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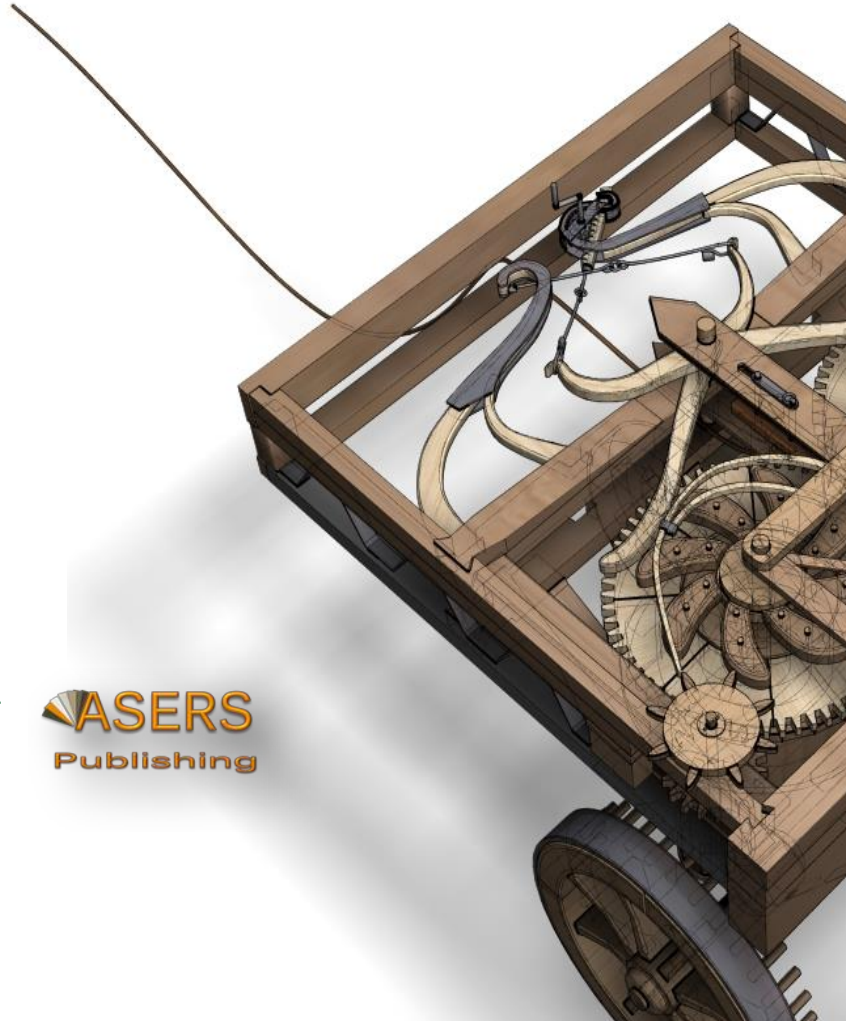


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Journal of Environmental Management and Tourism

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A Systematic Guide for Conducting Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Tourism Research

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Abstract: Thematic analysis is a widely used method for analyzing qualitative data in social sciences research. This research article provides a step-by-step guide on conducting thematic analysis manually, emphasizing the importance of understanding the process for researchers seeking a deeper grasp of the nuances involved. The article highlights the key steps, including familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining them, defining and naming the themes, and producing a final report. Through iterative reading, note-taking, and coding techniques, researchers can delve deep into the data, capture meaningful details, and uncover rich insights. Thematic analysis offers a valuable avenue for developing theoretical understanding, generating nuanced interpretations, and contributing to knowledge advancement in tourism research. The article also discusses the relevance and adaptability of thematic analysis in various qualitative research designs and methodologies. By prioritizing transparency, rigor, and a manual coding approach, researchers can ensure the validity and reliability of their thematic analysis, leading to robust and insightful findings.

Keywords: thematic analysis; social sciences; inductive research; manual coding; transparency.

JEL Classification: L83; L89; Z32; I29.

Introduction

Thematic analysis serves as a powerful and widely used method for analysing qualitative data in social sciences research, including tourism (Brady, 2015; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). As an inductive approach, it allows researchers to uncover and interpret the patterns, themes, and meanings embedded within the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). By identifying and organizing these recurring themes, thematic analysis enables researchers to extract rich and nuanced insights from their qualitative data, ultimately contributing to theory development, evidence-based decision-making, and advancements in knowledge within the social sciences (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Its adaptability to different research contexts and compatibility with diverse theoretical frameworks make thematic analysis a versatile tool that can be applied across a range of qualitative research designs and methodologies (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The primary objective of this article is to provide researchers with a step-by-step guide on conducting thematic analysis manually. While the availability of software tools for qualitative analysis has increased (Kuckartz *et al.*, 2019), understanding the manual process is crucial for researchers seeking a deeper grasp of the nuances and complexities involved in thematic analysis (Williams and Moser, 2019). This guide aims to equip researchers, particularly those new to qualitative research or thematic analysis, with the necessary knowledge and practical skills to embark on their analysis journey confidently. By focusing on the manual coding approach, researchers will be able to gain insights into the underlying principles and techniques inherent in thematic analysis (and thus, fostering a deeper connection with their research and enriching the overall analytical process).

1. Qualitative Research: An Overview

Qualitative research is an exploratory research approach that focuses on understanding the subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of individuals within their natural settings (Aspers and Corte, 2019;

Casula *et al.*, 2021). Qualitative research aims to generate new theories or refine existing ones through an inductive process of theory development (Grodal *et al.*, 2021; Stahl and King, 2020). Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes numerical data and hypothesis testing, qualitative research delves into the richness and complexity of human phenomena, embracing open-ended questions and capturing the context-specific nature of social interactions (Palys and Atchison, 2021). By adopting an inductive approach, qualitative research allows theories to emerge from the data itself, rather than imposing preconceived notions onto the research process (Mees-Buss *et al.*, 2022; Baghel and Pradhan, 2022). This inductive reasoning enables researchers to explore diverse perspectives, uncover unexpected insights, and generate nuanced understandings of social phenomena, thus contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the social sciences (Post *et al.*, 2020).

Qualitative research plays a vital role in the social sciences by providing a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena (Rashid *et al.*, 2019; Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). It allows researchers to explore the subjective realities, meanings, and experiences of individuals, groups, and communities, shedding light on the intricacies of human behavior, social interactions, and societal dynamics (Grodal *et al.*, 2021; Stahl and King, 2020). By embracing a holistic and contextualized perspective, qualitative research can capture the multifaceted nature of social phenomena that quantitative methods alone may not capture (Åkerblad *et al.*, 2021). It offers unique insights into the social and cultural factors that shape individuals' thoughts, beliefs, and actions, as well as the social structures and power dynamics that influence societal processes (Åkerblad *et al.*, 2021). Ultimately, qualitative research contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of human behavior and societal issues, informing policy development, interventions, and social change in the social sciences (Wilson and Cariola, 2020).

2. Thematic Analysis: A Rich Analysis Method for Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis stands out as a highly suitable method for analyzing qualitative data due to its flexibility and adaptability across various research contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2022). It offers a systematic and rigorous approach to uncovering patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data, making it particularly well-suited for exploratory research, theory development, and understanding complex phenomena (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). Thematic analysis allows researchers to delve deep into the data, enabling a comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Moreover, it provides a structured framework for organizing and interpreting qualitative data, ensuring that valuable insights are not overlooked (Neuendorf, 2018). The iterative nature of thematic analysis allows for a dynamic and evolving understanding of the data, facilitating the exploration of multiple layers of meaning and enabling researchers to capture the complexity inherent in human experiences (Javadi and Zarea, 2016). These characteristics make thematic analysis a versatile method that can be applied to a wide range of qualitative research designs and data types, contributing to its widespread use and relevance in the social sciences (Braun and Clarke, 2014; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Thematic analysis possesses several key attributes that make it a valuable method for capturing rich and nuanced data, facilitating theory development in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Firstly, thematic analysis allows for flexibility in its application, accommodating different theoretical frameworks and research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2014). Researchers have the freedom to identify and explore themes that emerge directly from the data, without being constrained by preconceived categories or hypotheses. This flexibility allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Secondly, thematic analysis enables the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes that may not be readily apparent through other methods, allowing for the uncovering of hidden or novel insights (Braun and Clarke, 2014). This richness of data contributes to a deeper understanding of the research topic and supports theory generation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Finally, thematic analysis provides researchers with a structured approach to analyze and interpret qualitative data, facilitating the development of theoretical explanations or models that account for the complexity of social phenomena (Braun and Clarke, 2014). The identification and exploration of themes can lead to the formulation of new theories or the refinement of existing ones, advancing knowledge within the social sciences (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022).

3. Key Steps in Conducting Thematic Analysis

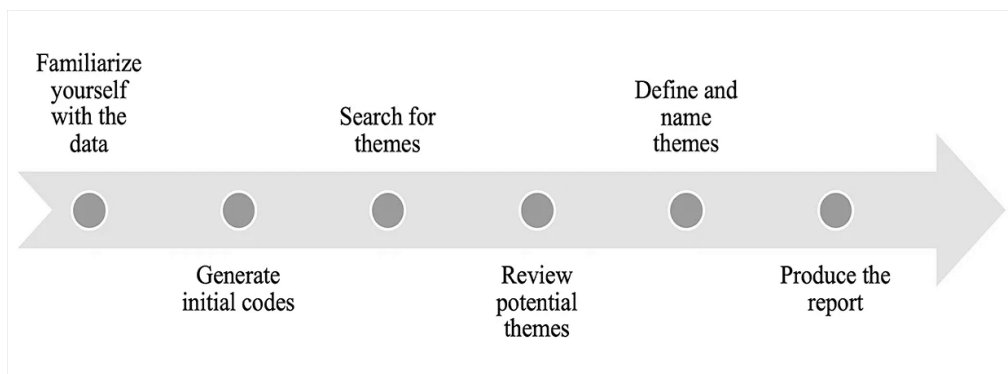
Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of analyzing qualitative data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. According to Braun and Clarke (2014), there are six key steps in conducting thematic analysis. The first step is familiarization with the data, where researchers immerse themselves in the qualitative data, reading and re-reading it to gain a comprehensive understanding. Next, researchers generate initial codes, systematically

labeling interesting features, patterns, or ideas that emerge from the data. The third step involves searching for themes, organizing and collating the codes into potential themes, identifying similarities, differences, and connections among them. In the fourth step, researchers review and refine the themes, ensuring they accurately represent the data and exploring any overlap or redundancy. Defining and naming the themes is the fifth step, where researchers clarify the content and scope of each theme and create clear and concise names that capture their essence. Finally, in the sixth step, researchers produce the final report by integrating the themes into a coherent narrative, supported by illustrative quotes from the data, and presenting the findings, interpretations, and implications of the thematic analysis. These six key steps provide a structured and systematic approach to conducting thematic analysis, ensuring the analysis remains grounded in the data and accurately reflects the richness and complexity of the qualitative data being analyzed.

Open-coding vs. closed-coding approach?

Before conducting the analysis, it is important to understand the key difference between the closed-coding and open-coding approaches. The main distinction lies in the level of flexibility and freedom given to the researcher during the analysis process. In closed coding, there is a predefined list of themes or categories (based on the underpinning theory), and the goal is to fit the data into these predetermined themes. This deductive analysis approach restricts the researcher to pre-established frameworks, limiting their exploration of new or unexpected themes that may emerge from the data. On the other hand, open coding allows the researcher to explore the data freely, without predefined categories, enabling them to identify and develop themes directly from the data. This inductive analysis approach encourages a more flexible and open-minded analysis, allowing for the discovery of novel insights and themes that may not have been anticipated initially.

Figure 1. Six key steps in conducting thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data



Source: Adopted from Braun and Clarke (2014)

Step 1: Familiarization with the data

The first step in thematic analysis is to familiarize oneself with the data by immersing in its content. This involves reading and re-reading the data, taking detailed notes, and making initial observations to develop a comprehensive understanding of its nuances and intricacies. By engaging deeply with the data, researchers can identify key themes and patterns that will guide subsequent stages of the analysis.

Table 1. Familiarization with the data

Action	Description
Data Familiarization	Immerse in content through reading and re-reading
Detailed Notes	Take comprehensive notes to capture nuances
Initial Observations	Make early insights to identify key themes

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

During the second step of thematic analysis, researchers systematically code interesting features, patterns, or ideas that emerge from the qualitative data. This process involves identifying meaningful units of information and assigning descriptive labels or codes to capture the essence of each code. By generating these initial codes,

researchers begin the process of organizing and categorizing the data, setting the foundation for further analysis and theme development.

Table 2. Generating initial codes

Action	Description
Systematic Coding	Code emerging features, patterns, or ideas
Meaningful Units	Identify information units for coding
Descriptive Labels	Assign codes to capture code essence

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

Step 3: Searching for themes

In the third step of thematic analysis, researchers organize and collate the generated codes into potential themes, aiming to identify patterns and connections. They examine similarities, differences, and relationships among codes to form meaningful clusters, searching for recurring ideas or concepts that cut across multiple codes. This process allows researchers to discern higher-order themes that reflect the central ideas or messages present in the data.

Table 3. Searching for themes

Action	Description
Theme Organization	Organize codes into potential themes
Pattern Identification	Identify similarities, differences, and relationships
Higher-Order Themes	Discern central ideas cutting across codes

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Next, researchers thoroughly review and refine the identified themes to ensure their accuracy in representing the data. This involves scrutinizing each theme to check for overlap, redundancy, or inconsistencies, and exploring their relationships with one another. By conducting this careful review, researchers enhance the validity and reliability of the thematic analysis, ensuring that the final themes are a faithful reflection of the qualitative data.

Table 4. Reviewing themes

Action	Description
Thorough Review	Scrutinize and refine identified themes
Overlap and Inconsistencies	Check for redundancy and inconsistencies
Enhanced Validity	Improve analysis accuracy and reliability

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

During this stage of thematic analysis, researchers focus on defining the content and scope of each theme. They thoroughly examine the associated codes and data to establish the key characteristics and boundaries of each theme. Additionally, researchers assign clear and concise names to the themes, aiming to capture their essence and convey their meaning effectively.

Table 5. Defining and naming themes

Action	Description
Theme Definition	Establish content and scope of themes
Key Characteristics	Examine codes for defining features
Clear Naming	Assign concise names capturing theme essence

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

Step 6: Producing the final report

In the final step of thematic analysis, researchers integrate the identified themes into a coherent narrative, weaving together the insights and patterns they have discovered. This involves using illustrative quotes and examples from the data to support and illustrate the themes effectively. Researchers then compile a comprehensive report that presents the findings, interpretations, and implications of the thematic analysis, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the research phenomenon based on the identified themes.

Table 6. Producing the final report

Action	Description
Narrative Integration	Weave themes into a coherent story
Illustrative Support	Use quotes and examples to enhance themes
Comprehensive Reporting	Compile findings, interpretations, and implications.

Source: Summarized in tabular format based on the aforementioned steps.

4. Tips for Conducting Thematic Analysis

Quality assurance through iterative reading

Iterative reading is a vital component of qualitative research and thematic analysis, playing a central role in uncovering rich insights (Fuchs, 2022). By engaging in multiple passes through the data, researchers immerse themselves in the material, gaining a comprehensive understanding and identifying overlooked patterns, connections, and themes (Joffe, 2011). This iterative process allows for a deeper appreciation of the data's nuances, complexities, and context, facilitating a more robust analysis. Note-taking serves as a valuable tool for capturing initial observations and organizing thoughts, aiding in preserving the researchers' evolving understanding and enhancing transparency (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Coding techniques complement iterative reading by systematically categorizing and organizing data, enabling the extraction of key concepts, ideas, and themes. Together, these interconnected practices strengthen the rigor, trustworthiness, and validity of thematic analysis, leading to insightful interpretations and the development of rich theoretical insights. Emphasizing the importance of iterative reading ensures thorough engagement with the data, capturing crucial details that enhance the depth and quality of the analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

Transparency and rigor are paramount in thematic analysis, ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. By emphasizing transparency, researchers provide a clear account of their analytical process, enabling others to evaluate and replicate the study. This involves documenting decisions made at each stage, such as the coding process, theme development, and data interpretation (Mackieson *et al.*, 2019). According to Mackieson *et al.* (2019), rigor, on the other hand, entails adhering to systematic and rigorous methods throughout the analysis. This includes employing clear criteria for theme selection, engaging in thorough data analysis, and seeking diverse perspectives through peer debriefing or member checking. By prioritizing transparency and rigor, researchers enhance the validity and reliability of thematic analysis, fostering confidence in the research outcomes and promoting the advancement of knowledge in the field (Neuendorf, 2018).

Manual Coding vs. Software Tools

Software tools have become increasingly available for conducting thematic analysis, offering convenience and efficiency in data management and analysis (Belotto, 2018). These tools provide researchers with features like

code creation, data visualization, and data retrieval, streamlining the coding process and facilitating the identification of patterns and themes (Neuendorf, 2018). However, it is important to note that this guide focuses on manual coding to provide researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the thematic analysis process (Firmin *et al.*, 2017). Manual coding allows researchers to actively engage with the data, delve deeper into its nuances, and make subjective interpretations based on their expertise and insights (Firmin *et al.*, 2017; Belotto, 2018). By emphasizing manual coding, researchers can develop a more profound connection with the data and gain a deeper appreciation of the underlying themes and meanings. While software tools can be valuable aids, understanding the manual process is fundamental for researchers seeking a thorough grasp of the intricacies and complexities involved in thematic analysis.

Conclusions

The article provides a broad overview of conducting thematic analysis for qualitative research and has covered the key steps of thematic analysis, highlighting the significance of immersing oneself in the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining them, defining and naming themes, and ultimately producing a comprehensive report, all while utilizing iterative reading, note-taking, and coding techniques to capture meaningful details and uncover valuable insights. This approach enables the identification of recurring themes and patterns, contributing to a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon and facilitating evidence-based decision-making and theory development. Thematic analysis is a valuable avenue for developing theoretical insights and advancing knowledge in the social sciences. Researchers are encouraged to apply the steps and recommendations outlined in this guide to their own research projects, embracing transparency, rigor, and a manual coding approach. By doing so, researchers can embark on their thematic analysis journey with confidence, enabling them to produce robust and insightful findings. Embracing the power of thematic analysis allows researchers to unlock the profound depth of meaning hidden within their qualitative data.

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Any opinions articulated in this article are exclusively the intellectual result of the author and do not necessarily reflect the stance of their affiliated institutions.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conception of the article and its design, the data collection through desk research, analysis of the articles and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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