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QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH  
PRESENTATION

**“Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User”**

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LIBR 285 – Prof. Luo

Good evening, I'm Erica and I'll be presenting a critique of this qualitative research study: "Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User," by Dr. Paul Conway.

## + Research Question & Context

**#1 Seeing Images:** “How to the visual aspects of digitized photograph archives influence the choice of images for a given purpose?”

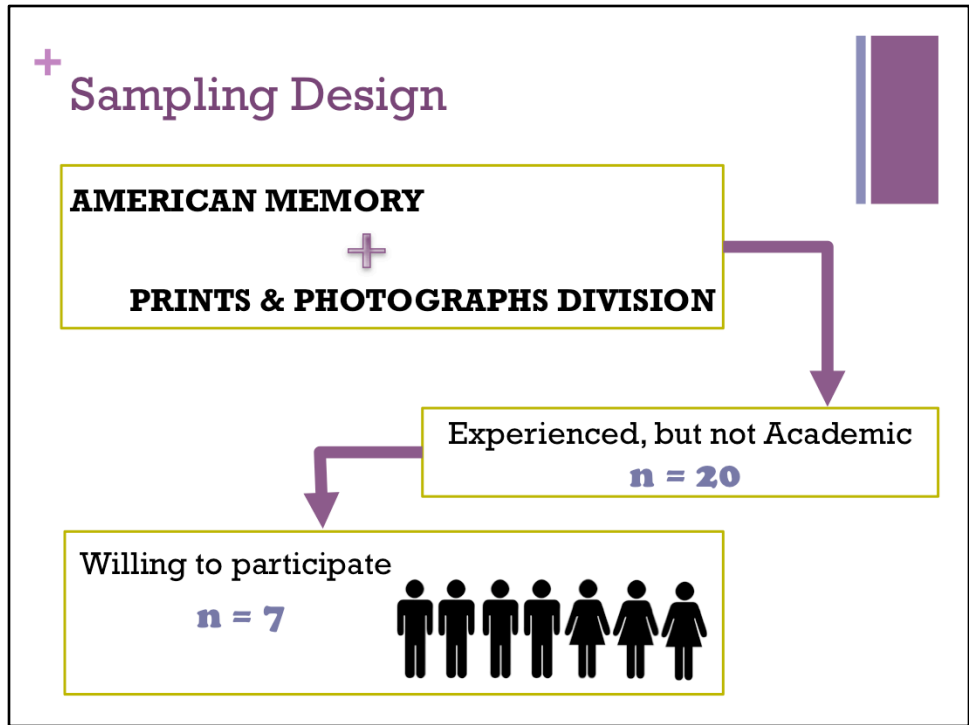
**#2 Seeing pictures:** “What is the relative importance of the technical characteristics of digitized photograph archives in determining the choice images for a given purpose?”

**#3 Seeing Archives:** “To what extent do the archival properties of digitized photograph archives and the underlying photographic sources influence the choice of images for a given purpose?”

(Conway, 2010)

In this study, Conway was curious to explore how the increasingly widespread practice of digitizing photographic collections is affecting the relationship between archivists, their collections, and their users. He posed the three questions listed here, and used an inductive theoretical framework to design his research around them. The first question, “Seeing Images,” refers to the content of a photo, while the second question uses the term “pictures” to refer to the technical manifestation of the photo. Overall, you can see that Conway wants to understand how visual, technical, and archival (or metadata) designs influence the user’s experience with a digital photo collection.

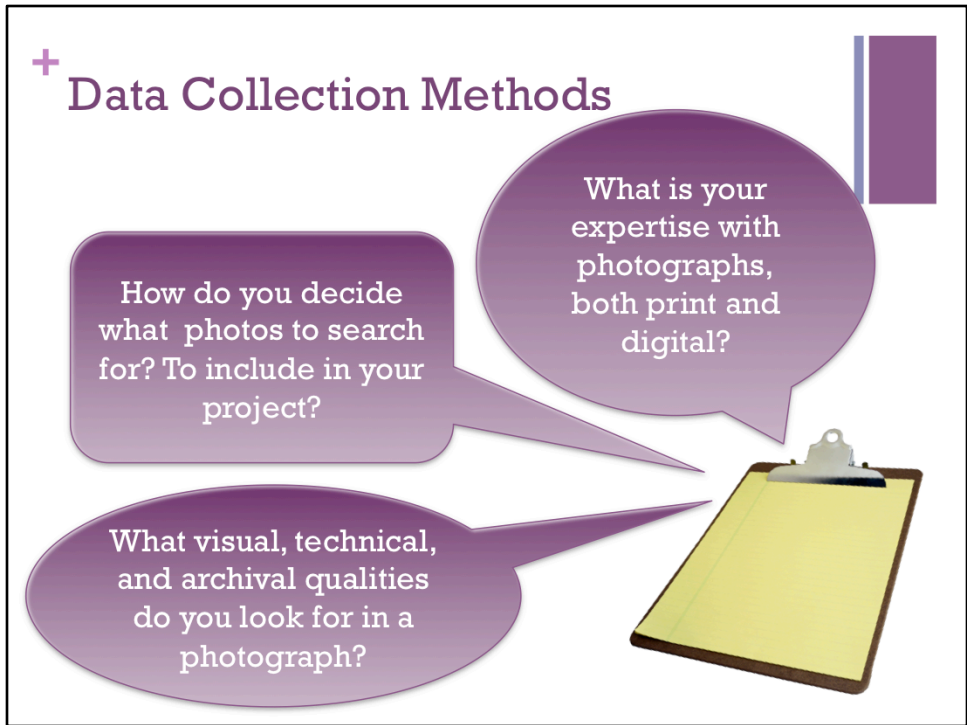
This is an important study because while archival literature has covered topics such as retrieval effectiveness, for the most part digitization and its effects on archives is not well understood. Conway points out that despite this, archives have almost uniformly accepted digitization as a number one priority for progress, when it really began as an experiment and still has very little theoretical backing. This study strives to form the beginnings of a theory that will help archivists understand the “representational implications of their digitization process.”



Conway chose to address his research questions with a series of independent case studies. His sample population came from users of the Library of Congress’ online collections: the American Memory Project, with 9 million digital images, and the Prints and Photographs Division Online Catalog, with 1.2 million images. Only drawing from one database helped Conway control for variables such as interface design, image processing, and metadata models.

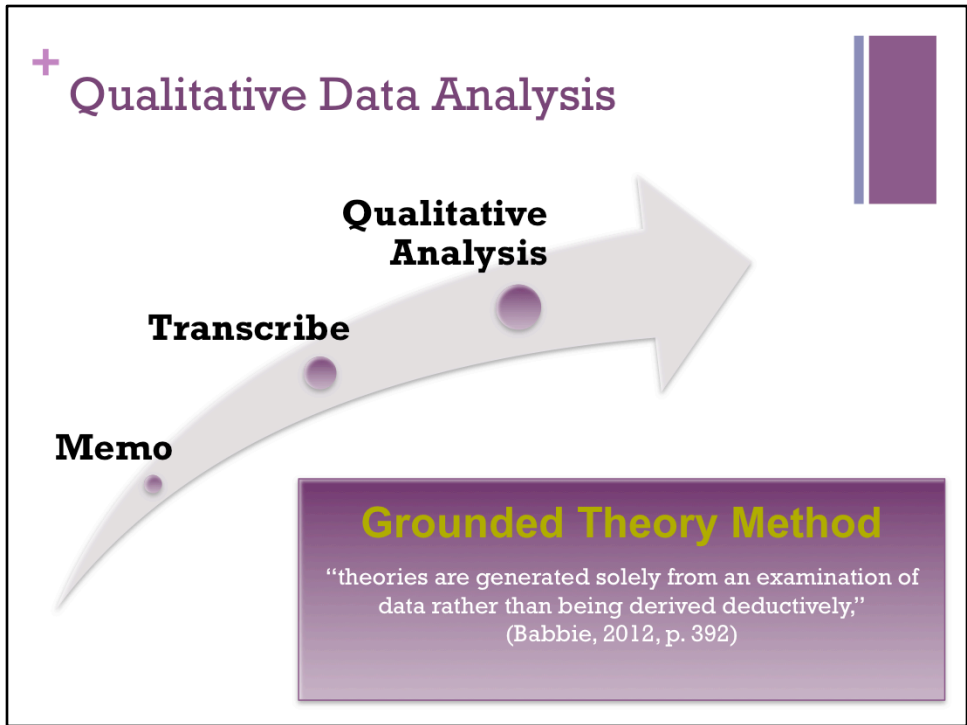
However, this sample population did not include all users—Conway wanted to interview experienced, but not academic, users. So he asked LOC curators for a list of individuals who were utilizing either or both of these digital collections to produce a tangible product that was likely to credit LOC (e.g. book, article, online exhibition, etc.). The original list had twenty suitable individuals, and from these, Conway contacted all twenty by email, and narrowed down to seven research participants, depending on their willingness. This sampling method is not random at all, but is appropriate for an inductive study, where the hypothesis will be formed, rather than tested, through the research process.

As you can see here, the final seven participants varied widely in terms of demographics, education, and occupation (3 female, 4 male. 30-67. 4 Bachelors, 2 Masters, 1 PhD), however, none were professional archivists or academics.



A PhD student conducted the seven phase one phone interviews; each was approximately 45 minutes long, and was recorded and later transcribed. During these initial interviews, the PhD student introduced Conway’s research project, and solicited information about the participant’s background training, experience, and LOC-related project.

Conway himself conducted the second phase interviews face to face at each participant’s location. Prior, participants received a 1-page interview protocol describing topical areas and the sequence of questions. The second phase interviews lasted anywhere from 1.5 to 4.5 hours, and were semi-structured around three components: First, a self-assessment of expertise with photographic materials and digitized photographs. Second, the participant’s overall decision-making strategies for his/her project. And third, an assessment of visual, technical, and archival properties of individual digitized photographs. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, resulting in 309 pages of text.



Conway went through a three stage process to get to his qualitative data analysis, as you can see on this slide. After each interview, he wrote a memo documenting the context of the interview, as well as his initial thoughts. After all seven were complete, the recordings were transcribed and prepared for qualitative analysis. Here, Conway used open coding in an iterative, line-by-line extraction of concept terms. Open coding was particularly important for his analysis because each of the seven participants used slightly different terminology, which wouldn't fit well into a pre-defined code construct. As he coded, Conway was able to use the grounded theory method to identify emergent theories and develop a testable hypothesis from his interview data.

## + Research & Personal Conclusions

**#1 Seeing Images:** Use based on relevant data within and emotions elicited; digitally-enhanced zoom is a huge benefit.

**#2 Seeing pictures:** Technical limitations and source format can pose issues. Users distinguish between needing original or digital surrogate.

**#3 Seeing Archives:** The value of archives comes from use—and digital archives are used. Digital, more so than physical, collections need to be associated with a trusted institution.

It is important to remember that an inductive study such as this one has no predictive power for the general sample population. That said, Conway's conclusions offer raw material to develop a use theory for digital visual archives.

In answer to his original three research questions, Conway found that in terms of the photo content, i.e. the image, his sample population appreciated images based on the relevant data they contained, as well as the emotions they elicited. One user reported that the digital zoom on online images was an invaluable tool for finding unintentionally included data, such as a background address or person.

In terms of the picture, or the technical image, Conway found that users distinguished between times they needed the original and times when the digital surrogate would be more appropriate. His interviewees also said that technical limitations—such as insufficient resolution, poor navigation and page turning, and inflexible tools for zooming, rotation, juxtaposition, manipulation, etc.—were problematic and could interfere with the experience of using the image. Likewise, non-single source formats, like photo albums, posed findability issues.

Finally, Conway found that overall his participants thought of digital archives much the same as physical ones, with the added caveat that because the images are digital surrogates, trust is a much more prominent factor. Several participants mentioned that digital archival trust came from a trustworthy host institution, such as the Library of Congress.

Interestingly, none of the seven interviewees discussed retrieval effectiveness, which was previously the only area in digital visual archives that had been researched. Conway speculates that by focusing on quantitative data, these earlier studies missed an opportunity to gain insight into users' needs, and that future digitization efforts and research must remember to take into account user expectations beyond the technical presentation.

My take home message from this article is that qualitative research, while seemingly less empirical than quantitative research, is an invaluable tool for accessing the human side of a field. While quantitative research can provide percents and error margins, qualitative research is no less rigorous in providing insight into a sample population's thoughts, opinions, and experiences.



## REFERENCES

Babbie, E. (2012). *The practice of social research* (13th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Conway, P. (2010). Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User. *American Archivist*, 73(2), 425-462.