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Exploring the use of content analysis methodology in consumer research

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ABSTRACT

Content analysis is a viable way to thematise consumer experiences. The purpose of this review study is to examine the use of content analysis in consumer research (1977–2017). The authors explore *how* content analysis has been used. The reviewed studies address consumer experiences. The results show that qualitative content analysis is not used as a method in its own right; it is more often applied as a supplement to quantitative testing. There is also a lack of rigorous reporting of methodologies in many studies. The systematic review provides four propositions, content analysis studies: 1) vary in execution and reporting; 2) have a tendency towards methodological vagueness; 3) do not apply content analysis as a sole method; 4) are versatile. The study can also serve as point of departure for novice researchers wishing to engage with content analysis research. We suggest that further research is needed to explore the use of qualitative methodologies in consumer research.

1. Introduction

Consumers no longer rely solely on marketing from businesses (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004) but are actively engaged in the value co-creation process (Galvagno and Dallì, 2014; Venkatesh and Peñaloza, 2014; Loef et al., 2017; Zervas et al., 2017; Rudd et al., 2018). Whereas research was formerly preoccupied with studying the content of the information and communication from the business to the customer, the focus is now more consumer oriented, e.g. in social media (Jacobsen et al., 2020). Businesses need to listen and learn from consumers in order to be equipped to co-create experiences (Schmitt, 1999; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Sweeney and Lapp, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). To understand the consumer is essential as they are involved in experiential value creation (Rudd et al., 2018; Lecoeuvre et al., 2021). Moreover, consumer data is easily available through social media, tweets etc. (Gong et al., 2017), creating opportunities that can inspire to push beyond methodological boundaries (Grewal, 2017), and represent a broader view of consumer experiences (Becker, 2018).

The foundation for knowledge about the consumer within the field of marketing and consumer behaviour is debated (Anderson, 1986) and could benefit from a widening of its methodological approaches (Gummesson, 2001; Saad, 2017; Becker, 2018), to form a more heterogeneous understanding of consumers (Nöjd et al., 2020). It has traditionally taken a quantitative direction (Alves et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2011; Kienzler and Kowalkowski, 2017), with consumer surveys and

experiments being the methods of choice (Rapp and Hill, 2015). However, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has supported the use of qualitative methods in consumer research (Murphy, Patterson, & O'Malley, 2019), as it adheres to sociocultural and experiential dimensions (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), 2018; Caruana et al., 2008; Canniford and Shankar, 2013). Recent studies, aimed at understanding consumers' showrooming behaviour has also emphasized use of qualitative methods (Fiestas and Tuzovic, 2021). To comprehend experiences, the consumer's own understanding of the experience is crucial (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). In this context, content analysis and semiotic analysis are feasible methods, as they acknowledge the consumers own experiences by providing thicker descriptions from individual perspectives (Bertrand, 1988; Clarke et al., 1998). Yet, it remains somewhat unexplored how consumer literature could benefit from adopting such approaches. Semiotics is a form of analysis of content of communication. It is the "study of signs: an approach to the analysis of documents and other phenomena that emphasizes the importance of seeking out the deeper meaning of those data. Semiotic approach is concerned to uncover the processes of meaning production and how signs are designed to have an effect upon actual and prospective consumers of those signs" (Bell et al., 2019, p. 281). Exploring semiotic analysis in its' own right, is beyond the scope of this review, as is the use of the phenomenological approach, as described by Goolaup et al. (2018) and applied by Kuuru and Närvänen (2019). The aim of this study is to reveal *how* content analysis is used to analyse

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interview data from consumers in consumer research over a 40 year period (1977–2017).

Content analysis, can be defined as “an approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 595). Content analysis underlines the development of categories from the data and recognizes the importance of understanding the meaning of the context where the analyzed items appeared (Bell et al., 2019). Quantitative content analysis seeks to “quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 281). As such, qualitative content analysis is systematic and analytic but less rigid than quantitative content analysis, and the researcher constantly revises the themes or categories by moving “back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (Bell et al., 2019, p. 511).

Within marketing and consumer behaviour, content analysis has been widely used in the assessment of verbal contents and nonverbal messages of communication (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991), for example,

advertisements or pictures (Bartikowski et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2013). In recent years, there has been a tendency towards the use of content analysis of interviews in consumer studies (Davis et al., 2011; Zarrantonello and Luomala, 2011; Lecoeuvre et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is still a need for discussing the use and relevance of content analysis as a method for learning more about consumer experiences (Carlson, 2008). Earlier research has focused on the methodological aspect of content analysis, such as the methodological review by Kolbe and Burnett (1991). Whereas Mulvey and Stern (2004) took a theoretical approach and addressed the *what* in content analysis research from 1977 to 2000: the *what* being the theoretical focus of the research using content analysis. It can be argued that the *how* of content analysis processes has not been thoroughly debated in consumer research, since Kassarian’s (1977) seminal article. In the authors’ view the topic is ripe for a revisit, this review examines the use of content analysis from 1977 to 2017.

A systematic literature review was carried out using well-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, as described in the methods section

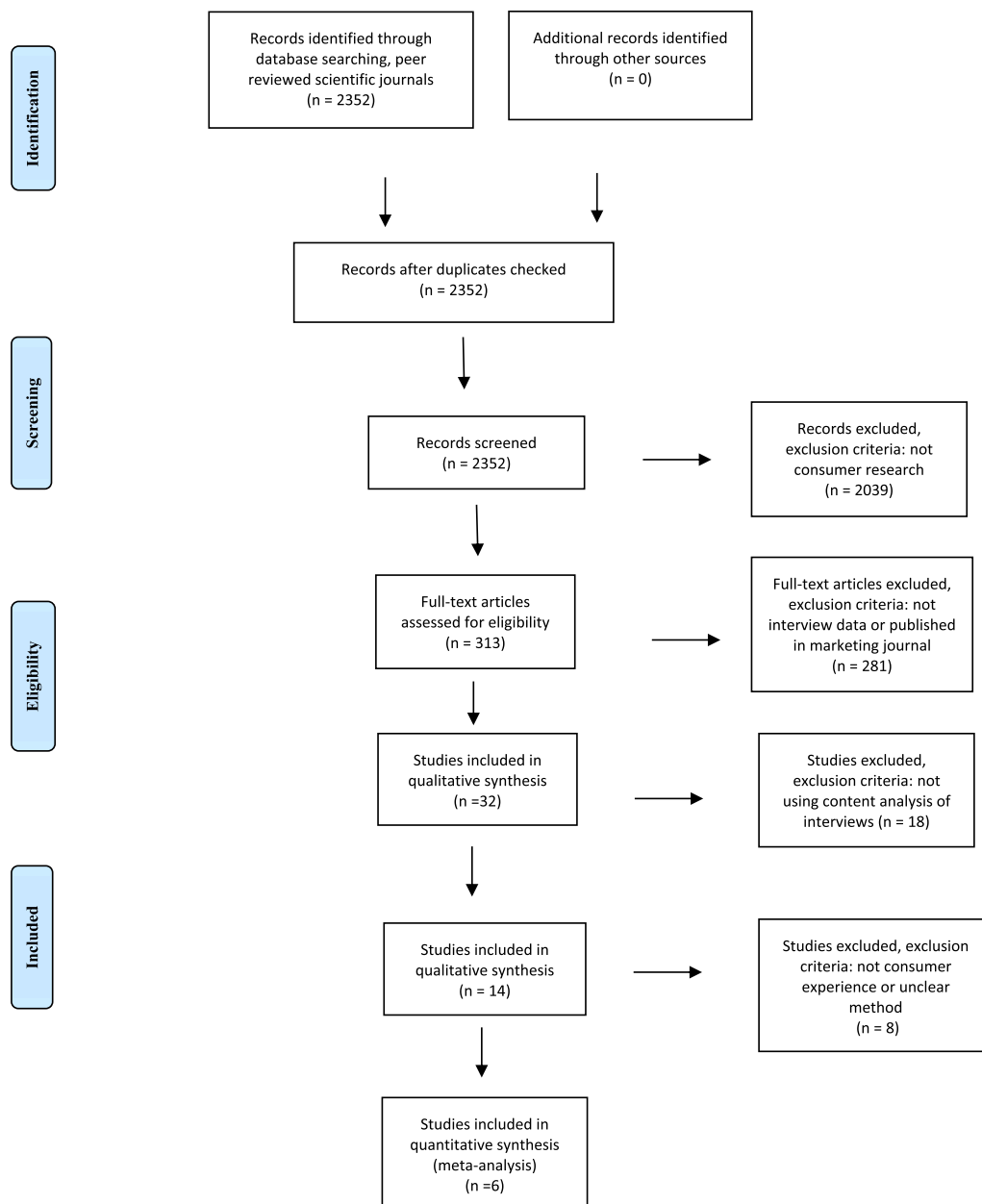


Fig. 1. PRISMA Diagramme of the systematic literature review (adapted from Moher et al., 2009).

and flow chart (Fig. 1). This review explores the use of content analysis in consumer research interviews. The review does not claim to be all inclusive or exhaustive, as that would be difficult to achieve. It does, however, delve into content analysis studies that focus on consumer experiences. Responding to the call for research that can enrich the scope of practitioners (Grewal, 2017), the current article contributes to understanding aspects of methodological choices in consumer research. Secondly, as called for (Gummesson, 2001, 2005) the article intends to inspire methodological diversity in consumer research. The current article contributes to understanding how content analysis is used in consumer research. The study also provides insight into methodological choices and promotes the importance of clearly presented methods and methodological diversity. The study can be an important theoretical contribution related to the use of content analysis in the domain of marketing and consumer research.

2. Literature review

2.1. The use of content analysis

Content analysis was introduced in the early 40's within political science, analyses of political propaganda, social psychology, journalism and communications research (Kassarjian, 1977). Fearing (1953) for example, referred to content analysis as a specific set of procedures to be used in quantitative and qualitative accounts concerning communications content. Gerbner (1956) on the other hand emphasized that content analysis investigates relational patterns and focuses on inherent qualities of communication products. An early study examining consumer behaviour using content analysis (quantitatively), concluded that although it could be used alone it might be most useful in combination with other methodologies (Way, 1984). Later, Sayre (1992) emphasized that content analysis should be used to a greater extent amongst marketers, to reveal both manifest (frequency) and latent content (meaning) in advertising. Sayre (1992, p. 18) promoted the use of content analysis as "an ideal tool for observing and analyzing the overt communication behaviour of selected communicators" and to understand how advertisers create meaning for consumers.

Content analysis has been considered an emerging innovative technique (Orlikowski, 1991) and was particularly popular in cultural studies and mass communications research (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994). Kassarjian's (1977) classic article on content analysis in consumer research served as an inspiration for later research in the field (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). Holbrook (1977) noted that until then, the method had not been neglected but more misdirected, referring to Kassarjian's (1977) considerable contribution. Kassarjian's article highlighted methodological aspects of content analysis and emphasized the need for methods that take into account "the subjects own language and mode of expression" (Kassarjian 1977, p. 11). Holbrook (1977) further noted that very few researchers used content analysis to study the effects of marketing communication as experienced by the consumer. This view was later supported by Carlson (2008) who expressed concerns regarding the misuse of content analysis to infer causation. Duriau, Reger and Pfarrer (2007) claim that the use of content analysis has been growing in management research in the past 25 years; however, their review of content analysis research shows that out of the 98 studies included, only 16 are from year 2000 or later.

An early review study in consumer behaviour literature, by Helgeson et al. (1984), used content analysis to identify the topics of consumer behaviour research. Similarly, content analysis has been applied in review studies; for example in tourism (Mehmetoglu, 2004). Moreover, in the tourism context, Mehmetoglu and Dann (2003) looked at the benefits of using electronic analytical software as a tool for qualitative data content and semiotic analysis. Cheng, Edwards, Darcy and Redfern (2016) applied content analysis as one of the methods in a review of adventure tourism consumers. Kolbe and Burnett's (1991) empirical review of 128 studies using content analysis methods draws upon the

guidelines of Kassarjian (1977) and extended Kassarjian's (1977) criteria, by investigating several objectivity dimensions. Duriau et al. (2007) reviewed the use of content analysis in organisational studies, looking into the research themes, data sources and methodological refinements, referring to a wide range of theoretical content analysis frameworks.

Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) criticised content analysis for not being able to capture context. Whereas, Mayring (2014) disapproved of the methodological dichotomisation of qualitative and quantitative research and proposed mixed methods research as an alternative in social and behavioural sciences. Qualitative content analysis as a mixed methods approach qualitatively assigns categories to text and, then, quantitatively works through the text and the consistency of the categories (Mayring, 2014). Moreover, content analysis enables an independent and text-driven appraisal of the literature, and it permits the researcher to gain theoretical insights (Cheng et al., 2016).

2.2. A review of content analysis

Krippendorff (1980, 1989, 2013) defined content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. Duriau et al. (2007) adopted a wider definition of content analysis, stating that it is a broad methodological measurement applied to text. In the work of Kassarjian (1977), content analysis was described as an analytic method to reveal communicative content in the form of verbal and symbolic content. Content analysis is not about studying a viewer or a communicator, it is about studying the communication itself (Kassarjian, 1977); thereby, the intention would be to understand the message of the data. According to Kassarjian (1977), content analysis should be objective, systematic and quantitative. Krippendorff (2013), on the other hand, criticises the focus on objectivity and manifest content, as content analysis should allow for a person's interpretation and meaning of the text or data.

Content analysis can be carried out in a deductive or inductive way (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Krippendorff, 2013), and can reveal different aspects of the content. A deductive approach would often be used to test a theory in diverse situations or to collate categories in various time-frames (Krippendorff, 2013). Inductive analysis is a process of discovery where findings emerge through the analyst's interaction with the data (Patton, 2002). An inductive approach can be used in cases that are fragmented and where there is a need for exploration, or where there is a lack of studies on the phenomenon in question (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Despite the versatility of content analysis, critiques has claimed it is an overly simplistic method (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008).

Illustrating the variety in content analysis, Mehmetoglu and Dann (2003, p. 2) claim content analysis is versatile and can be applied to 'any type of human communication in whatever medium'. Another advantage of content analysis is that it allows for an understanding of interaction and social communication (McAlister and Erffmeyer, 2003). Semiotic analysis is closely related to content analysis and concerns how language gives meaning to symbols and signs (Duriau et al., 2007). One can regard the two methods as part of the same process, as semiotic analysis also reveals the underlying meaning of messages (Mehmetoglu and Dann, 2003).

Choice of data collection affects the level of interpretation. The researcher can use a manifest content analysis that describes the visible content of the text. A latent analysis has a deeper level of interpretation where the focus is on the underlying meaning (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Qualitative content analysis deals with condensation and abstraction. The analysis process comprises condensation in order to reduce the text and abstraction to reconstitute the text to a higher level of abstraction by coding, categorization and the development of themes. Content analysis is often used in conjunction with other interpretive techniques (Duriau et al., 2007); however, it can also be a stand-alone method (Krippendorff, 2013).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) furthermore described three approaches

to qualitative content analysis: 1) conventional, 2) directional and 3) summative. The conventional content analysis derives categories directly from the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The directed approach is structured and guided by theory (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Counting and comparing keywords or content and subsequently interpreting the underlying context, is the basis for the summative approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The goal of all three approaches is to interpret meaning from the content of the data, differences related to coding schemes and origins of codes and trustworthiness. The success of a content analysis depends on the coding process (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The purpose of the process is to bring forth the core meanings of the text. The core meanings found in content analysis can be referred to as patterns (i.e., descriptive findings) and themes (i.e., categories) (Patton, 2002). Content analysis has certain limitations, as it is related to content, not form (Krippendorff, 1980). As a supplement to the methodological debate within consumer literature this study explores the use of content analysis related to consumer experiences.

3. Methods

This study systematically reviews the use of content analysis in consumer research over a period of 40 years. When the aim is to identify, assess, and summarize relevant literature, a systematic review process ensures structure, transparency and replicability (Alves et al., 2016; Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003), and further increases objectivity and trustworthiness (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). A rigorous search strategy was developed and the systematic review is illustrated in Fig. 1, following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Snyder, 2019).

3.1. Data collection

The search was carried out in three online search databases in the social sciences: 1) Web of Science, 2) ABI Inform Global (ProQuest) and 3) Academic Search Premier. The search terms ‘content analysis’ and ‘consumer research’ were used, the inclusion criteria specified that the included studies should be: ‘peer reviewed articles describing interview studies and published in scientific journals’ between 1977 and 2017; in ProQuest, the subject category of consumer behaviour was specified. Two university librarians were consulted in the search process, to ensure that the quality of the search was according to recommended research standards. The flow chart (Fig. 1) illustrates the searches, as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The searches provided a total of 2352 articles for review. The search in ProQuest gave 2277 results. The search in Web of Science ISI gave 46 results. Only two articles were eligible for review, since they were based on interviews. The search in Academic Search Premier resulted in 29 articles, none of the articles used content analysis of interviews. Subsequently, by including the subject category ‘consumer research’ in ProQuest resulted in a total of 313 articles that were eligible for further review.

The researchers, then, read the title and abstract of the 313 articles. Articles that used content analysis of interview data were included for further analysis, if uncertain as to whether this inclusion criterion was met, the authors also read the methods section. In total, 58 articles were included as interview-based, mixed methods studies with interview data were also included. Out of 58 articles, 26 articles were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criterion of being published in marketing or consumer research journals (according to the Association of Business Schools, ABS, list of marketing journals). The method sections of the 32 remaining articles were read closely, excluding articles not using content analysis of interviews and those not mentioning content analysis as a method. This resulted in 14 articles. These articles were reviewed further to ensure that they focused on consumer experiences and had a clearly described method. A final inclusion criterion in this regard was that the interviewee of the articles should be the consumer and not business experts. Based on these inclusion criteria, eight articles were excluded. As a result of the rigorous review process six articles were

considered eligible for final inclusion and a more in-depth review (see Table 2). These studies represent a small portion (0.0025) of the total number of reviewed articles.

The researchers applied the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) in the selection process. The use of CASP was deemed appropriate as it provides a systematic approach for assessing trustworthiness, relevance and results of published papers (CASP, 2017). The method of content analysis in the reviewed studies—the analysis itself—may be both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Table 1 presents the questions used in order to review the studies. Table 2 shows the score of each article, according to the questions raised in Table 1. Table 2 concludes that the chosen articles were eligible for further review and analysis. The strategy guiding the analytical process is presented in Tables 3 and 4. The authors identified each study’s methodology, details of the sample and the phenomenon of interest, as well as the coding steps (Table 3). Moreover, an in-depth analysis of “what content analysis was used for”, “how it was done” and “why it was used”, guided the analysis (Table 4). Theoretical propositions were developed as a result of the analysis. These are presented in Table 5.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Discussion of findings

The aim of this study was to explore *how* content analysis has been applied and contributed to consumer research. The results of the rigorous screening process illustrate that there is limited use of content analysis in consumer research. The 32 articles that were reviewed showed great variety in methodological approaches. Eleven of the articles (Keaveney, 1995; Bloemer, Ko de Ruyter and Wetzels, 1999; Bhasaran and Hardley, 2002; Luomala, 2002; Carrigan et al., 2004; Mitchell and Harris, 2005; Reynolds and Harris, 2005; Green and Pelozo, 2011; Thorne, 2011; Lee, 2013; Gaur et al., 2015) used qualitative interviews alone or as a supplementary data, but did not apply qualitative content analysis. Two articles (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Fowler and Close, 2012) used content analysis, but not for the analysis of qualitative interview data. One article (Chen and Quester, 2006) used quantitative content analysis to identify reliable variables for developing a research instrument. In this study content analysis was not the main method. Four studies (Roberts, 1998; Wang and Chen, 2004; Maddox and Gong, 2005; Jozsa et al., 2010) did not use qualitative interviews nor qualitative content analysis. Eight of the remaining articles (Baker et al. 2004; Huber et al., 2004; Tadajewski; Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2006; Essoussi and Zahaf, 2008; Myers and Lumbers, 2008; Gruber, 2011; Spanjaard et al., 2014; Ramirez et al., 2015) used content analysis but did not report on consumer experiences.

Proposition 1. *The methodological approaches to content analysis studies in consumer research vary in execution and reporting.*

Qualitative methods can give valuable insight into understanding the consumer’s experiences. This is in line with Alves et al. (2016) and Becker (2018), suggesting a need for more qualitative studies to

Table 1

The questions considered in relation to the reviewed studies.

- | |
|---|
| 1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? |
| 2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? |
| 3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research? |
| 4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? |
| 5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? |
| 6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? |
| 7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? |
| 8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? |
| 9. Is there a clear statement of findings? |
| 10. How valuable is the research? |

Table 2

Review of the selected articles following the numbered CASP questions in Table 1.

Reviewed articles	Yes	Can't tell/not relevant	No
1) Clarke et al. (1998)	1, 2, 10	3, 4, 5, 6, 7	8, 9
2) Fitzmaurice (2008)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10	6, 7	
3) Guiot and Roux (2010)	1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10	4, 6, 7	
4) Kessous and Roux (2008)	1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10	4, 6, 7	
5) Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10	6, 7	
6) Sweeney and Lapp (2004)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10	6, 7	

comprehend consumers. The emphasis on understanding what it means to be a consumer, what they do and believe is also the essence of CCT (Arnould and Thompson, 2018). Qualitative content analysis can provide stable categories, valid content and appropriate results. The main challenge to using qualitative content analysis in consumer research can be rooted in a traditional quantitative understanding of validity measures. The results of the review depict methodological variety in content analysis studies as well as methodological vagueness in certain studies that explore consumer experiences. An example of a recent study which has applied content analysis and have explained it in detail, is the study of fear appeal in advertising by Bartikowski et al. (2019). This review illustrates that there are only six studies that fully describe the

Table 3

Review of the included studies; how was content analysis (CA) applied?

Study	Methodology	Methods/participants	Phenomenon of interest	Coding steps described
1) Clarke et al. (1998)	Qualitative positivist approach to gather qualitative insights. Inductive CA.	Interviews with pub visitors from 27 pubs. Number of respondents not given.	The consumer experience of the British pub format.	CA within the framework of the Semiotic cube: 1) each quote taken as the interpretant, the inferred understanding 2) the single dominant sign from each quote extracted as the iconic representation of the object to the consumer 3) from this sign, a single predominant object was inferred. For each sign/object relationship in each quotation, a single category was selected from Peirce's three dominant categories of iconic, indexical and symbolic.
2) Fitzmaurice (2008)	Deductive CA.	Mixed methods. Interviews with 107 adults (67 women and 40 men). From 25 to over 64 years.	Exploratory study on consumer splurge purchases, comparing high-versus low-materialism consumers.	Categorization along given dimensions. CA gave 10 categories of concepts and themes.
3) Guiot and Roux (2010)	Qualitative and quantitative. Inductive CA.	Mixed methods. Semi-directed in-depth interviews of 15 French 2-hand shoppers.	Explore and measure motivations for 2-hand shopping, test a motivation model. CA to develop scale to be tested.	Sequential coding brought out certain themes (14) in 4 main motivation areas, comprising 72 items obtained from coding interviews.
4) Kessous and Roux (2008)	Qualitative, inductive CA.	Two-stage interviews: first 20 consumers (10 males 10 females), then follow-up on 16 of these. 22–66 years.	Consumer experiences relating to meaning of nostalgia connected to brand products.	3 step CA: 1) CA to identify discernible patterns to define coding criterion. 2) Lexical analysis using Sphinx Lexica screening of the corpus based on keywords, frequency of mentioned products/brands linked to spatial-temporal-emotional-personal context. 3) Complementary semiotic analysis.
5) Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	Qualitative, inductive CA.	In-depth interviews, 17 retired female consumers, 60–94 years.	To propose an integrating conceptual framework of the consumer complaint process, to test and provide support for theory-based propositions. Consumer experience of non-satisfactory critical incidents that where not complained about.	The unit of analysis was a theme. The themes here were words and similar concepts used by respondents to answer questions.
6) Sweeney and Lapp (2004)	Inductive CA.	Phone interviews with 97 internet users (57 incidents) recruited from a consumer database of an upmarket retail store in Australia: 53% male and 47% female. 17–58 years.	Exploring critical factors in consumers' perceptions of Web site service quality. Evaluates whether the same factors contribute to high/low quality perceptions. Investigates the effect of the customer's search behaviour while visiting Web site.	The incident classification system. Classification in two stages: 1) groupings 2) categories, 3) independent assessment, 4) final clarification. 4 researchers (judges) were involved. Continual prudent reading and sorting of incidents into groups and categories based on similarities in the described encounters.

methodology and apply content analysis to qualitatively investigate the consumer's point of view.

Proposition 2. *Content analysis studies in consumer research suffer from methodological vagueness.*

Table 3 illustrates further results of the review process, and provides details of the involved participants, the phenomenon of interest and how the content analysis was carried out in six of the final reviewed studies. One important finding is that several of the articles in the review have unclear or poorly reported methodology.

The study revealed that content analysis is most often represented in mixed methods studies within consumer research. The benefits of conducting multiple methods research in marketing are evident—triangulation of findings, more comprehensive research, holistic understanding of phenomena and the ability to respond to broader questions (Davis et al., 2011). The findings can indicate that content analysis in consumer research is not regarded as a sufficient method of analysis in its own right, but is useful as a method of analysis that can only be used at a pre-stage for further development of a quantitative analytic tool (i.e., statistical analysis). This is in line with the notion that content analysis is most often used in combination with other analytic methods (Krippendorff, 2013; Duriau et al., 2007). However, an advantage of content analysis is that the researcher defines the complexity or simplicity of the content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017).

Proposition 3. *Content analysis is not viewed as a method in its own right.*

All the included studies emphasise the importance of understanding

Table 4
The *what, how* and *why* of content analysis (CA) in consumer research.

Studies using qualitative CA	What was CA used for?	How was it done?	Why was CA used?
Clarke et al. (1998)	Establishing the symbolic meaning of the pub from the perspective of the consumers' experience.	Semiotic analysis to explore the consumer experience of different formats in pubs. Use the semiotic cube as a framework to content analyse interview quotations.	To understand meaning, the example of British pubs is used 'to explore the potential insights which can be obtained into the consumer experience via semiotic analysis' (p. 133).
Fitzmaurice (2008)	To identify consumers own definitions of splurges. Revealed differences in how consumers define (and experience) splurges.	Exploratory study with small sample. Two independent coders. The most frequently occurring theme was 'something that they did not necessarily need but really wanted'. Identification of consumers' motivational themes.	For 'understanding the way consumers themselves classify a purchase, could help marketers more effectively communicate advertising messages and information to consumers' (p. 336). Consumers refer to their experiences when expressing their motives.
Guiot and Roux (2010)	Developing a measurement scale for second-hand shopping motivation.	Three-step CA: 1) reading corpus to identify two dimensions of time that structure the informants discourse (continuity and discontinuity). 2) Lexical analysis of vocabulary associated with nostalgic experience 3) Semiotic analysis of text.	The study was "interested in consumer experience" and interviews were conducted to gain insight into the informants discourse on their past (p. 196).
Kessous and Roux (2008)	To identify the meaning of nostalgia related to products and brands through semiotic analysis. Used to identify distinct patterns emerging from the texts as well as to delineate a coding criterion.	Exploratory study. CA as method of analysis and the unit of analysis was a theme, which is defined as a unit of text that consists of a perceiver and a perceived agent of action, an action and a target of the action.	Data consisted of respondents own words to illustrate their coping strategies related to dissatisfying marketplace experiences.
Stephens and Gwinner (1998)	Identifying instances of dissatisfying marketplace experience and the consumers' strategies used for coping with these problems. Used for development of theoretical model.	CIT was used to identify the causes of memorability, high or low service quality evaluations. Data collected through telephone interviews with open-ended questions and CA of the results. CIT identified on a 10-point service quality scale; coded 1–3 or 8–10.	CA and CIT were used to understand Web site consumers' perceptions in a way that is "informationally richer than a survey of perceptions" (p. 285).
Sweeney and Lapp (2004)	To explore how high and low service quality perceptions, developed through a website. Rather than general evaluation, CA was used to identify specific events that lead to extreme perceptions.		

Table 5
Theoretical propositions developed from the findings.

Theoretical propositions
1. The methodological approaches in content analysis studies in consumer research vary in execution and reporting.
2. Content analysis studies in consumer research suffer from methodological vagueness.
3. Content analysis is not viewed as a method in its own right.
4. Content analysis is a versatile method for understanding a wide range of consumer experiences.

the consumer, although it is not clearly explicated and argued why content analysis is deemed a relevant method for promoting such understanding. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), when coding categories are derived directly from the data, content analysis is limited in theory development and will not give a nuanced understanding of the lived experience of the participants. However, content analysis can give insight into consumer cultures in e.g. netnography (Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). The current review also aimed at identifying whether the articles manage to go beyond mere description of the manifest content in their content analyses, or whether attention is also given to the latent content in the data. The review shows that the studies address the manifest content in consumer experiences, the latent content is not investigated. A recent study by Batat (2020) acknowledges the assets of revealing the latent content which can give deeper meaning to consumer experiences. Articles 1, 2 and 3, in Table 3 (Clarke et al., 1998; Fitzmaurice, 2008; Guiot and Roux, 2010) gave gaining insight into consumer experiences as reasons for applying content analysis. Kessous and Roux (2008, article 4) use semiotic analysis and discuss the reliability and validity of the method; nevertheless, they do not explicitly mention latent or manifest content. The analysis is thorough and well-described. Stephens and Gwinner (1998, article 5) focus on the manifest content. Focus on objectivity or manifest content is contrary to Krippendorff's (1989) approach, which emphasizes meaning. Sweeney and Lapp (2004, article 6) claim that an advantage of the critical incident techniques (CIT, a content analysis technique) is that it reports behavioural evidences from particular incidents, which is desirable in assessing and understanding overall impressions.

Table 4 presents the use of content analysis in the reviewed studies. As can be seen, content analysis was used in a variety of ways. It was used to explore consumer experiences, to reveal consumers' definitions of splurges, to identify consumers' motivations, to recognize consumers' temporal discourse and to analyse the vocabulary related to nostalgic experiences. It was also used to explore dissatisfying marketplace experiences, and to shed light on consumers' experiences of web sites. The versatility of content analysis in a myriad of contexts can, legitimise its continued use in consumer research.

Content analysis could be a method of choice when data requires interpretation and understanding of phenomena, such as understanding second-hand shopping as in the article by Guiot and Roux (2010). Content analysis also enables text-driven and independent appraisal of literature to gain theoretical insights (Cheng et al., 2016). The analyses in five of the reviewed articles are of a directional nature, relying on theory and relevant findings to direct the coding (Clarke et al., 1998; Stephens and Gwinner, 1998; Fitzmaurice, 2008; Kessous and Roux, 2008; Guiot and Roux, 2010). Moreover, summative counting and comparison of keywords is evident in three studies (Sweeney and Lapp, 2004; Fitzmaurice, 2008; Guiot and Roux, 2010). In one of the articles the analysis is also of a conventional character (Sweeney and Lapp, 2004). This shows some variety in the use of content analysis with the aim of understanding consumers.

Proposition 4. *Content analysis is a versatile method for understanding a wide range of consumer experiences.*

4.2. Discussion of methods and further research

The authors acknowledge that the study has limitations. The choice of search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria can affect the quality and rigour of any review study (Snyder, 2019). The review started out with 2352 articles and to diminish potential bias a systematic approach was followed in the review process according to established criteria (Fig. 1). Unclear presentation of methodology in the reviewed studies has had an impact, and could have affected the final selection of articles, as several studies did not include enough information to judge whether they met the current inclusion criteria, and thereby had to be excluded. This seems to be a particular problem where mixed methods are used. Nevertheless, the quality of the studies was evaluated according to CASP (Tables 1 and 2). The generalizability of review studies is limited (Shin and Parker, 2017; Deeks, Dinnes, D'Amico, Sowden, Sakarovitch, Song, Petticrew & Altman, 2003). However, the study could be transferable to other areas of research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and the transparency in this systematic review increases trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003). A quantitative approach to this review could have led to other results; however, the aspects of interpretation and meaning that are emphasized in consumer experiences would have been neglected.

The study has shown that content analysis can be adopted in numerous contexts to shed light on various research questions. The authors recommend further research on the application and use of content analysis in consumer research: using conceptual frameworks; in combination with ethnographic methods and using network-related approaches (Duriau et al., 2007). Recognising the differences in age, gender, race and class, by using interpretive content analysis, can illuminate further variations of subjective consumer experiences. Similar review studies of the use of content analysis could also be carried out in other areas of business research.

5. Conclusions

This review of content analysis in consumer research shows that despite the fact that content analysis can be a versatile method for understanding a wide range of consumer experiences, it is not commonly used as a sole method of choice. Nor is it often used in analysing interviews with the aim of understanding consumer experiences. Researchers often apply content analysis as a means to develop a scale for deductive testing. The review has also shown that the methodological approaches to content analysis studies in consumer research vary in execution and reporting and often suffer from methodological vagueness. Another finding of this review, is that only four out of the final studies were carried out in year 2000 or later. It can be interpreted that the apparent lack of contemporary interview studies using content analysis in consumer research can be due to: 1) the fact that it is viewed as an outdated and unsophisticated method; 2) the versatility, flexibility and lack of strict rules and 3) that content analysis cannot stand alone methodologically.

This systematic review provides methodological, theoretical and practical contributions to the knowledge base. Methodologically, the study shows that content analysis rarely stands alone as the method of choice and the focus is mainly on manifest content. The study can serve as a valuable methodological resource. It provides insight into methodological choices and promotes the importance of clearly presented methods. The study also elucidates the importance of methodological diversity in consumer research. The theoretical contribution of this review study to marketing research, is that in the aspiration to comprehend the consumer, empirical evidence from the consumers own perspective is crucial. Insight can only be achieved through inclusion of co-creative consumers. The included studies provide practical examples of how content analysis can be used.

Over 40 years ago, Kassirjian (1977) concluded that the limitations of content analysis might not be in the method itself, but rather in the limits of the consumer researchers' ingenuity and creativity. A review of

the use of content analysis in consumer research between 1977 and 2017 has revealed that the boundaries are still there. Consumer researchers need to leave their comfort zones and explore other methodological approaches. Rigorous reporting of methods will ensure that their research contributes to the development of the existing knowledge base in consumer and business research.

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