RESEARCH NOTE

USING THEMATIC ANALYSIS IN TOURISM RESEARCH

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This research note uses a case study approach to illustrate when and how to apply thematic analysis as a tool to interpret empirical material in tourism research and suggests a variety of research contexts in which its use may be appropriate. The case study demonstrates the value of thematic analysis in understanding and unpacking a body of rich, descriptive media text (such as magazine articles, social media, and marketing material). This note also establishes that thematic analysis can be successfully used with visual material, taking intertextuality into account to facilitate a well-balanced interpretation of underlying cultural meanings. A further strength is the ability to produce graphic representations of the analysis, which then provide a suitable structure for discussing the findings. Using research carried out on second-home articles in a New Zealand magazine from 1936 to 2012 to illustrate the process, a step-by-step description of how to apply thematic analysis to written and visual text is provided. It also provides a set of criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of the research output, and as such is a valuable guide to carrying out a rigorous thematic analysis of texts in a variety of tourism research contexts.

Key words: Thematic analysis; Visual text; Media; Tourism; Second homes

Introduction

Qualitative thematic analysis is a widely used tool for interpreting written text in disciplines such as psychology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), yet it remains relatively uncommon in the field of tourism studies where content analysis is more frequently used (Page, Steele, & Connell, 2006; Schellhorn & Perkins, 2004). Certainly, and with specific regards to tourism research, Hannam and Knox (2005) recognize the value of thematic analysis (which they term “textual analysis” and consider under the rubric of discourse analysis) for its ability to unpack the inherent cultural meanings in written text.

The most frequent use of thematic analysis in tourism research has been its application to the interpretation of written documents such as interview transcripts. Recent examples include Higham and Cohen (2011) and their study of climate change beliefs, and Lipkina (2013) in her work on motives for foreign second-home ownership. Pitkänen (2011) applied the method to an analysis of newspaper text.
designed to uncover how the media represent second-home meaning in Finland, while Collins and Kearns (2010) analyzed interviews and official documents for deeper meanings relating to landscape values in New Zealand. However, in many of these studies there is little detail about how the analysis was actually carried out, thereby possibly creating the impression that the method is “ad hoc” and lacking in rigor and validity. Accordingly, this may work to lessen the perceived usefulness of the method itself.

This research note seeks to redress this perception of thematic analysis, showing it to be a versatile tool that may be effectively applied to tourism research in a variety of situations. First, it shows that thematic analysis may be particularly useful where interpretation of both written and visual text is required, such as research using newspapers, magazines, advertising brochures, or social media. Second, it demonstrates its suitability in situations where a concept is cloaked in linguistic ambiguity and/or is subject to social, cultural, and temporal variation, such as the study of meanings of place or representations of leisure. This research note uses media representations of luxury in the context of second homes in New Zealand as a case study to illustrate its effective application in these situations. Using examples, a comprehensive step by step guide to conducting thematic analysis with both written and visual text is provided. Finally, criteria are suggested to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, to allay potential criticisms, and ensure studies using thematic analysis are (issue of terminology notwithstanding) academically rigorous and valid (Decrop, 2004).

Background

Unfortunately, paradigmatic and methodological considerations are rarely addressed in academic journal articles on the basis of space restrictions, leaving the reader wanting (Creswell, 2013). Here, an in-depth discussion of the case study is provided to give the reader an understanding of the conditions under which thematic analysis may be appropriately and usefully deployed.

Research Objective and Philosophy

The objective of the case study was to critically examine media representations of luxury in the context of second homes in New Zealand, which firstly necessitated a deep reflection on what constituted luxury. It is a dynamic notion that defies rigid definition; luxury is culturally and socially specific and changes through time (Berry, 1994). This subjective nature of luxury instinctively suggested a rich emotive and evocative (experiential) content to both the written and visual text that would somehow resist capture sufficiently through quantification. Luxury could potentially be represented as tangible (physical) or intangible (sensual) and portrayed through both written and visual text. For example, the tangible may include descriptions and images of architectural form, fixtures and furnishings, or artworks. The intangible may be depicted through images using warm lighting to suggest a sense of luxuriousness or through carefully styled table settings laden with gourmet foods.

Luxury may be implied through the language used; words such as stylish, quality, sumptuous, comfortable, opulent, designer, convenient, exclusive, or tasteful may all be used as synonyms. In addition, rich descriptive prose may evoke a sense of luxuriousness by painting a word picture that results in the reader feeling desire or imagined pleasure. Given these conceptualizations of luxury, it is perhaps not surprising that an interpretivist research paradigm was adopted for this study; the research was carried out within a relativist ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a hermeneutic methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Empirical Material

The source of empirical material was the architecture and lifestyle magazine *Home New Zealand*, and the analysis involved the interpretation of a total of 266 second-home articles from its inception in 1936 to 2012. The nature of the material dictated three main factors that assumed importance in determining the most appropriate method for the subsequent analysis. First, the gathering of material from the magazine lead to two forms of “data” that needed to be interpreted—written text and visual text—therefore it was important that the method should be able to be applied with equal rigor to both, and allowed for the intertextuality that naturally occurs in articles comprised of both written and visual text. Images are usually viewed
built from the conceptual framework of the study and occurrences are then counted; these coding categories may be quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture of both, according to the research objective (Dann, 2005; Page et al., 2006; Stokowski, 2011; Timothy, 2012). The resultant frequency counts are subjected to statistical analysis, which in a positivist tradition are held to be rigorous, replicable, and valid (Rose, 2007; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011). Again, the interpretivist research paradigm adopted for this study, in combination with the inductive approach sought, suggested that content analysis would not be an appropriate means of addressing the research objective.

Thematic analysis may be conducted in a variety of ways (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and it is sufficiently flexible to allow for the inductive, latent, interpretive qualities desired here. Furthermore, its ability to be adapted for use with visual text in addition to written text means it is able to echo the process of reading a magazine article, where both written and visual text contribute to the overall impression and meaning interpreted by the reader (Ahuvia, 2001). For these reasons, thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate method to address the research questions. A further strength is its use of web-like diagrammatic networks, providing a valuable graphic representation of the themes and the relationships between them (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These networks then become a tool for reporting the findings, allowing the reader to understand how the text was interpreted (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Conducting Thematic Analysis of Written and Visual Text

By amalgamating two best practice models suggested by Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006), a series of six phases were identified in conducting the thematic analysis (Fig. 1). Sather-Wagstaff’s (2011) method of conducting a qualitative discourse-centered thematic analysis of visual material was also used to guide the adaptation of the technique to suit visual as well as written text. Although this process map is presented as a linear progression, the arrows in Figure 1 indicate that in reality thematic analysis is an iterative and recursive process entailing constant moving back and forth between the phases—as with any hermeneutic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Creswell, 2013).
Equal consideration was given to the visual and written text throughout; meaning the way in which the analysis was carried out reflected the natural process of reading the magazine.

Phase One: Initial Reading of Texts to Gain Familiarity

Each of the 266 articles featuring second homes from Home New Zealand magazine and its predecessors was initially read through to gain an understanding of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Early thoughts and preliminary points of interest surrounding representations of both tangible and intangible luxury were noted down in a reflexive journal. For example:

“Mark of distinction”—intangible, carries connotations of exclusivity and luxury.

Considering the enjoyment any family would get from [a portable BBQ] the cash outlay would be well justified. Barbecue “tools” are an asset too.—so I take this to mean they are a luxury, based on the need to justify the outlay, and also the need to call the tools an “asset.”

Temporal changes were also noted as they were discerned, such as this noted in the 1980s:

The text is increasingly creating word-pictures of luxuriousness, describing the “sun streaming through the windows,” the “rich glow” of timber, the “gentle harmony” of the second home and its surroundings.

Phase Two: Repeated Readings to Code Texts

In the coding phase of the analysis, articles were examined for similarities and differences with previous articles. Recurring words, the ideas they represented, and any emotions the articles evoked (thereby capturing both affective and semantic connotations) were coded and recorded in a matrix (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Anomalies, missing elements, contradictions, and discrepancies were also considered to be valuable data, and were coded accordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each subsequent reading of the texts brought new insights, which in turn warranted a further round of reading to ensure as many codes as possible were generated across the entire data set (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The coded extract illustrates this phase in the process (Table 1). Just over 800 codes in total were identified from the written text of the articles. During this phase, the coding of the visual text was carried out simultaneously (Table 2). These codes tended to be longer and more descriptive as they were attempting to code what was visible within the images, plus the rooms shown and objects present in the images (Sather-Wagstaff, 2011). As with the written text,
THEMATICS ANALYSIS IN TOURISM RESEARCH

important that it is not hurried (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Throughout the analysis process the reflexive journal was used, recording the nature and rationale of decision making as the recurring words and data extracts were translated into codes, and as these were subsequently translated into basic themes. This aided with rigor and ensured that the application of the codes was consistent throughout the coding process.

Phase Three: Development of Basic Themes

The codes were consolidated into basic themes by collating together all codes that seemed similar

| Table 1 |
|---|---|
| Three Examples of Extracts From Written Text of Second-Home Articles Showing Coding |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract From Second-Home Articles</th>
<th>Coding of Extracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With its wide views of snowcapped peaks and rolling pasture, all-day sun, and elevated position it was just the environment [a city couple] sought for a retreat that would transport them far from their normal experience of seaside living.</td>
<td>(1) Wide mountain and rural views (2) Sun (3) Retreat (4) Escape “normal” life (5) Contrast with everyday home environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately inside the front door, a breezy double-height walkway can be opened to a sheltered courtyard containing a smooth lawn and a pool... they wanted to have the family living area upstairs, enabling them to view the whole beach with the added benefit of privacy.</td>
<td>(1) Breezy double-height = sense of spaciousness (2) Shelter from wind (3) Swimming pool [beachfront property] (4) Views of the whole beach (5) Benefit of privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because privacy wasn’t an issue, the expansive views immediately cried out for glass, glass, and more glass on the remaining three sides.</td>
<td>(1) Privacy not an issue (2) Expansive views (3) Extensive use of glass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 2 |
|---|---|
| Three Examples of the Descriptions and Coding of Visual Text in Second-Home Articles |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Image</th>
<th>Coding of Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo of comfortable leather lounge suite, rug, large abstract art on one wall, all in warm golden tones due to the macrocarpa floors, walls, ceiling, exudes a real feeling of luxury in its warmth and unclutteredness, as though you just want to sink into the leather and relax.</td>
<td>(1) Comfort (2) Artwork (3) Warm golden tones (4) Uncluttered (5) Relaxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden hills as the backdrop, large rural second home, stone clad, roaring fire in the lounge, outdoor table set with grapes and cheese with wine glasses/bottle overlooking a vast (unpopulated) view of yellows, greens, and blues of hills and pasture, sun shining in a blue sky, just makes you want to be there relaxing on the terrace.</td>
<td>(1) Golden tones (2) Warm roaring fire (3) Gourmet food/wine (4) Views (5) Relaxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master bedroom at night with the lights on seems very sumptuous with a [designer] light shade and richly embroidered duvet, all exuding warmth in tones of cream and gold.</td>
<td>(1) Warm lighting (2) Sumptuous feeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phase Five: Derive Global Themes and Networks

Additional, deeper analysis of the organizing themes at a higher level of abstraction revealed overarching global themes that could be derived from them, while maintaining their internal homogeneity and mutual exclusivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The global theme could be seen as the conclusion or main tenet of an argument, with the organizing themes providing support and illustration (constructed through the basic themes) for reaching the conclusion (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The basic themes, organizing themes, and global theme could be visually depicted as a thematic network; here, the two organizing themes described in Phase Four contribute to the thematic network surrounding the global theme of “the luxury of the second home” (Fig. 3).

This phase was iterative and organic, and involved a “going back and forth” between the codes, the basic themes, and the organizing themes until a cohesive argument was made for each global theme (there may be more than one), such that they could be defined and named (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase Six: Describe, Explore, and Analyze Networks

Deriving the global theme and placing it at the center of the thematic network provided a visual tool for describing, exploring, and analyzing the empirical material in a way that was transparent and easy to understand. Vivid examples of both the written and visual text were selected for their

Figure 2. A graphic representation of the organizing theme “the luxury of the site” with its contributing basic themes.
analyzed in this way, then drawn together and the thematic network summarized.

Ensuring the Trustworthiness of the Research

Many have noted the criticisms of positivist researchers towards qualitative research on the basis of a lack of objectivity, generalizability, and
The organising theme titled ‘the luxury of the site’ was identified from the earliest issues of Home New Zealand magazine and continued throughout the decades of publication. It contributed significantly to the global theme of the luxury of the second home through three basic themes: the setting, the views, and privacy. The setting of the second home was frequently described in a way which evoked a sense of exclusivity and luxury, and was evident from the early years of the publication:

Has a setting worthy of a James Fitzpatrick travel talk (‘A holiday home on the shore of Lake Rotomai’, Home and Building, May 1951, p. 25)

This cottage is about a hundred feet from the water’s edge on one of the finest inland lake beaches in the North Island (‘A lakeside cottage planned for easy holiday living’, Home and Building, March 1955, p. 27)

Few of the articles specified the exact location of the second home, instead giving a general region as in the second extract. While the magazine was no doubt protecting the privacy of the second home owners, this further worked to enhance the impression of the exclusivity and luxury of the site. Additionally, the frequent use of words such as ‘perfect’, ‘sumptuous’ and ‘spectacular’ all influenced the perception of the second home setting as both luxurious and a luxury. The overwhelming majority of second homes featured in the magazine were located on the coast and the evocative language used conjured up images of an idyll for the reader to aspire to:

The location is an almost too-perfect distillation of the New Zealand beach ideal... hills that hug a gentle beach shrouded in pinetrees (Hansen, Home NZ, Dec/Jan 2007/08, p. 78)

It is hard to imagine crafting a better outlook: sandy beach and quarried trees in the foreground, sheltered water and pleasant little bush-clad islands in the midground, and a far view across the bay to layered ridges and a glimpse of open ocean to the east. Yet there is another prospect just as enticing inland, to a soft green valley with ponds and planting, giving onto ridgelines stacked up in the afternoon haze (Cheshire, Home NZ, June/July 2010, p. 72)

The perception of luxury of the coastal setting was due in no small part to the association with exclusivity and premium prices such a limited commodity commands (Collins & Kearns, 2008). In New Zealand, the coast has traditionally been viewed as democratic and accessible to all (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Freeman & Cheyne, 2008). Over the last decade though, the popular media discourse has articulated (or provoked) public disquiet in response to rising property prices and increasing waterfront property development. Headlines alluding to the perceived change to a less democratic (more exclusive and elite) New Zealand coast over the last decade include:

Fright for the beaches (Watkin, 2005)
The Great New Zealand Coast Grab (Barber, 2005)
Waterfront boom claims more coastline (Henderson, 2003)

Indeed, recent academic literature has contended that coastal property in New Zealand, especially in second home destinations, has become an elite setting (Collins & Kearns, 2008; Freeman & Cheyne, 2008). It has been noted that the popular media commentary on the injustice inherent in the unaffordability of the ‘average New Zealander’ to afford a second home in these locations and avoids the politically-charged questions around affordability of primary housing for permanent residents who may often be on lower incomes (Collins & Kearns, 2010; Freeman & Cheyne, 2008). Privileging the (leisure) needs of one sector of society over the (housing) needs of another in this way alludes to the exclusive nature of the coastal second home setting.

Figure 4. Analysis of the basic theme of “the setting” is presented to illustrate the process of constructing the argument from the outside (basic theme) in.

criteria for judging rigor and validity (Decrop, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Issues of terminology notwithstanding, there have been various attempts by qualitative researchers to establish criteria for qualitative inquiry, which allow the trustworthiness of the research to be ascertained (Creswell, 2013; Decrop, 2004). Credibility, applicability, dependability, and confirmability are cited as the qualitative equivalents of the quantitative constructs of internal and external validity, reliability, and
objectivity, respectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where: credibility refers to the truthfulness of the findings; applicability deals with whether the findings are able to be transferred to a different setting or group; dependability is associated with the consistency and reproducibility of the findings; confirmability refers to how neutral or objective the findings are.

With specific regard to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) note a number of pitfalls that can result in poor quality work, and provide a checklist of criteria to ensure that the analysis has been conducted rigorously (Fig. 5).

If these criteria are followed and a rigorous thematic analysis is conducted as a result, notions of credibility, applicability, dependability, and confirmability should be largely addressed.

Conclusion

This research note illustrates both a detailed procedure for conducting qualitative thematic analysis and its application to a contemporary tourism issue. The case study has shown thematic analysis to be a rigorous and valid means of analyzing tourism texts that incorporate written and visual elements, particularly where it is recognized that the meaning or significance of the whole may be more than the sum of its parts. The case study also demonstrated the suitability of thematic analysis to the interpretation of a slippery, complex, and dynamic concept exhibiting temporal variation; in this case the concept of luxury (Berry, 1994). The comprehensive step by step guide to conducting thematic analysis with both written and visual text, supported by examples, will be of use to tourism researchers searching for a detailed description of a method suited to the analysis of both forms of text.

Explicitly situating the case study and the use of thematic analysis within the context of both the researchers paradigm and the research objective is a further valuable contribution—often the decisions and ramifications surrounding the nature of the research objective (and the researcher’s paradigmatic approach to addressing them) go unacknowledged in the tourism literature (Jennings, 2009). By doing so, this research note promotes and strives to achieve transparency in the research process in order to allow the reader to understand and appreciate the chain of inquiry (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Finally, it is hoped that the provision of criteria to ensure that the method is applied with rigor and credibility will assist tourism researchers to conduct best-practice thematic analysis that enhances the reputability of both the research and the researcher.

This research note illustrates that the application of thematic analysis may be appropriate and valuable in tourism research where: (a) descriptive passages, narratives, and visual text form the empirical material for interpretation; and (b) unpacking the latent cultural meanings in the material is important. Media representations of various cultural dimensions of the tourism phenomenon provide a particularly

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Figure 5. Checklist of criteria (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
rich avenue for the use of thematic analysis, as demonstrated by this case study, yet to date it has been underutilized. The strengths of thematic analysis lie in its ability to deal with such material in a way that ensures the richness and nuances of the context may be retained, and in its diagrammatic representation of the findings, which provides a useful framework through which to structure the discussion.

Note

1This magazine has had a number of title changes since its inception in 1936 as follows: Building Today, October 1936; Home and Building Today, July 1937; Home and Building, November 1937; New Zealand Home and Building, Issue 1 1976; New Zealand Home and Entertaining, February 1999; Home New Zealand, October 2007 to present.

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