
BOOK REVIEW:

Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Frederick G. Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Mahwah, New Jersey, 1998.

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Basic Facts

208 pages.
\$29.95 softcover and \$49.95 hardcover.

Quantitative content analysis is a common tool in advertising research, with application examples including the useful consumer information contained in advertising (Resnik and Stern 1977), advertising images of females across cultures (Maynard and Taylor 1999), the commercial content of messages aimed at children (Alexander, et al. 1998), fine print disclosures in prime time and children's advertising (Muehling and Kolbe 1998), and the general creative message executions in radio ads (Abernethy, Gray and Rotfeld 1993). Due to the importance of content analysis, a book focusing on content analytic research methods would be of interest to many advertising researchers.

The goal of Riffe and his co-authors was to provide a clear, comprehensive guide to conducting content analyses with numerous examples of how content analysis is applied. On the whole, this goal is met. Yet, although many of the examples are very useful, they are almost all focused on general communications research such as the content of political speeches, correspondence, or newspaper stories. Almost no examples of content analysis applications to advertising research are included.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this book is how the authors demonstrate how a careful literature review, coding instrument design, sampling frame design and coding methods are important for a meaningful and interesting content analysis study. The chapters on designing a content analysis study, measurement and sampling all focus on the systematic steps that researchers can take to maximize the chances that their content analysis will allow them to successfully answer their research questions. Included are examples of both hypothesis testing and descriptive content analysis studies.

The authors provide a step-by-step approach of content analysis study design from the literature review (Chapter 3) through setting the sampling frame (Chapter 5). The suggestions of how to set up a measurement instrument (Chapter 4), how to design a content analysis sample (Chapter 5), how to train coders and the importance of revising both the coding instrument and the coding instructions on a set of data not included in the main study (Chapter 6) are all very worthwhile. Compared to other content analysis method books, Riffe and his co-authors provide the best practical examples and methods of how to train coders, revise coding instruments and instructions before the main study, and how to set up a useful sampling frame for an effective study. This coverage is invaluable to a scholar planning

a first content analysis study. More experienced researchers will find many worthwhile tips on how to improve study design and execution.

The reliability chapter was mixed. The reliability chapter stresses the importance of sound coding instructions, coding form and coder training on achieving acceptable study reliability. The impact of the complexity of the study concepts on reliability is also interesting and seldom discussed. For example, an advertising content analysis study that counts the numbers of males and females in ads should have very high reliability. In contrast, a study that tried to assess a more complex construct such as the attractiveness of the models in ads should expect to have far lower levels of coder reliability. The authors stress the importance of both reporting basic levels of inter-coder agreement and the need for using measures of content analysis reliability that account for chance agreement between coders. Unfortunately, some content analysis reliability measures developed in the last ten years were not included (Perreault and Leigh 1989).

Overall, the chapter on content analysis validity was well done. Content analysis can establish correlation and, with careful sample design, time order of effects. However, content analysis cannot control for other factors which could explain the hypothesized relationships like a well executed experimental design. The measurement validity issues of face, concurrent, predictive and construct validity are also well covered. The authors also stress the importance of replication to add confidence to research findings and provide greater evidence of external validity. Unfortunately, a discussion of the ways that a single study can start establishing external validity is somewhat lacking.

The book contains several weaknesses when examined in the context of conducting advertising research. First, Chapter 9 is entirely devoted to computer content analysis. Computer content analysis requires the subject material to either be completely transcribed into electronic format or for an existing data base of electronically transcribed material to be available. Unfortunately, although newspaper and magazine editorial content is routinely transcribed into electronic format, ads are simply not traditionally transcribed.

Second, the data analysis chapter (Chapter 8) is written on the undergraduate level. For example, the authors include very basic statistical formulas such as calculating the sampling error for a mean and the formula for a t-test. Interestingly, no formulas were provided when more complicated statistical techniques, such as path analysis, were discussed. As a result, the data analysis chapter could probably be skipped by most researchers since the techniques discussed are in almost any undergraduate level statistics book.

Due to the sole focus on general communications research, the introduction and the chapter on defining content analysis as a social science tool are also not terribly useful to an advertising researcher. This is especially true since quantitative content analysis is a very well established procedure in advertising research. However, if a researcher is searching for a good step-by-step guide to content analysis research methodology, this book is a worthwhile purchase. A researcher planning his or her first content analysis study would find this book to be very useful. Scholars who have conducted several quantitative content analyses will also find some useful suggestions to improve their study design and procedures.

References

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