equally plausible to the interpretation presented by the author, this is generally considered a serious problem. But in experimental research, this pattern of data is usually generated through multiple experiments. The results of a series of

experiments, not any single experiment, are expected to produce a unique explanation for the data. In interpretive content analysis, the pattern of data created by coding multiple texts should allow for fewer explanations than any individual text. But when coding any particular text, it is not realistic to insist that the researchers demonstrate the impossibility of coding the text in a different way. It is enough for the researchers to show that their codings are at least as plausible and compelling as rival interpretations. It should also be recognized that in experimental research, the researcher has the power to create an experimental situation designed to rule out rival hypotheses. But interpretive content analysis is a more naturalistic method. Researchers frequently don't exercise the same level of influence on the nature of the data being interpreted, and this increases the likelihood of rival interpretations. Finally, it should be acknowledged that unique explanation is a goal in experimental research that is only temporarily achieved, if at all. In time, a different researcher viewing the data from a different theoretical perspective will inevitably come up with a rival interpretation. Hence the unending movement of scientific thought.

Qualitative researchers may object that turning over their data to reviewers is too reminiscent of Lincoln and Guba's (1985: ch. 11) discredited notion of "auditing" ethnographic data (for critiques of auditing see Belk, 1991; Holt, 1991; Thompson, 1990). This analogy to auditing is misplaced because unlike auditing, interpretive content analysis recognizes the context-bound nature of interpretation. In his critique of auditing, Holt (1991) writes that "interpretations should be judged on their insightfulness . . . and their ability to convince the reader, no more" (p. 61). Interpretive content analysis is completely consistent with this approach. But in order for the reviewers to judge the insightfulness of the interpretations, they must have access to the texts being interpreted.

In sum, interpretive content analysis, like traditional content analysis, is a method for coding texts into categories and counting the frequencies in each category. But interpretive content analysis recognizes that coding rules and interrater agreement statistics are not appropriate for connotative interpretation. Instead, interpretive content analysis treats the interpretation of focal texts in the same way that mainstream science treats the complex interpretation of

other forms of data, i.e. by using public justifiability as the primary means of quality control.

RECEPTION BASED CONTENT ANALYSIS

The Need for Reception Based Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method for interpreting the meaning of texts and quantifying the frequency of those interpretations. Since meanings exist in people, and people may understand the same text in different ways, researchers face an important issue; *whose understanding of the text should be used as the basis for coding?* The text's authors? The text's natural readers? The researchers? Or some combination of these?

Berelson's approach to this topic was to insist that content analysis be restricted to situations in which virtually everybody agreed on the meaning of the focal texts.

Content analysis assumes that ...content be accepted as a "common meeting ground" for the communicator, the audience, and the analyst. That is, the content analyst assumes that the "meanings" which he ascribes to the content, by assigning it to certain categories, correspond to the "meanings" intended by the communicator and/or understood by the audience (Berelson, 1952: p. 19).

This may occur in some cases, but as Kepplinger (1989, p. 175) points out, "the common meeting ground, as we know today, is probably even more limited than Berelson supposed it to be." Mick and Politi (1989) have noted the difficulty of agreeing on even denotative meaning, and Jacoby et al. (1980) and Hoyer and Jacoby (1985) have shown the surprising frequency with which even seemingly straightforward statements are understood differently by different people. Furthermore, coding tasks that seem straightforward at the outset often end up being rather complex. This paper began with an example about a hypothetical researcher who wanted to know if the number of female spokespeople had increased since 1950. This would seem to be as straightforward a question as one is likely to get. Deciding if someone is male or female should not be too problematic, but what exactly is a spokesperson? Does Figure 3 (Appendix II) contain a spokesperson or just a model? The answer probably depends on the reader's social group. Too many people

outside of the fashion, gay, or certain music communities, the answer is likely to be a model. But MAC targets their makeup at professional models who would instantly recognize RuPaul as a celebrity endorser and hence a true spokesperson (RuPaul is the world's leading transvestite model and singer. Sometimes even gender isn't as simple as it seems). Gilly (1988) ran into a similar problem when she coded television ads for whether the setting of the advertisement was a private residence, store/restaurant, occupational setting, outdoors, or other. Even with this very simple coding scheme, the raters agreed only 67% of the time. Just because it seems at first glance that everyone would agree on the coding of the focal texts, it is not necessarily the case. Berelson's answer isn't sufficient because restricting content analysis to his "common ground" is too limiting.

Kassarjian (1977) takes a different approach to this problem. He describes a central feature of content analysis as follows:

Although not independent, the study of content variables is approached apart from the study of the communicator or the audience. The signs and symbols (Mead, 1934; Morris, 1946) are the units of analysis rather than the intent of the communicator or the actions of the interpreter. Of interest is what was said, the properties of the stimuli, rather than what the communicator claims he said or the interpreter perceived to have been said. Much of consumer research has concentrated on the characteristics, opinion, or behavior of the interpreter of communications messages or on the characteristics of the communicator. Content analysis is the study of the message itself, and not the communicator or the audience (p. 8).

This quote can be understood in a number of ways. The emphasis on "the message itself" as discrete from how its authors or readers understood it, may be interpreted as a call for sign-vehicle analysis (though I don't believe this was Kassarjian's intent, the position should be addressed). In sign-vehicle analysis, "the results describe a physical property of the communication – for example, in this magazine article, there are five occurrences of the following configuration of black-marks-on-white: 'Germany.'" (Janis, 1943: p. 430). In contrast, semantical content analysis is about the *meaning* of words and images, not their physical properties. In a semantical analysis "Germany" and "the homeland of the Germans" could be coded into the same category because they mean basically the same thing, but in a sign-vehicle analysis they could not be put in the same

category because of their different physical properties. Therefore, sign-vehicle analysis is of limited usefulness and cannot provide a way around the question of whose interpretation of the focal texts we care about (Janis, 1943: pp. 438–439, 1965).

A more plausible reading of Kassarian's quote is to see him as privileging the researcher's standpoint on the texts. When he says, "of interest is what was said, the properties of the stimuli, rather than what the communicator claims he said or the interpreter perceived to have been said," he means, *of interest is what the coders understood the message to say* based on their coding rules and definitions. This is essentially the position taken by Kepplinger (1989), who argues that the codings should be seen as measuring a scientific construct which need not replicate the way the text was understood by its author or would be understood by its natural readers. This understanding of content analysis is appropriate in some situations, but like sign-vehicle analysis, it prevents content analysis for addressing many important issues to which it could otherwise be relevant. For instance, content analysts who work with advertising are sometimes motivated by a concern for how advertising affects consumers' purchase intentions, or in the case of social critics, how advertising affects consumers' attitudes about women, minorities, wealth, technology, beauty, sexuality, etc. Since texts only influence consumers through the consumers' understanding of the texts, the consumers' readings of these ads are inherently relevant to these research projects (for an extended discussion, see the debate between Ringold and Calfee, 1989, 1990; versus Cohen, 1989, 1991; Pollay, 1989). If we define content analysis as excluding consideration of how the focal texts would be understood by their natural audience, then content analysis could not address these issues.

There are also situations in which content analysts care about how a text's author, rather than its readers, would understand it. Zinkhan and Shermohamad (1986) use content analysis of old advertisements to test the hypothesis that American society became more other-directed⁵ between 1950 and 1980. This research assumed that advertisers were in touch with the values of their audiences. If between 1950 and 1980 advertisements were increasingly designed to appeal to other-directed consumers, then we could

conclude that advertisers believed a shift towards other-directedness had taken place among consumers. Zinkhan and Shermohamad were not interested in objective properties of the ads themselves. Rather, they used the ads as evidence to deduce what advertisers assumed about their readers' values and, in this way, used the ads to learn about the social context of their creation. Here, it is the authors' rather than the readers' understanding of the texts that is relevant to the theory being tested.

This concern with the author's understanding is common when content analysis is used to quantify qualitative interview data where the "author" is the interview respondent. In qualitative jargon, "emic" categories reflect the respondents' world view, whereas "etic" categories are researcher-defined constructs. Belk et al. (1989) notion of sacredness is a good example of etic research. They defined objects as sacred if the objects "reliably ... provide self-transcending, extraordinary experiences, and (are) capable of being profaned" (p. 13). This definition is etic because it does not depend on the respondents classifying the object as sacred in order for the researchers to see it that way. In contrast, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) use an emic definition of "favorite positions" in their research. The only requirement for an object to qualify as a favorite possession was that the respondents felt it was one. If researchers want to quantify their emic interpretations, they need to be able to claim that their coding reflects their respondents' understandings. In contrast, when dealing with etic interpretations, Kassirjian's and Kepplinger's position becomes much more plausible.

This analysis shows that in some cases, such as quantifying etic interpretations of interview data, Kassirjian's and Kepplinger's position may be appropriate. But in other situations, the author's or the natural reader's understanding of a text may be tenaciously attached to the research project. In these cases, one cannot get around the need to code the text in accordance with the author's or natural reader's understanding simply by claiming that the coding reflects a "scientific construct." Even if content analytic codings represent a scientific construct, one is still left with the question of construct validity: Does the construct measure what it is supposed to measure? This brings us to the question of what is the construct supposed to measure? In every case, the construct

measures someone's interpretation of the focal texts. Depending on the specifics of the research, that someone may be the texts' authors, the researchers, or some identified group of readers.⁶ Henceforth, I will use the term *focal interpreters* to describe those people whose understandings of the texts are of interest. Reception based content analysis was designed to ensure that the codings reflect the focal interpreters' understandings as accurately as possible in situations when the researchers are not the focal interpreters.

Description of Reception Based Content Analysis

We have just seen that the identity of the focal interpreters depends on the research question being asked. At times, the researchers themselves may be the focal interpreters, but in other situations the focal interpreters might be some other identifiable population, say high school students or full-time homemakers. Reception based content analysis is designed around a simple premise – if you want to know how a group of people, say full-time homemakers, would understand a set of texts, it makes sense to ask them.

“Reception research” is a general term for studies in which readers are asked how they understand particular texts (see review in Stern, 1993). Past work has included depth interviews (Mick and Buhl, 1992), focus groups (Elliot et al., 1993), and audience ethnographies (Schroder, 1994). These qualitative approaches usually explore in rich detail how readers interpret a small number of texts, whereas content analysis generally involves a less detailed look at a larger number of texts. Therefore, I have coined the term reception based content analysis to describe a fusion of reception research and content analysis in which direct reader input is used to code texts into categories producing quantitative results.

Reception based content analysis is a fusion of survey research and traditional content analysis (see Table 1). It is designed to increase confidence that the codings reflect the views of the focal interpreters in situations where the researchers are not the focal interpreters. Reception based content analysis is the same as traditional content analysis in the selection of the focal texts, but differs in the selection and training of the coders, the value of intercoder agreement, the reporting of the results, and the number of coders needed.

Selection of coders. In traditional content analysis, the coders are generally the researchers or their students. But in reception based content analysis, the coders are representative of the focal interpreters. If the research is motivated by a concern that certain ads have particular effects on high school students, then the coders would be drawn from the population of high school students. It is unlikely that a perfectly representative sample of high school students could be obtained, but even an imperfect sample of high school students is a step in the right direction.

Training of coders. In traditional content analysis, the coders are trained to follow coding rules which are seen as increasing objectivity (Holsti, 1968: p. 588; Kassirjian, 1977: p. 9) because “detailed rules and procedures reduce judges’ subjective biases” (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991: p. 245). In reception based content analysis, the goal is not to eliminate subjectivity, but to measure the subjective readings of the focal interpreters. Therefore, in reception based content analysis, raters code the focal texts according to their own intuitive understandings of the texts’ meaning rather than following predetermined coding rules.

Intercoder agreement. In traditional content analysis, intercoder agreement is an important sign of quality because it indicates that the coders were closely following the coding rules (Kassirjian, 1977: p. 9). Since there are no coding rules in reception based content analysis, interrater agreement is no longer valuable and is not used to judge the quality of the coding process. In traditional content analysis, if two-thirds of the raters think the woman in the magazine ad is a secretary, but one-third think she’s an executive, this is a problem. But in reception based content analysis, it’s not a problem, it’s a finding. There is no reason why different readers should agree on the meaning of a text. Any attempt to create consensus where none naturally exists distorts the findings.

Reporting the findings. The results of a reception based content analysis can be reported in such a way that they closely resemble the results of a traditional content analysis. Consider the following two hypothetical findings.

Hypothetical traditional content analysis finding: Forty-seven percent of the female models that appear in advertisements in *Playboy* were shown in seductive poses, whereas only 23% of the female models in *Newsweek* were posed seductively.

Hypothetical reception based content analysis finding: On average, men aged 18–35 who subscribe to both *Playboy* and *Newsweek* felt that 47% of the female models that appear in advertisements in *Playboy* were shown in seductive poses, whereas only 23% of the female models in *Newsweek* were posed seductively.

However, one could also do a more detailed analysis by looking at differences in the way coders understood the texts. The hypothetical reception based content analysis finding might continue as follows.

Social class appears to play a role in how these men perceived seductiveness. The 15 men who came from working class backgrounds labeled 55% of the *Playboy* models as seductive and 30% of the *Newsweek* models as seductive. In contrast, the 17 men from upper middle class backgrounds labeled 42% of the women in *Playboy* ads as seductive and only 19% of the women in *Newsweek* ads as seductive (chi square for social class significant at 0.05).

This potential for studying the differences in the way texts are understood by different audiences opens up a vast array of research possibilities for reception based content analysis that were not available using traditional content analysis.

The number of coders needed. Reception based content analysis may report a finding such as 50% of the raters thought text A belonged in category X, but 50% thought it belonged in category Y. If this statistic is based on two raters disagreeing with each other, it would be highly unreliable to even tentatively project it onto some larger population. Therefore, the use of reception based content analysis suggests that more than the customary two or three raters may be needed to code the focal texts. But just how many raters are required for a reception based content analysis?

As with any survey, the less variance there is in the population, the smaller the sample size needed. If the variance is 0, then an N of 1 is perfect. If the variance approaches 0, then an N of 2 or 3 may indeed be fine. But if you find a high level of disagreement between coders, a larger sample of coders will be needed. Unfortunately, it is

difficult to specify apriori the correct number of coders for any given research project, since the exact number of coders needed would depend on the observed level of variance and the desired level of confidence.

Is Reception Based Content Analysis Practical?

Reception based content analysis could potentially be applied in three general situations: (1) understanding how readers interpret mass media texts, (2) understanding what authors of mass media texts meant by those texts, or (3) understanding what interview respondents or experimental subjects meant by their comments. In general, reception based content analysis is recommended in the first situation, when researchers are interested in learning about the interpretation of mass media texts by contemporary⁷ audiences, but it usually is not appropriate in the second or third scenarios. Although reception based content analysis is not practical in all three situations, understanding the interpretation of mass media texts is an important area of study and improving research methodology in this one area would make a significant contribution.

In the second situation, the application of reception based content analysis to understanding what authors of mass media texts meant by those texts may sound good in principle. If you want to know what authors meant by their texts, why not ask them? Unfortunately, this approach is rarely feasible. Sometimes the author is no longer living, and living authors of important texts are often celebrities who are not known to be generous with their time. If the focal texts are ads, further problems arise because advertising agencies consider their thought processes confidential. Even when one can get an interview with the author, if the text is controversial one has good reason to doubt the veracity of her or his statements. Finally, if one wished to analyze a large number of published texts, performing authorial interviews would prove so cumbersome that it would likely scuttle the research entirely.

In the third situation, when working with qualitative interview data or subject protocols, reception based content analysis is also unlikely to be practical. Coding interview data is generally more complex, time consuming, and tedious than responding to mass media texts, so interview respondents or experimental subjects are

unlikely be cooperative. However, “member checks” (Miles and Huberman, 1984: p. 142), in which qualitative researchers get feedback on their codings and interpretations from informants, is a common practice. Member checks are a practical solution to the need for input from focal interpreters which is fully consistent with the logic underlying reception based content analysis. As such, member checks are also primarily relevant when interested in verifying researchers understandings of emic, rather than etic, constructs (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989: p. 75).

It should also be noted that the need for reception based content analysis is significantly lessened when dealing with qualitative interview data or subject protocols. In traditional content analysis, if a rater looks at a mass media text and tries to surmise how some focal interpreters would understand it, those focal interpreters have had no direct input into the research process. Reception based content analysis is important in this situation because it allows the focal interpreters a voice in explaining their own understandings. But when coding qualitative interview data or subject protocols, the data comes from the focal interpreter in the first place. In the case of interview data, a skilled interviewer should have encouraged the respondent to elaborate on any ambiguous or unclear statements during the interview, and may have recontacted the informant after the interview to clear up any confusing elements. In these cases, having respondents code their own comments may be redundant, since they have already expressed their views in the initial comments being coded.

When reception based content analysis is indicated but cannot be used because of practical problems, interpretive content analysis may be the next best choice. Surmising how someone else would understand a text is a complex task that requires a detailed understanding of the historical, social, and linguistic context in which the interpretation is taking place. Because of the complexity of the interpretations involved, it is likely that interpretive content analysis will be a more appropriate methodology than traditional content analysis for this research. In the following section, issues of when to use each type of content analysis are discussed in more detail.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INTERPRETIVE AND RECEPTION
BASED CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis allows for quantitative claims about the prevalence of a certain type of textual interpretation. Interpretive researchers can analyze interview data and report that certain themes emerged, but if they want to claim that one theme was more prevalent than another, they need a basis for that comparison. Similarly, literary theorists can claim that any given ad has a certain meaning, but if they want to say that this meaning is more typical of one genre than another, they need some quantitative basis on which to make the claim. Content analysis can provide a basis for these quantitative claims, but determining which type of content analysis is appropriate is a complex question. Table 2 (Appendix I) outlines which type of content analysis is likely to be appropriate in each situation. Table 2 is based on three factors⁸: the complexity of the coding task, the identity of the focal interpreters, and practical issues that may limit the use reception based content analysis.

Traditional content analysis has at least one undeniable strength – it's doable. As Babbie (1975) writes, “probably the greatest advantage of (traditional) content analysis is the economy in terms of both time and money” (p. 232). When compared to reception based content analysis, traditional content analysis saves a lot of time and effort by eliminating the need to gain the cooperation of respondents. When compared to interpretive content analysis, traditional content analysis is somewhat less work for the author – who doesn't have to compile materials to send to the reviewers – and it is also less work for the reviewers. Therefore, if traditional content analysis can effectively do what we want it to do, it may be preferred over its more labor-intensive alternatives.

The horizontal axis of Table 2 distinguishes between situations in which the researchers are, or are not, the focal interpreters. Reception based content analysis is only applicable when the researchers are not the focal interpreters. But even when this condition is met, there are times when traditional or interpretive content analysis would be more appropriate. As cell 2 of Table 2 indicates, traditional content analysis is recommended when there is a strong natural consensus about the meaning of the texts, so the researchers and the focal interpreters all agree on how a text should be coded (i.e.

Berelson's "common ground"). If everyone would code the text the same way, it doesn't matter who does the coding, so reception based content analysis is not worth the effort.

It should be noted that what I am calling a *natural* consensus is not measured by conventional interrater reliability figures. This is because the coders in most studies have been trained in how they should code the texts. If one wishes to claim that a coding task is so obvious that anyone would do it the same way, then no training of coders or coding rules should be needed.

This strong natural consensus is most likely to occur when the codings reflect interpretations of simple denotative meanings. But as we saw above, denotative coding isn't always simple and opinions about denotative meanings can be surprisingly diverse. Therefore, using denotative coding categories is not sufficient for showing that a strong natural consensus exists. How then can we know if we are on "common ground" with regards to the text's meaning? I suggest that this should be determined empirically. An initial coding of a subset of the focal texts could be performed by a group of coders including representatives of the focal interpreters and the researchers or their assistants. Each coder should be provided with a general definition of the coding categories, but they should not be trained in how to code the text or provided with specific coding rules. If a strong consensus between the coders is established, then a traditional content analysis would be justified. A "strong consensus" could be operationalized as an interrater agreement of 90%, or its equivalent using more sophisticated statistics such as Cohen's Kappa (1960)⁹, Perreault and Leigh's (1989) reliability index, or Rust and Cooil's PRL statistic (1994).

As we move vertically down Table 2, we leave Berelson's common ground for situations in which the text is not always understood in the same way. When the text is likely to be understood differently by different readers, and the researchers are not the focal interpreters, reception based content analysis should be used if possible (cells 4 and 7). When reception based content analysis is not practical, interpretive or traditional content analysis should be used, depending on the complexity of the coding task (cells 5 and 8). One might think that since traditional content analysis is likely to be most appropriate for denotative coding tasks, it should

always be recommended in cell 5. However, even if the coding categories reflect denotative meanings, inferring how someone else (say a reader from a different historical period) would approach the text adds a level of complexity that might require interpretive content analysis.

When the researchers themselves are the focal interpreters, one needs to choose between traditional and interpretive content analysis. Here the choice is simply based on the difficulty and complexity of the coding task. As we move from cells 1 and 3 to cell 6, the complexity of the coding increases and interpretive content analysis becomes the recommended methodology.

CONCLUSION

This paper asks readers to make a subtle but important shift in the way they view content analysis. Previously, one might have seen content analysis as a method for counting content. I am proposing that we view content analysis as a method for counting interpretations of content. Once one recognizes that content analysis counts interpretations of content, several questions arise. What is the best way to create those interpretations? How should we judge the quality of those interpretations? Whose interpretations should we care about?

In answering these and related questions, we uncover the need for a greater variety of content analytic methodologies. There is no one best way to generate and evaluate interpretations. Instead, the best methodology depends on the ambiguity and complexity of the interpretive task. For simple denotative interpretations, traditional content analysis may be the best option. But coding qualitative interview data or performing latent content analysis is likely to benefit from the greater flexibility allowed within interpretive content analysis. The question of whose interpretations we should care about also has no simple answer. When the coding categories reflect etic constructs, the researcher is generally the most qualified person to make the interpretations, whereas when our research is motivated by a concern with how the texts will be understood by their natural readers, it makes sense to get the reader's input when coding the texts. Ultimately, the choice of the focal interpreters

will have to be decided on a case-by-case basis in keeping with the theory under investigation and the assumptions motivating the research.

Interpretive content analysis and reception based content analysis will improve our existing research and open up new research opportunities. Using reception based content analysis, not only can we have a clearer idea about the social impact of advertising and other texts, but we can explore differences in the way the same focal texts will be understood by different populations of readers. Using interpretive content analysis, qualitative researchers may be more inclined to explore the quantitative aspects of their data than they would if they had to use traditional content analysis. Similarly, latent content analysis will be greatly facilitated by interpretive content analysis, allowing us to take a more holistic approach to mass media texts.

The basic content analytic methodology was formulated about 40 years ago. Since then, various conceptual variants such as sign-vehicle analysis and latent content analysis have been developed. But these conceptual variants have not produced new and different methodological processes. Given the increased attention being paid to the role of interpretation in research with the “interpretive turn” in the social sciences, it makes sense to expand our toolbox of content analytic techniques accordingly. Interpretive and reception based content analysis are an attempt to do just that. They open up new possibilities for content analysis which allow for more complex interpretations of the focal texts and recognize that every interpretation must be made from a particular perspective, not from an objective foundation.

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NOTES

¹ When content analysis is used to quantify qualitative data collected through thought listing tasks or other related techniques, it is sometimes called protocol analysis (Ericson and Simon, 1984).

² This past work includes Babbie, 1975; Berelson, 1952, 1954; Fowles and Horner, 1975; Holbrook, 1977; Holsti, 1968; Janis, 1943, 1965; Kaplan, 1943; Kepplinger, 1989; Pollay, 1983; and Weber, 1985.

³ For criticisms of sign-vehicle analysis which explain why it is rarely used, see Janis (1943: pp. 4380-439).

⁴ Kassarian's comment that he is talking about "replicability, reliability, or what Berelson *has chosen to call* objectivity," hints that he, too, may not have felt objectivity was the best word for this construct (Kassarjian, 1977: p. 9, italics added). These comments are therefore not meant as a criticism of Kassarian, who I recognize as simply adopting the established usage of the term.

⁵ Becoming more "other-directed" means becoming more concerned with "the expectations and preferences of others," as opposed to inner-directed (following an internalized set of goals), or tradition-directed (following tradition).

⁶ It has been suggested that my position fails to differentiate between what content analysis is *about*, and what it is *used for*. In this view, content analysis is about the text as interpreted by the coders, but it is used for making predictions about how the text would be understood by other focal interpreters. This stance doesn't recognize that content analysis can only legitimately be used to make inferences about how the text would be understood by other focal interpreters if the codings of the texts reflect the way the texts would be understood by those readers. So we are stuck right back where we started, needing to establish a connection between the way the text is coded and the way it is understood by some group of focal interpreters.

⁷ Clearly, if one is interested in studying the social impact of advertising in the 1890s, the focal readers are no longer around to be interviewed. In this situation, skilled researchers would have to attempt to infer the focal readers' understandings.

⁸ This analysis assumes that there is variance along these dimensions but does not attempt to present a comprehensive theory of when researchers will be the focal interpreters or what determines the complexity of the coding task.

⁹ See Kolbe and Burneett (p. 249) for cites on papers expanding on Cohen's work.

APPENDIX I

TABLE I

Over View of Traditional, Interpretive, and Reception Based Content Analysis

Issue	Traditional content analysis	Interpretive content analysis	Reception based content analysis
Selection of focal texts	Focal texts are selected to be representative of the larger population of texts which are of theoretical concern.	Same.	Same.
Selection of coders	Coders are usually the researchers, but some methodologists advocated coders who are independent of the researchers to increase objectivity.	Coders are usually the researchers, but may be highly trained assistants.	Coders should be representative of the population of focal interpreters. The focal interpreters are determined by the theory motivating the research.
Training of coders	Coders are trained to follow coding rules and minimize the use of their subjective intuition.	Generally, coders will need high levels of expertise to understand the context of the focal texts' production or reception. Coders receive training in the mechanics of coding, but care is taken not to influence their subjective interpretations of the texts	
Use of coding rules	Explicit coding rules are used to minimize subjective judgment	Each text is approached individually to make the most compelling	Coding rules are not used. Coders report their own subjective

TABLE I
Continued

Issue	Traditional content analysis	Interpretive content analysis	Reception based content analysis
	and make the coding process public.	and contextually sensitive interpretations.	readings of the text.
Inter-coder agreement	Inter-coder agreement is used to demonstrate that coders successfully followed the coding rules.	When researchers work in teams, the teams work collaboratively to arrive at the most compelling interpretations.	The level of consensus about the meaning of the texts is a research finding, not a measure of research quality.
Justifying interpretations of the focal texts	Inter-coder agreement is used to indicate that the coding rules were followed. The coding rules are assessed by a direct appeal to their justifiability.	The justifiability of each interpretation is assessed individually.	The coders are not required to justify their subjective readings of the focal texts. However, researchers may seek to understand their interpretive process.

TABLE II
Finding the optimal type of content analysis

	The researchers are the focal interpreters	The researchers are <i>not</i> the focal interpreters
There is a strong natural consensus about the coding of the texts	(1) Use traditional content analysis.	(2) Use traditional content analysis.
		Is reception based content analysis practical?
Coding categories are denotatively based, so inter-coder reliability is easily achieved	(3) Use traditional content analysis.	(4) If it is practical, use reception based content analysis.
		(5) If reception based content analysis is not practical, use interpretive or traditional content analysis.
Coding categories are complex, so inter-rater reliability is difficult to achieve	(6) Use interpretive content analysis.	(7) If it is practical, use reception based content analysis.
		(8) If reception based content analysis is not practical, use interpretive content analysis.

APPENDIX II

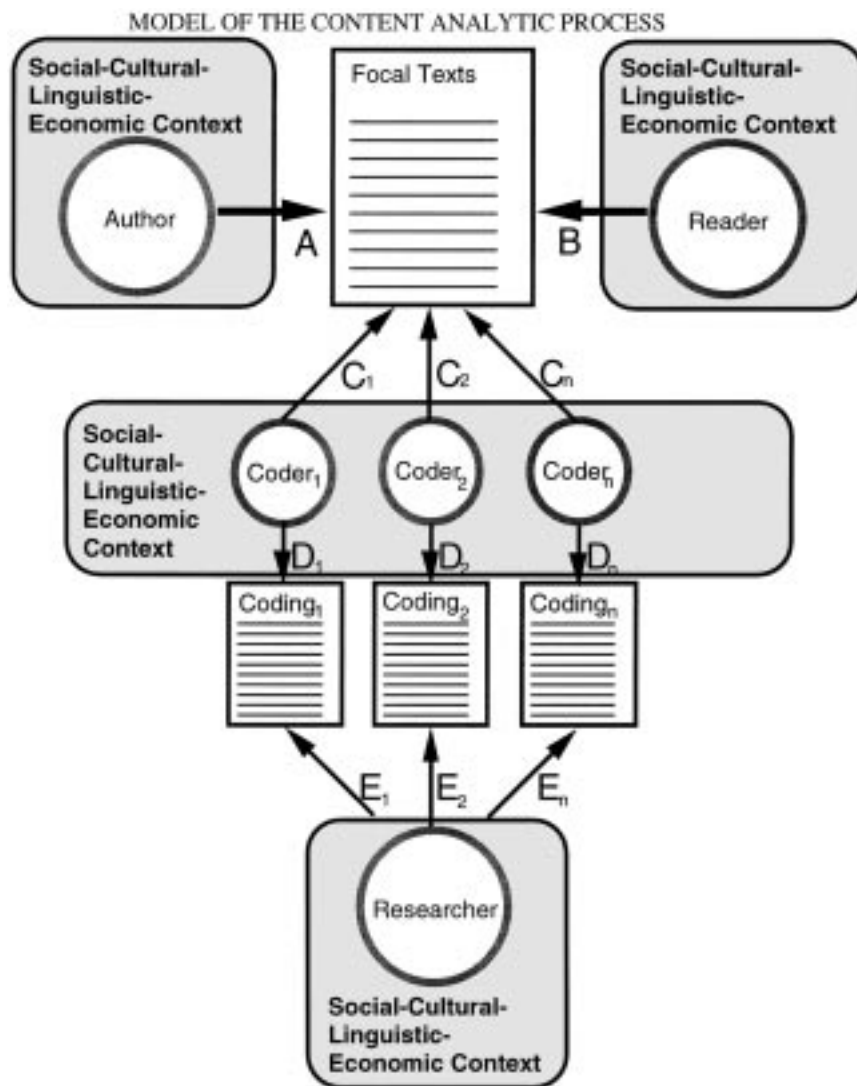


Figure 1. Model Of The Content Analytic Process.

Quality is Job 1.

"When I see one of our freshly painted cars, I feel it's a piece of art."

Larry Dickson, Paint Expertise, Ford Employee for 33 years.

Profile in Quality at 23: Pella

The truck that Larry Dickson's team puts on our cars is a true reflection of the quality we build into our cars.

Larry is one of over 100,000 Ford people worldwide who are committed to making quality Job 1.

Our goal is to build the highest quality cars and trucks in the world.

Ford Motor Company

FORD, MERCURY, LINCOLN, FORD TRUCKS

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Figure 2. Example Of Connotative And Denotative Meanings.



Figure 3. Model or Spokesperson?

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