THEMING THE INTERVIEWS
DATA ANALYSIS QUICK GUIDE

Data analysis is a pivotal step in uncovering meaningful insights from your interviews. One powerful analysis method is thematic coding, which involves identifying and labeling patterns, themes, or categories within your data. This guide walks you through the informal and robust thematic coding steps and delves into each approach's pros and cons. Additionally, we explore various tools that can support your data analysis journey.

Understanding Thematic Coding

At its core, thematic coding is about making sense of your collected data. It systematically reviews your interview notes, extracts key points, and organizes them into coherent themes. These themes then become the building blocks for understanding the nuances and commonalities present in your data.

Choosing the Right Approach

Choosing the right approach depends on a few things: **what you want to achieve with your project, how much time you have, your team's capacity, and how deep you want to dig into the analysis.**

In the world of thematic coding, there are two main methods: ***informal*** and ***robust***. Informal coding is a quick way to identify main themes by getting familiar with the content and grouping similar segments. In contrast, robust coding involves a more detailed approach. It includes creating precise labels for different ideas, organizing them into more prominent themes, and breaking those themes down into smaller sub-parts. A robust approach helps reveal intricate relationships and patterns within the data. While informal coding is faster, robust coding requires more careful analysis. It's especially useful when you want to closely examine the data, uncover hidden connections, and gain a deep comprehension of the subject matter.

Going the robust coding route will go much smoother if you have someone on your team with experience in data analysis, leveraging AI, qualitative research, or similar areas. These skills make it easier to handle complex data systematically, ensuring your coding process is accurate and giving you intelligent insights. If you do not have that capacity on your team, consider using informal coding or hiring analysis support.

If you use the **Jump Start** or **Conversation Starter** approach to your Listening Tour, you will find the informal approach best suited for your team. If you are deploying the **Strategy Builder** approach, you should explore a more robust approach.

Whatever approach you take, it's crucial to be transparent in your reporting about how you arrived at your conclusions and accurately represent your findings. This report section is often titled 'Methodology & Limitations,' or, for a more informal touch, 'Our Process.' Remember that all qualitative analysis is inherently subjective, meaning interpretations can vary based on individual perspectives. However, there's a clear distinction between what you can claim in your reporting based on the type of analysis you conducted.

Informal Approach Example: If you opt for the informal approach, you can openly share your observations when reviewing the data. Your findings are the themes that stood out most to you and your team during the interviews. In other words, you're forthright with your audience that your reporting centers around what you collectively found to be the data's most relevant and insightful aspects. While this approach provides valuable insights, it doesn't necessarily yield analytically rigorous findings. As an illustration, consider this:

> *"After **reviewing the data**, our team **noticed** that the most **prevalent themes** revolved around community engagement and the use of digital platforms for evangelism. These themes **stood out** as they were **frequently discussed** during the interviews and **seemed particularly relevant** to our study."*

Robust Approach Example: The robust approach allows you to step beyond surface-level observations and delve into a deeper, more systematic analysis. This means you can confidently state which themes were most prevalent and highlight the patterns that emerged from your thorough examination of the data. In essence, this approach enables you to make assertions firmly grounded in your rigorous analysis, providing a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of your data. To illustrate the depth of this approach, consider this example:

> *"Through **rigorous thematic analysis**, we identified that community engagement and the use of digital platforms for evangelism were not only **prevalent but also intricately connected**. The **data revealed** that successful evangelism initiatives often involved leveraging digital tools to strengthen community bonds, leading to more effective outreach efforts."*

1 INFORMAL THEMATIC CODING

Informal coding, whether alone or with a group, is a quick way to find the main ideas in your data. Here's how:

1. **Know your interview notes:** Start by reading your interview notes carefully. This will help you understand the content and find ideas that come up often.

2. **Highlight important parts:** While you read, use colors or underline to mark the parts that talk about specific ideas. This makes it easy to see and sort them later.

3. **Group similar ideas together:** Make groups of the marked parts that are similar. These groups will become the basis for your themes and help you organize the related details.

4. **Make themes clearer:** Look at the groups you made and find common things in each group. Make your themes better by combining similar sub-themes and giving them clear names.

5. **Explain why each theme matters:** Write a short explanation for each theme. Say why you put those parts together and what bigger idea they show. This will help you remember why you chose those themes and serve as the foundation for writing the report.

Pros: This approach is quick and straightforward, providing a general overview of themes. It encourages collaborative insights in group settings, promoting diverse perspectives.

Cons: However, it might lack depth in analysis, as it's less structured and more susceptible to subjective interpretation.

Informal Coding as a Team

Collaboration amplifies the impact of your efforts. Working with a team can lead to richer insights and more robust results. Here's how to foster effective collaboration during the analysis process:

Shared Vision: Ensure all team members clearly understand the research objectives and desired outcomes. A shared vision guides the analysis and keeps everyone on the same page.

Regular Team Meetings: Schedule regular meetings to discuss progress, share findings, and align on analysis approaches. These meetings facilitate open communication and collective decision-making. It is easier to theme the interviews in chunks as they are being conducted, allowing your team to discuss a manageable amount of information.

Diverse Perspectives: Embrace the diversity within your team. Different viewpoints lead to well-rounded insights. Encourage team members to express their opinions and challenge assumptions.

Assigned Roles: Designate roles and responsibilities within the team. From transcription to coding to analysis, clarifying each member's role streamlines the process and prevents duplication of efforts.

Consolidated Insights: As you analyze data, consolidate individual insights. Share preliminary findings with the team, allowing everyone to contribute their interpretations and collectively refine the analysis.

2 ROBUST THEMATIC CODING

Robust coding helps reveal intricate relationships and patterns within the data. While informal coding is faster, robust coding requires more careful analysis. It's beneficial when you want to closely examine the data, uncover hidden connections, and gain a deep comprehension of the subject matter.

Most people who take a robust approach will use AI or qualitative analysis software to support the process and will have someone on their team with previous experience.

Pros: Robust coding yields comprehensive understanding of data, offering a structured and systematic framework for in-depth analysis.

Cons: However, it demands significant time and effort, requires expertise, and may not be suitable for rapid analysis.

Pen-and-Paper, Sticky Notes, White Board: Particularly handy for initial brainstorming and rough categorization.

Collaborative Tools (e.g., Google Docs, Microsoft Teams): Enable real-time group coding and discussions.

Spreadsheet Software (e.g., Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets): Organize and categorize coded data and visualize patterns through charts and graphs.

AI, specifically ChatGPT-4: Supports a thematic coding process by automating the analysis of extensive text data, swiftly identifying and categorizing key themes and patterns, akin to how Python code is written and executed through functions, streaming the work flow and enhancing the efficiency of the coding process.

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (e.g., NViro, ATLAS.ti): For more complex analyses, these tools facilitate detailed coding, analysis, and visualization of themes, with features like data linking and query building.

FAQ

Should I theme the responses to all the interview questions or focus on a few?

Most people will want to look for overarching themes across all the categories and then drill down into a few specific questions to look for particular answers. Which questions you want to focus on depends on your goals. If, for example, you are most interested in understanding the best practices in your city, you will want to look closely at responses about what is working. To understand opportunities for collaborative efforts, look for answers about challenges, strategies, and hopes.

I was the only person conducting interviews, and now I am the only person doing the analysis. I'm overwhelmed; how can it be more manageable?

You've got this; make sure you aren't overthinking it. Take 15 minutes to brainstorm what stood out to you the most as you were listening. You'll be surprised how many themes emerge even before you skim through the transcripts. Then, choose a few questions to review in more detail. Focusing on a smaller subset of the questions will make it feel more manageable. Once you have themes for a few questions, you can decide if you want to review more of them carefully.

We took a team approach to the interviews and wanted to theme them together. How should we approach it?

Group theming works best when each team member comes prepared to share the themes they have noticed by reviewing their notes or the transcripts in advance. Take time to list out what everyone is seeing. Then, discuss similarities, tensions, and outstanding questions. Afterward, you can consolidate your observations into central themes.

Is thematic analysis the only option?

Thematic analysis is an intuitive approach to making meaning of a lot of information because humans naturally categorize what we learn. But it's certainly not the only approach. One other analysis that is accessible in the informal approach is to look at a subset of the response using a **SWOT analysis** lens.

There are also more ways to robustly analyze qualitative data, including sentiment analysis, content analysis, narrative analysis, and case study analysis. Each of those approaches is best suited for those with previous experience. If you have someone on your team with those skill sets, discuss which approach best aligns with the project goals.

Our team wants more help; what are our options?

Look for people who have experience analyzing qualitative data. They could be people in your network with data analysis, academic, Python programming, AI-assisted analysis, or qualitative research backgrounds. Sometimes, graduate students look for internship opportunities to practice their new skills. If you are searching online, you might want to search "CITY NAME, qualitative, data analysis, consultant."

What are other cities doing?

PDX used a blend of informal and robust coding. Some team members had experience in thematic analysis, and City Gospel Movement staff member worked with a qualitative consultant to coach on the process.

LoveKC hired a qualitative researcher to use a robust mixed-method approach that combined thematic coding with sentiment analysis and SWOT analysis using AI (ChatGPT4) to assist in writing and running Python coding.

Phoenix took an Informal approach conducted by one individual.

Omaha is taking an informal group coding approach.

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE ANALYSIS

Respecting Confidentiality & Interviewee Voice: Treat all interview responses as confidential and use them solely for the purposes disclosed to the interviewees. Refrain from sharing or discussing sensitive information beyond the analysis context. If you wish to attribute a specific quote to an interviewee, kindly seek their permission. Additionally, ensure proper citation when using direct quotes or phrases to avoid unintentionally using their words as your own. If confidentiality is a concern, generic terms can be used to attribute quotes. For instance, "one pastor shared with us..."

Thoughtful Reflection: Approach your analysis with an open mind, free from preconceived notions or biases. Allow the data to inform your interpretations and avoid imposing personal beliefs on the findings. Regularly reflect on your analysis process, identifying potential challenges, biases, or assumptions that may have influenced your interpretations.

Transparent Reporting: When presenting your report, provide transparency regarding your methodology. Clearly explain the chosen approach (informal or robust), the reasoning behind your choice, and any limitations you encountered during the analysis.

Promote Inclusivity: Ensure that your analysis encompasses a range of voices and perspectives, reflecting the diversity in the interviews. Strive to avoid favoring specific themes or responses over others, promoting a comprehensive representation.

Data Security: Prioritize digital and physical data security to prevent unauthorized access or accidental loss. Opt for reputable platforms emphasizing robust data security measures when using digital tools or services.

If you have any questions or feel your Evangelism Team would benefit from a one-on-one conversation about the ideas in this resource, please email us at eteams@palau.org. Our team is here to support you!