

Name of Method	<b>Content Analysis</b>
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**Brief Outline of Method**

As the name suggests, Content Analysis is used by sociologists (and other social scientists) to investigate the content of the Mass Media (, although it has applications across a wider range of spheres - the analysis of **historical documents**, for example). In other words, it's used to explore the content of various media (books, magazines, TV, film etc.) in order to discover how particular issues are presented. At its most basic, content analysis is a **statistical exercise** that involves **categorising** some aspect or quality of people's behaviour and **counting** the number of times such behaviour appears (a **simple content analysis** might involve **counting** the number of minutes men and women appear on screen in a programme such as "EastEnders"). In this way, content analysis helps us to build-up a picture of the **patterns of behaviour** that **underlie** (and are usually hidden from view) the social interaction portrayed in the media.

Strengths / Uses of Method	Weaknesses / Limitations of Method
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is relatively easy to gain access to the broadcast or publication you want to study.</li> <li>2. It is relatively easy and inexpensive to build a representative sample.</li> <li>3. It produces highly reliable (usually quantitative) data. Content Analyses are usually easy to repeat ("replicate"). Complex forms of social interaction can be quantified using a standardised framework (the <b>content analysis grid</b>) that can be applied across a wide range of media.</li> <li>4. It can present an objective account of events, themes, issues and so forth that may not be immediately apparent to a reader, viewer or general consumer.</li> <li>5. It is an unobtrusive method - it doesn't involve the researcher interacting with the people / things being studied. The researcher cannot, therefore, influence the behaviour of the people being studied.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. May not be as objective as it claims since the researcher must select and record data accurately. In some instances (such as a television programme) the researcher must make choices about how to interpret particular forms of behaviour (for example, when a character is acting aggressively). For example, the researcher decides things like: what categories will be used and whether or not everyone be put neatly into a particular category).</li> <li>2. By attempting to quantify behaviour (such as the relationship between people), this method may not tell us very much about the quality of people's relationships.</li> <li>3. May be time-consuming (for example, analysing a range of newspapers or TV programmes in detail).</li> <li>4. As with all statistical data, it provides us with a <b>snapshot</b> of people's behaviour at a single moment in their life.</li> <li>5. It describes, rather than explains, people's behaviour. It does not tell us what behaviour <b>means</b> to those involved and those watching.</li> </ol>

How **reliable** is this method? [Circle one option]

1	2	<b>3</b>	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Highly Reliable				Neither Reliable nor Unreliable					Highly Unreliable

Briefly explain why you think the method is reliable / unreliable

Content Analysis can be reliable in one sense because it is relatively easy to create a Content Analysis Grid (on which you record, for example, every occasion when the word “he” is used in a text) which can be standardised and used repeatedly to get the same results. However, if you are looking to record abstract ideas (such as looking at how many times men are portrayed in positions of power on TV), this requires interpretation on the part of the researcher (deciding, for example, what a “position of power” means) and this interpretation may be different for different researchers (what I believe is the portrayal of power may not be considered as such by you...).

How **valid** is this method? [Circle one option]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	<b>9</b>	10
Highly Valid				Neither Valid nor Invalid					Very Low Validity

Briefly explain why you think the method is valid / invalid

It is not a particularly valid method because it doesn't go into any detail or depth about the behaviour it is recording - it is mainly designed the gather quantitative data that records objective features of behaviour. In this respect we don't get a very clear picture about the possible significance of the behaviour recorded by Content Analysis - both in terms of the people involved and, most importantly, the consumer of mass media products.

The fact that something may not be apparent to the consumer without the aid of a content analysis to help them **decode** the “underlying themes” involved may mean one of two things:

**Either** the consumer is unaware, on a conscious level, of these ideas and so they have little or no effect on their actual behaviour **or**:

The existence of these “hidden messages” may operate on an **almost subconscious** level, such that a theme is being transmitted, received and acted on without the consumer being aware of this fact. For example, in many Hollywood “action” films, a constant, unstated theme is the revenge motive. The “good guy” has to take his revenge on the “bad guy” personally (invariably by killing them in a violent, painful and humiliating, way). Problems, in this respect, are solved through violence of an extreme and personal kind rather than the way people normally try to solve problems...

Next time you watch one of these films, try looking-out for this theme. If you find yourself waiting enthusiastically for the point at which the hero kills the villain then there might just be something in this idea...

How easy is it to use a **representative** sample with this method? [Circle one option]

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Very                                  Neither Easy                                  Very  
 Easy                                  nor Difficult                                  Difficult

Briefly explain why you think it is easy / difficult to use a representative sample with this method

As with most forms of research, it's easy if you have enough time, money and resources. For example, if you were studying school books aimed at 5 year old children it would be possible to gain a representative sample of such books. Similarly, it would be easy to buy a particular newspaper everyday for a year...

How easy is it to **generalise** your findings using this method? [Circle one option]

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10  
 Very                                  Neither Easy                                  Very  
 Easy                                  nor Difficult                                  Difficult

Briefly explain why you think it is easy / difficult to generalise your findings using this method

In one way it might be possible to make generalisations (for example, if you've studied a newspaper for a year it will be possible to identify general themes and patterns in the way content is presented to the consumer).

However, in other respects it may be more difficult to make generalisations (for example, about a comedy programme lasting six episodes - there are so many different types of comedy it may not be representative of all types).