Content Analysis Research Themes 1977-2000: Evolution and Change

Michael S. Mulvey, University of Ottawa
Barbara B. Stern, Rutgers University

ABSTRACT - More than two decades ago, Hal Kassarjian introduced the content analysis methodology to consumer researchers in his 1977 Journal of Consumer Research article "Content Analysis in Consumer Research." Our research has two goals. First, from a historical perspective, we trace the evolution in the use and application of content analysis in-field from 1977-2000. Second, we analyze the substantive issues and thematic domains that dominate this body of research. By integrating the set of studies in terms of themes, we are in a better position to describe current knowledge and practice, evaluate theoretical progress, identify gaps and weak points that remain, and plot a course for future research.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9004/volumes/v31/NA-31

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Content Analysis Research Themes 1977-2000: Evolution and Change
Michael S. Mulvey, University of Ottawa
Barbara B. Stern, Rutgers University

ABSTRACT
More than two decades ago, Hal Kassarjian introduced the content analysis methodology to consumer researchers in his 1977 Journal of Consumer Research article “Content Analysis in Consumer Research.” Our research has two goals. First, from a historical perspective, we trace the evolution in the use and application of content analysis in-field from 1977-2000. Second, we analyze the substantive issues and thematic domains that dominate this body of research. By integrating the set of studies in terms of themes, we are in a better position to describe current knowledge and practice, evaluate theoretical progress, identify gaps and weak points that remain, and plot a course for future research.

From its earliest days, content analysis has been a vital and popular technique in the consumer researcher’s tool kit. In 1977, Kassarjian’s article “Content Analysis in Consumer Research” appeared in the Journal of Consumer Research. The article is considered “a catalyst” for later research (Kolbe and Burnett, p. 243) and served as a “methodological benchmark” for more than two decades. Just as earlier researchers investigated the how of content analysis (methodology), we focus on the what (theoretical focus) of such research from 1977-2000.

The purpose is to trace the evolutionary development of research themes so that future content analysts can make sense out of what has been studied and make more informed decisions about what to study in the future. Here, the unit of analysis is the “subject thematic unit.” (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998, p. 68), defined by Berelson as “an assertion about a subject matter” (1952, p. 18) and by Holsti as “a single assertion about some subject” (1969, p. 116) in a word, its “aboutness.” The study first examines the “original themes” (“research questions”) in Kassarjian’s first-generation article, and organizes them into baseline categories. Next, it identifies themes in content analysis studies from 1977-2000, and organizes them into an updated categorical scheme that reveals post-1977 changes. Last, it offers suggestions for new research directions. In this way, thematic development over time is organized into a system that reveals the relationship between changes in content analysis research and changes in society, the advertising and consumer behavior disciplines, the media, and data sources.

Original Themes: Baseline
Historically, content analysis predates the foundation of the field of consumer research. The method was borrowed from other social sciences, and was introduced to the field in 1969 at an AMA Task Force on Marketing Methodology and held at Ohio State University. In a session on “Communication: The Mass Media and Informal Channels,” Harold Kassarjian’s paper, “The Negro and Mass Media: A Preliminary Analysis of 1969 Magazine Advertisements,” demonstrated the use in a study whose theme was the role of blacks in advertisements. His 1977 article formalized the introduction of the method as a valuable new tool for systematic analysis of the content of mass communications, “most useful whenever documentary evidence is available,” (Kassarjian 1977, p. 16) and provided a list of themes from past research and directives for the future.

A total of 21 original themes was presented, divided into 12 used in pre-1977 research and 9 suggested for future research. In the pre-1977 summary, the largest number of themes (10) were advertising-related, and of that group, 5 were about images of women and minorities. Five others were about other advertising themes such as social values, product and company images, the method for technical/managerial positions, information content, and decision-choice models. The remaining two themes were about other media, including the content of best-selling novels and the readability of marketing and consumer behavior journals. The 9 directives for future themes extended media vehicles to non-advertising communications such as multinational companies’ press releases, comic strips, graffiti, bumper stickers, and historical documents recording early consumer behavior. The categorization scheme that we derived to classify the original themes into groups follows:

I. Advertising
   A: Images: women, minorities, product, company
   B: Societal values: social, recruitment
   C: Appeal type: informational content, decision models

II. Other Media
   A: Popular Culture: comic strips, graffiti, bumper stickers
   B: Historical: novels, press releases, documents related to consumer behavior
   C: Disciplinary journals: readability

All of the themes are united by two commonalities: (1) the data source is mass communication messages (marketer-generated), and (2) the collection of themes centers on social issues in the media. That is, content analysis was used to examine public communication about public issues. Under this umbrella, the main categories were differentiated by the media in which the communication appeared—advertising or other media. The original themes of images, values, and appeal types reflected societal changes in the 1960s and early 1970s related to the emergence of the civil rights, women’s rights, and consumer rights movements, and the expectation that such changes would continue to be studied. Non-advertising themes in other media were proposed for future study, specifically popular culture media, literature and news, and the disciplinary literature itself, reflecting directives for the development of the new field of consumer research. In the last quarter of the century, a multitude of changes in society and the discipline as well as in the media and data sources calls for reassessment of the original themes to determine where content analysis is now, and where it might go in the future. The current study uses the following method to identify and categorize post-1977 themes.

METHOD
Sample
Articles using content analysis were located in a search of 57 journals indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) “Business” category. Journals included generalist publications such as Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Research, and Journal of Marketing Research, and specialist ones such as Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, Journal of Retailing, and Journal of Advertising. The criterion for inclusion was citation of Kassarjian’s (1977) article, and, after excluding 3 misclassified articles that lacked the criterion citation, we constructed a sample set of 158 articles.
A subset of articles for a holdout sample was also collected (Miles and Huberman 1994) from “second generation” articles, defined as articles in business journals that did not cite Kassarjian directly, but that did cite two influential methodological articles based on his work: Hughes and Garrett (1990) and/or Kolbe and Burnett (1991). The reason for selecting these two articles is that they are the springboard for the most recent discussions (2001) of reliability assessment by Kent Grayson, Dawn Iacobucci and Roland Rust. After excluding duplicates, the holdout sample contained 22 articles, bringing the total sample to 180 articles.

The final sample contained articles from 21 business journals (see Exhibit), with the highest number in *Journal of Advertising* (42), *Journal of Consumer Research* (19), and *Journal of Advertising Research* (18). The time series graph (Figure 1) shows that the number of articles per year citing Kassarjian (1977) rose steadily from 1977 to 1990, reaching a maximum of 12 articles in 1990. Since then, the number of articles per year has leveled off at about 9 studies per year, underscoring the method’s enduring popularity.

The second time series (the holdout sample) in Figure 1 shows that although a few researchers look exclusively to second-generation articles for methodological guidance, the majority continues to recognize Kassarjian’s paper.

### Data Analysis and Coding

Analysis began with each author’s identification of article themes in the sample and holdout data sets, and disagreements were resolved by discussion. A provisional coding scheme was derived for the sample article themes via inductive and iterative analysis of the sample data (Noblit and Hare 1988; Miles and Huberman 1994; Spiggle 1994), and then applied to the holdout article themes to assess their fit in the provisional scheme (Miles and Huberman 1994). No thematic differences between the two sets were found, and after re-analysis of both data sets, the final coding scheme was agreed upon and used to derive categories for all of the articles.

### FINDINGS: CATEGORIZATION SCHEME

Findings reveal that from the 1970s to the 1990s, Kassarjian’s original themes were dominant, augmented by newer ones related to socio-cultural changes. The original data sources—marketer-generated mass communications in advertisements and other media—continued to be used, and the object of analysis was the messages’ manifest meanings. However, in the 1990s, three new research interests emerged: (1) refinement of quantitative methodology; (2) introduction of qualitative methodology; (3) and use of personal communications as data sources. The Table shows the categorization scheme that we derived from the post-1977 sample, and it reveals the extension and enrichment of the original themes. Kassarjian’s original two categories have evolved/expanded to five, of which three relate to data sources, including mass communications, personal communications, and disciplinary/academic documents; one relates to quantitative issues (problems and improvements); and one relates to qualitative methods. The following sections examine thematic expansion in detail.

### 1: Mass Communications: Advertisements and Other Media

Themes in mass communications including but not limited to advertisements form the largest category, comprising 114 articles (63%). And the articles can be grouped into three sub-categories.
A: Executorial Devices.

Content analysis of executorial devices is a new category, one that includes both macro and micro-level stimulus elements. On the macro level, themes include comparison of appeals by media (Bush and Leigh 1984), target market (Alexander, Benjamin, Hoermer and Roe 1998), product (Cutler and Javalgi 1993; Turley and Kelley 1997), and so forth; on the micro level, they include small textual elements such as headline figures of speech (Beltramini and Blasko 1986; Leigh 1994; Soley and Reid 1983), cartoon characters and animation (Bush, Hair and Bush 1983; Kelly, Slater, Karan and Henn 2000), color (Clarke and Honeycutt 2000; Huang 1993), and pictorial or musical elements (Haley, Staffaroni and Fox 1994). The trend toward close analysis of small textual units can be attributed to the incorporation of fine arts theory, semiotics, and literary criticism in consumer and advertising research, a development that began in the mid to late 1980s.

B: Informational/Emotional Appeals.

At about the same time, the original theme of informational content expanded to include the new themes of comparative ad content and emotional appeals, both of which arose in response to societal and disciplinary changes after 1977. Comparative advertising provides information about one named brand versus another, often including scientific evidence or product demonstrations to convey the superiority of the advertised brand. These appeals became popular in the 1970s, after the Federal Trade Commission began advocating brand comparisons (1972) to provide consumers with information that would enable them to evaluate competing brands. Television networks, which had long banned comparative ads, now permitted them, and the investigation of their effectiveness that began in the mid-70s (Wilkie and Farris 1975) still continues. Studies of comparative appeals in print media are common, especially in magazine advertisements (Harmon, Razzouk and Stern 1983; Jackson, Brown and Harmon 1979; Swayne and Stevenson 1984, 1987), but also in direct mail (Stevenson and Swayne 1995).

In the late 1980s, content analysis of emotional advertising appeals was spurred by a confluence between the rise of “image” advertisements and the introduction of postmodern ideas in consumer research (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). The assumption that consumers are driven by rational motivations was re-examined, and researchers began to study the influence of emotions on consumer responses to advertising (Holbrook and Batra 1987; Olney, Holbrook and Batra 1991). Emotional advertisements appealing to positive feelings (humor, fun, nostalgia) or negative ones (guilt and fear) as well as cultural differences in attitudes to emotional appeals are the objects of interest in current research (Huhmann and Brotherton 1997; McCullough and Taylor 1993; Spotts, Weinberger and Parsons 1997; Stern 1992; Weinberger and Spotts 1989).

Nonetheless, even though post-1977 themes include emotional content, most of the articles in this category are about informational content, emphasizing a variety of information cues such as location, price, or hours presented to consumers, and the value of this information both to consumers and marketers (Abernathy and Franke 1996; Taylor 1997; Taylor and Taylor 1994; Zaichkowsky and Sadlowski 1991). Empirical studies examine differences in information content by media (Stern, Krugman and Resnik 1981; Stern and Resnik 1991), target market (Lee and Callcott 1994; Muehling and Kolbe 1998), and product (Abermethy and Butler 1993; Dube, Chattopadhyay and Letarte 1996; Grove, Pickett and Laband 1995; James and Vanden Bergh 1990). Cross-cultural comparisons gather evidence of relationships between a
country’s regulatory environment and the informativeness of print and broadcast messages (Dowling 1980; Madden, Caballero and Matsukubo 1986; Mueller 1991; Rice and Lu 1988; Sepstrup 1985; Taylor, Miracle, and Wilson 1997; Weinberger and Spotts 1989). In the United States, marketing and public policy researchers monitor firms’ compliance with government legislation and scrutinize the effectiveness of self-regulation programs (Kassarjian and Kassarjian 1988). This is particularly true in industries whose advertising is prone to controversy, notably cigarettes and tobacco (Ringold 1987; Ringold and Calfee 1989), drugs (Roth 1996; Shimp and Dyer 1979), food products (Pappalardo and Ringold 2000), and motor vehicles (Ford and Mazis 1996). Regulation of advertising stems from concerns about product risk disclosure and the nature of claim substantiation and aims at preventing misleading, deceptive, or “puffed” advertisements that exaggerate product attributes/benefits (Healey and Kassarjian 1983; Simonson and Holbrook 1993). Related research analyzes the information content of legal contracts to identify safeguards that effectively protect firms against opportunism in business-to-business exchanges (Achrol and Gundlach 1999; Gundlach and Achrol 1993).

C: Sociocultural Issues.
Research attention continues to focus on positive and negative stereotyping, with age-related themes now added to the original ones of women and minority images. The theme of women’s media images now includes analysis of changing portrayals of women, effects of stereotyping on children, ad portrayals of the elderly. Synchronic analysis of media representations describes gender role portrayals in particular countries (Ford, Voli, Honeycutt and 1998) or media outlets (Reese, Whipple and Courtney 1987), and diachronic analysis presents evidence of women’s shifting occupational roles (Ferguson, Kreshel and Tinkham 1990; Zhou and Chen 1997). Studies of inappropriate gender stereotypes and advertising effectiveness (Jaffe and Berger 1994) emphasize negative effects on consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers such as children and teens, likely to be harmed by gender stereotyping (Browne 1998; Macklin and Kolbe 1984; Maynard and Taylor 1999). Interestingly, research by Klassen, Jasper and Schwartz (1993) was the only study in the sample that examined images of both men and women portrayed together in advertisements.

Many researchers have followed Kassarjian’s proposal to examine depictions of blacks in advertising (Bristol, Lee and Hunt 1995; Motley 1995; Stevenson and Swayne 1999; Williams, Qualls and Grier 1995). In addition, new themes of minority underrepresentation or misrepresentation now include Asian-Americans (Taylor and Lee 1994) and Hispanics (Wilkes and Valenci 1989), reflecting the growth in minority immigration in the past two decades. Some articles develop more complex representational benchmarks by treating the racial composition of models along with their social and occupational roles (Stevenson 1991; Taylor and Stern 1997). Most recently, researchers have broadened the scope of inquiry by analyzing consumers’ responses to ads targeted to different cultural groups (Grier and Brumbaugh 1999). Further, content analysis of portrayals of the elderly—an age group likely to be “disappeared” in advertisements—reflects the aging of the population as the baby-boomers grew older (Carrigan and Szmigiel 1999; Peterson and Ross 1997; Swayne and Greco 1987; Ursic, Ursic and Ursic 1986).

Cultural values depicted in popular culture and other media follow the original suggestion that future research should branch out from analysis of more traditional media (novels, magazine...
articles, advertisements) to more ephemeral ones such as comic books (Belk 1987), underground “comix” (Spiggle 1986), bumper stickers (Stern and Solomon 1992), and so forth. In spite of this progress, advertising remains the dominant source of data, for only a few studies examine the cultural values depicted in such long-established sources as magazine articles (Homburg and Pfleger 2000; Olson 1995) and novels (Friedman 1985). The themes in these studies tend to be the negative values associated with a commercialized society and the unintentionally negative ones in media targeted to the young. However, a new positive theme is the increase in ecological and environmental “green” advertisements, following the socio-cultural concern that arose in the 1980s when the public was made aware of the consequences of worldwide pollution and depletion of resources. New themes have arisen, such as types and prevalence of green appeals (Carlson, Grove and Kangun 1993; Peterson 1991), their structural characteristics (Iyer, Banerjee and Gulas 1994), strategic goals (Banerjee, Gulas and Iyer 1995), and tactics used to construct messages (Carlson, Grove, Lacznak and Kangun 1996). Related themes include evaluation of the accuracy of environmental claims (Polonsky et al. 1998) and consumers’ perceptions of green issues (Zimmer, Stafford and Stafford 1994).

From the late 1980s on, articles about value changes across space, time, and media began to appear, extending the original themes both spatially and temporally. The theme of changing representations of time and timesteps relates to that of gender images, with women’s time-impoverishment a new development (Gross and Sheth 1989). Other changes in consumer values are also content analyzed, including those depicted in advertisements for a single product such as automobiles (Tansey, Hyman and Zinkhan 1990), an entire industry, especially tobacco and cigarette ads (King, Reid, Moon and Ringold 1991), and advertising itself in a newly Westernized country (Zhou and Belk 1993). Single country studies of value appeals consider advertisers’ adoption of new values (Lill, Gross and Peterson 1986), the shifting incidence of specific social values such as achievement and motivation (Zinkhan, Hong and Lawson 1990), and the character of a nation’s value system (Hetsroni 2000).

Changes in values across countries in terms of themes such as globalization, Westernization, standardization, and similarities/differences between cultures are also associated with economic changes in the 1990s. Among such changes are the rise of Pacific Rim nations as world-class competitors, rapid growth in developing nations, and ongoing debate about economic alliances, most recently, NAFTA. American advertising is compared to that of longtime trading partners like Japan (Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan 1987; Javalgi, Cutler and Malhotra 1995; Mueller 1992) or the United Kingdom (Cutler and Javalgi 1994) and emerging partners including China (Cheng and Schweitzer 1996), Korea (Cho, Gentry and Cropp 1999) and Taiwan (Zandpour, Chang, and Catalano 1992). Multi-country comparisons offer additional insight into different nations’ advertising styles (Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996; Graham, Cutler and Javalgi 1992; Karmins and Oetomo 1993).

Changes in values in persuasive messages across different media vehicles are associated with the rise of product placements since 1982, when sales of Reese’s Pieces rose 70% after being featured in E.T. Themes of placement effects of covert persuasive messages—those embedded in entertainment or educational vehicles—occur in studies of brand placements in television programs (Avery and Ferraro 2000); brand associations with major television characters (Way 1984); alcohol and tobacco product placements in soap operas (Diener 1993) or magazine articles (Ford, Ringold and Rogers 1990); and brand placements in curricular materials for classroom use (Rudd and Buttolph 1987). New interest in the ethics of placements reflects the success of product embeds at a time when the effectiveness of advertising persuasiveness is being questioned.

2: Content Analyses of Personal Communications

The most innovative change since 1977 is the addition of personal communications—consumer-generated and employee-generated verbal protocols—as new data sources. Nonetheless, expansion of the source is rooted in early conceptualizations of “content” by Berelson, Kerlinger, Holsti, and Lasswell, which Kassarjian summarizes as “the communications that people have produced” (Kerlinger, in Kassarjian, p. 9). What has occurred is a broadening of the concept of “verbal and symbolic behavior” encoded in written and spoken language (p. 8) now taken to include analysis of language in real-life communication. The thematic subcategories based on the data sources are consumer-generated and employee/manager-generated responses to open-ended or survey questions.1

A: Consumer-generated Data.

Latent and manifest meanings encoded in consumers’ thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about media representations, especially advertisements, are related to the study of media documents themselves. For example, themes such as consumer ad comprehension (Mick 1992), brand associations (Bijmolt, Wedel, Pieters and Desarbo 1998; Curlo and Lerman 1999), and aspects of the decision-making process (Miyazaki, Langenderfer and Sprott 1999; Palan and Wilkes 1997; Reynolds and Gutman 1988) link stimuli to response effects in boundary-spanning research that connects the field of consumer behavior to that of advertising. Once the consumer’s words became the object of interest, themes such as the nature of consumer responses to the real-world consumption environment as distinct from responses to media representations reveal themes about shopping experiences and retailing. For example, consumers have been asked about their impressions of retail stores (Zimmer and Golden 1988), buying impulses (Roock 1987), unmet shopping needs (Lambert 1979), salesperson role performance (Harich and LaBahn 1998), gift-giving (Goodwin, Smith and Spiggle 1990; Mick and DeMoss 1990; Mick, DeMoss and Faber 1992; Ruth, Onies and Brunel 1999), and attachment to irreplaceable possessions (Grayson and Schumann 2000).

B: Managerial/Employee-generated Data.

In the second category, data sources include employee- and manager-generated protocols as well as consumer verbatims. Themes related to the consumption environment are commonly found in service industry research, where the critical incident technique (CIT) is used to generate consumer and employee responses about satisfaction/dissatisfaction with service processes (Bittner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Goodwin, Grove and Fisk 1996; Grove and Fisk 1997; Williams and Burns 1994), brand switching (Keaveney 1995), negative (positive) word of mouth (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster 1998), and complaining behavior (Davidow and Dacin 1997; Garrett and Meyers 1996; Stephens and Gwinner 1998). Manager-generated data can be found in the supply chain, sales management, and marketing strategy literature, which includes themes such as relationships with channel partners (Bello and Williamson 1985; Gundlach and Cadotte 1994), effective team

1Content analysis of verbal data is also called “protocol analysis” and “discourse analysis,” terms that are used interchangeably even though they are not identical.

3: Content Analysis of Research Impact

The original focus on disciplinary text has broadened into the increasing use of content analysis to examine marketing literature. Since the mid-1980s, journal articles and SSCI author citations are used as data for the purposes of identifying current “where we are” knowledge, research trends over time, and publication quality. In this way, the original theme of research readability has been expanded to include the impact of the discipline’s scholarly output (Oliva and Reidenbach 1985; Tripp 1997; Ward, Klees and Wackman 1999), individual contributions to research (Holbrook 1992; Jacoby 1995; Passadeos, Phelps and Kim 1998), and journals (Tellis, Chandy and Ackerman 1999; Yale and Gilly 1988). The theme of authorial “impact on the field,“ especially popular in the tenure and promotion process, is found in articles that present citation analysis of various authors’ works, often considered a proxy measurement for determining an author’s contribution to knowledge. Knowledge synthesis is also advanced by means of topical literature reviews (Teybje 1979; Varadarajan and Ramanujam 1990) and meta-analysis of research findings (Farley, Lehmann and Ryan 1981; Ryan and Barclay 1983).

4: Advances in Content Analysis Methodology

The post-1990s emergence of methodological articles revisits the how of content analysis, especially the controversial matter of reliability. Kolbe and Burnett (1991) examined the problems of reliability and validity in 1978-1989 research; Hughes and Garrett (1990) proposed a generalizability theory approach to apportion variance based on raters and coding conditions; and Finn and Kayande (1997) demonstrated additional benefits of improved reliability assessment. The methodological shift is reaffirmed by a 1995 content analysis of articles published in the Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly that identified the most frequently studied issues as “data representativeness, reliability, and validity” (Riffe and Freitag 1997, p. 521). The common theme is the method itself, with evaluative articles that examine adherence to the original guidelines stating that content analysis methodology “must be objective, systematic, and quantitative.” (Kassarjian 1977, p. 9, italics in original) and/or propose improvements in the calculation of intercoder reliability. Among the topics studied are the difficulty in coding “fuzzy data” (Varki, Coool and Rust 2000); the development of computer programs to calculate measures of intercoder reliability (Kang, Kara, Laskey, and Seaton 1993); and a warning the unreliability of communication content as a measure of effects on consumers’ knowledge, attitudes, or behavior (Cohen 1989).

5: Qualitative Methods: New Frameworks

After the Consumer Odyssey in 1987, articles began to appear in which qualitative methods adapted from other disciplines were used to derive new typologies. Most of these articles can be categorized as “pre-content analysis,” for new frameworks and themes were proposed for future content analysis, but no data sources were themselves content analyzed. Among the methods proposed were textual analysis, found in sources such as literary criticism (Stern 1989), semiotics (Holbrook and Grayson 1986), and rhetoric (Bush and Boller 1991), and ethnographic analysis, found primarily in ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), but also in sociology and anthropology (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Greco and Swayne 1992). The purpose of these articles was to build grounded theory inductively by examining the data first and then introducing new frameworks for generating categories and developing coding schemes. For example, Stern’s articles on textual analysis of advertising offer directives to identify the formal properties of persuasive communications such as the type of company person who speaks the message (1988a) or the allegorical conventions that underlie the message (1988b). These papers also exemplify the use of techniques to study latent as well as manifest content, another noticeable change. Interpretive techniques have been used to explore experiential aspects of consumption, identify thematic dimensions, and synthesize information into new frameworks (for a review see Spiggle 1994 or Stern 1998). Qualitative research aims at building innovative coding schemes for use in future content analyses. Comparisons between content analysis and other methods such as rhetorical analysis, syntactic analysis, degrees-of-freedom analysis, or the nominal group technique focus on methodological differences between quantitative and qualitative analysis (Claxton, Ritchie and Zaichkowsky 1980; Wilson and Woodside 1999).

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, this study’s investigation of content analysis research themes indicates that Kassarjian’s original themes served as a framework for expanded topical domains over time. Findings show that the current framework has been enriched by sociocultural and disciplinary changes such as the emergence of new themes, data sources, qualitative methods, disciplinary self-reflexiveness, and renewed interest in quantitative examination. Rather than discarding the original themes, researchers have applied them to new situations, and we found no articles that challenged the original questions. Hence, the study provides empirical support for the claims that Kassarjian’s article served as a benchmark for later thematic research and that the method remains a vital addition to the researcher’s tool kit.

Many research opportunities lie ahead, for the categories can be further enriched by the new themes, data sources, and media that arise in a rapidly changing environment. In the sociocultural category, for example, emergent topics as well as neglected ones await future researchers. Among the under-studied themes are political advertising, values in newly capitalist countries, theme-media relationships, and new media advertising. New ones surface regularly, such as the shrinking economy, an increase in minority populations, and the upsurge in patriotism after the terrorist attacks. So, too, do new media, including but not limited to the Internet, which provide fertile grounds for research on themes relevant to unexplored data types such as banner ads, chat groups, and edutainment; readily available data sources such as digital archives of print and TV ads; and legal or ethical issues such as privacy laws, content regulations, or ethical codes for research.

New synergies between qualitative methods and personal data sources also pave the way for innovative multi-method research that combines content analysis of textual stimuli with more accurate measurement of consumer response effects. Qualitative studies that adapt literary and language theory to advertising messages have led to greater awareness of executional or formal elements, allowing researchers to construct advertising stimuli free from confounds and to measure their effects empirically (Riffe, Lacy and Fico 1989). The confluence between qualitative analyses and empirical testing is likely to accelerate theory development by enabling researchers to derive theoretically grounded hypotheses testable in...
experiments that elicit open-ended responses. The future of content analysis as a technique adaptable to research on themes as yet unthought of is bright, for the method’s limits still seem to be “only the limits of the ingenuity and creativity of the consumer researcher” (Kassarjian 1977, p. 16).

SELECTED REFERENCES
The complete list of references could not be published due to space restrictions. They are available from Professor Mulvey’s website: http://public.management.uottawa.ca/~mulvey/