



# A new form of analysis based on explicit and implicit "suggestions" within the context of qualitative research

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## **Abstract** (150 words or fewer)

*Suggestions are a vital yet often overlooked form of qualitative data, offering direct insight into how research participants envision change, improvement, or alternative possibilities. Despite their practical relevance, little methodological attention has been given to their identification and interpretation. This paper introduces a new form of qualitative analysis designed to recognize, extract, and analyze suggestions—both explicit and implicit—within participant narratives. Grounded in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, this method treats suggestions as socially meaningful acts. A specific process is outlined which guides researchers from familiarization to interpretation. Especially suited to applied contexts such as hospitality and tourism, this form of analysis enables the generation of actionable insights, offering a structured yet flexible approach contributing both at a theoretical and practical level.*

**Key Words** *Qualitative research, Analysis; Suggestion analysis*

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## Introduction

A wide range of analytical approaches—such as thematic analysis, sentiment analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis—have long been used to interpret qualitative data. These methods are effective for uncovering patterns and recurring themes in participant feedback, user comments, and interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2024; Drisko and Maschi, 2016). However, a common limitation that may come across is the tendency of such methods to focus on what is being described or felt, rather than what is being proposed. A crucial category of communication—suggestions—is frequently grouped together with general opinions, perceptions, or experiences, and thus risks being overlooked. Suggestions may appear indirectly or subtly—embedded within broader commentary or expressed through indirect language—making them hard to pinpoint. This creates a significant blind spot, particularly in contexts such as hospitality and tourism, where change, innovation, and continuous improvement is expected (Zhang, 2025; Xiang et al., 2021). This underscores the need for a distinct form of analysis, specifically attuned to recognizing, extracting, categorizing, and interpreting these valuable communicative acts. As such, this theoretical study with its analytic methodological nature positioning, builds on the premise that new methodological and analytical approaches can contribute significantly at both practical and theoretical levels (Morgan and Nica, 2020).

## Positioning suggestion analysis within a research paradigm context

Despite their frequent appearance in qualitative datasets, suggestions are often treated as peripheral, instrumental, or reducible to other analytical categories. In many qualitative studies, they often appear in sections labelled “recommendations” (Sanip, 2020), without a consistent or rigorous method for identifying or interpreting them. In response to this, a new form of analysis specifically targeting suggestions, may offer a more context-sensitive and meaning-oriented approach. It begins from the premise that suggestions are not just isolated statements, but expressions shaped by the speaker’s values, intentions, lived experiences, and the discursive environment in which they are embedded. Besides, their significance has been well recognized at a personal, organizational, and societal level (Bekhterev, 2017; Michael et al., 2012). By providing a structured yet interpretive way to examine such contributions, this form of analysis can assist researchers uncover the transformative potential of suggestions—particularly in fields where stakeholder engagement, such as tourism, are central.

A distinct form of analysis which bases suggestions in its core, requires that we firstly examine what suggestions entail. For the purpose of this paper, suggestion analysis is defined as a qualitative analytical method designed to identify, interpret, and categorize suggestions within qualitative data. A suggestion in this context, is perceived as a forward-looking communicative act in which an individual expresses what could or should be done to improve a current situation, solve a perceived problem, or imagine a preferred alternative. Even so, to fully comprehend the nature of suggestion analysis, an ontological and epistemological insight is deemed important. This is a crucial aspect, in any proposed method of analysis (as in, Braun and Clarke, 2006). In a suggestion-based form of analysis, the ontological position treats suggestions as meaningful communicative acts through which individuals express how they believe situations could or should be improved. Suggestions are socially constructed expressions of perceived possibilities, subjective and shaped by personal experiences, values, and intentions. They describe not how things are, but how someone thinks they *ought* to be.

Epistemology, in turn, concerns how knowledge of that reality is produced (Kuhn and Weinstock, 2012), while in the case of suggestion analysis, an interpretivist epistemology is most appropriate. It focuses on the meanings participants assign to their experiences and how those meanings are communicated. Interpretivism emphasizes that meaning is mediated by language, context, cultural assumptions, and meaning that people assign to things and experiences (Ocean et al., 2022). The meaning of a suggestion is not fixed or universal—it depends on how, why, and in what situation it is expressed. Suggestions are therefore more than simple feedback; they are epistemic resources that reveal what individuals value, desire, or envision as change. Grounded in this epistemological stance, suggestion analysis seeks to interpret—not just extract—these expressions, uncovering their depth rather than reducing them to surface-level content. Table 1 presents a comparison of suggestion analysis with other key forms of qualitative analysis, including its ontological and epistemological positioning.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Suggestion Analysis with other key qualitative analysis methods

Aspect	<b>Suggestion Analysis</b>	Thematic Analysis	Content Analysis	Sentiment Analysis	Discourse Analysis
<b>Primary Focus</b>	Forward-looking, actionable ideas expressed explicitly or implicitly	Patterns of shared meaning relevant to the research question	Systematic categorization of manifest or latent content	Emotional valence and attitude in text	How language constructs social realities, identities, and relationships
<b>Key Unit of Analysis</b>	Suggestions as socially situated communicative acts (e.g., proposing change)	Themes representing underlying concepts across the dataset	Words, phrases, concepts, or categories in the data	Sentiment polarity (positive, negative, neutral) or intensity	Discursive acts, positions, and interactional context
<b>Ontology &amp; Epistemology</b>	Constructivist ontology; interpretivist epistemology—meanings shaped by context and participant intentions	Flexible	Can be positivist (quantifying content) or interpretivist (analyzing meaning)	Primarily positivist; computational linguistics foundations	Constructivist/poststructuralist—meaning as socially constructed in discourse
<b>Identification Approach</b>	Actively searches for explicit/implicit suggestions (e.g., by using linguistic cues and contextual interpretation)	Iterative coding and theme development from the entire dataset	Systematic coding rules; may involve counting frequencies or mapping concepts	Automated or manual classification based on (e.g.) sentiment lexicons	Examines power, ideology, and identity
<b>Data Treatment</b>	Categorizes and interprets proposals for change; reflects on relationships between categories	Groups data into themes to interpret meanings and patterns	Summarizes and categorizes textual or visual data for pattern detection	Labels emotional tone rather than interpreting deeper meaning	Analyzes structure, function, and implications of language use
<b>Strengths</b>	Directly generates actionable insights; captures participant-driven innovation; adaptable to applied/practical contexts	Highly flexible; rich depth of meaning; widely applicable	Handles large volumes; adaptable to mixed methods	Fast for large datasets; good for trend monitoring	Reveals hidden power relations, cultural assumptions
<b>Limitations</b>	Narrow-specific focus; potential inconsistency; may underrepresent voices without explicit suggestions	Risk of producing vague themes; less inherently action-oriented	May strip away nuance; less suited to deeply contextual meaning	May miss context-specific meanings	Highly interpretive; less suited to producing direct practical recommendations

(source: author)

### Steps to follow in suggestion analysis

A step-by-step process for suggestion analysis is proposed, that takes the form of a guide, similar to other studies of analogous direction and scope (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Mayring, 2021; Jensen et al., 2022). This process treats the entire dataset as a field of potential suggestions—not limiting analysis to responses to specific questions (e.g., “Do you have any suggestions?”) but actively identifying and interpreting suggestions wherever they emerge. It recognizes that participants often make suggestions indirectly or implicitly, through reflections, frustrations, comparisons, or imagined alternatives. It should be noted that computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo, MAXQDA, or Atlas.ti can support the following process of suggestion analysis by enabling systematic identification, categorization and visualization of suggestions across large datasets (Silver and Lewins, 2014). Also, AI-driven tools—either embedded within these platforms or used alongside them—can furthermore assist in this process, given the dynamics presented by AI technology within the context of qualitative analysis (Christou, 2023).

### ***Step 1: Familiarization with the data***

The first step in suggestion analysis is familiarization with the data, which mirrors the initial phase of other forms of analysis, such as content or thematic analysis, where researchers aim to develop a feel for the data before engaging in more focused coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Even so, in the context of suggestion analysis, familiarization serves a more specific purpose: to attune the researcher to the diverse and often subtle ways that suggestions may be expressed across the corpus. A central challenge of this stage lies in the fact that suggestions are not always stated directly or overtly. Participants may express recommendations indirectly, rather than by explicitly stating what “should” be done. For example, a statement like, *“The lectures were hard to follow, especially in the first weeks. It might have helped if we had a short summary video each week,”* includes a reflective observation followed by a softly phrased suggestion.

### ***Step 2: Identification and extraction of suggestions***

Whereas the first step emphasized gaining a holistic understanding of the dataset’s broader contexts and narrative flows, this phase shifts toward analytical precision, involving the careful detection and documentation of each instance in which a participant offers a suggestion—whether overtly or subtly embedded within their discourse. Suggestions may appear explicitly, through clear directive or propositional language (“They should...”), but more often they are expressed implicitly, couched in hypothetical, conditional, or modal phrasing (“It might help if...”). A major challenge in this phase is discerning the boundary between descriptive commentary and forward-looking suggestion. To address these challenges, researchers can adopt certain strategies, such as, to develop a flexible yet rigorous set of linguistic cues—such as modals (“might,” “could”), conditionals (“if...then”), or suggestive verbs (“recommend,” “propose”)—as heuristics to guide the extraction process. This step transitions the researcher from broad immersion into targeted analytic action, marking the beginning of transforming raw data into interpretable insight, setting the stage for deeper exploration and categorization.

### ***Step 3: Categorization of suggestions***

This phase helps make sense of the full set of suggestions by organizing them into categories that reflect common concerns or ideas. For example, in a study one participant (student) said while describing the first semester of university said, *“It would’ve made a big difference if we’d had a clearer orientation to the system in the first week. I spent hours just figuring out how to submit assignments.”* Another noted, *“Someone needs to walk us through the platform—not just send a PDF and expect us to figure it out.”* Even though these are worded differently, they are both asking for “better support at the start”—and could be grouped together. However, this step can also be challenging because suggestions often overlap or fit into more than one group. A single comment might include a new idea, fix a problem, and try to prevent future issues all at once. In those cases, we may need to make a judgment about what the main point of the suggestion is—or choose to include it in more than one group. It is also helpful to go back to the original quotes and ask: *What exactly is this person hoping will change?* and *How is this similar to what others have said?* This process is flexible and reflexive. As we group suggestions, we might notice new patterns, or realize that some of our early groupings do not make sense anymore. We can change, combine, or split groups as our understanding of suggestions deepens.

### ***Step 4: Reflecting on the categorizations***

This phase of reflection helps ensure that the analysis remains true to the data in its full complexity—not just to the parts where participants responded directly to questions that asked for suggestions. This step involves revisiting the dataset as a whole to make sure that the categorizations are still doing justice to the range and richness of participants’ suggestions—including those that were expressed indirectly or perhaps woven into broader reflections of perceptions, beliefs, or experiences. This is also an opportunity to consider how different types of suggestions relate to one another—not just within each categorization, but across them. Some suggestions might challenge or contradict others, or reveal tensions in what different participants want.

### ***Step 5: Interpretation and presentation***

Interpreting qualitative data is a pivotal aspect of qualitative inquiry (Willig, 2017). This phase implies going beyond listing or describing suggestion categories, and beginning to ask: What do these suggestions reveal about the participants' experiences, and priorities? How do they respond—directly or indirectly—to the central questions of the research? And what might they contribute to practical change or theoretical insight? Essentially this step combines presentation and interpretation. It begins by clearly explaining each suggestion category—what kinds of suggestions it embraces, and why it matters. This includes using direct quotes from participants, while the aim is to analyze what these categories mean in the context of the study. One effective way to present the findings is to walk through the categories one by one, outlining the range of suggestions within each and explaining how they relate to broader patterns in the data. Where helpful, the analysis can also be supported by a visual format such as a matrix or conceptual diagram—tools that help illustrate relationships between categories, the types of change being proposed, or the different levels at which suggestions are directed (e.g., individual, institutional, structural). This phase should also bring the analysis back to the main aim of the research. For instance, if the study was designed to explore how tourists experience and make sense of remote heritage sites, the question now becomes: How do these suggestions reveal what visitors felt or experienced at the site? What do their suggestions tell us about what they felt was missing, poorly managed, or worth improving? In this way, suggestions become more than just practical feedback—they offer insights into how people interact with a place, what they value, and how they believe their experience could have been different. This kind of interpretation helps show how participants' suggestions are shaped by, and respond to, the broader setting and purpose of the research.

This is also the stage where the analysis may begin to contribute to practical implications and/or theoretical development, depending on the goals of the research. In fact, this is perhaps one of the greatest advantages of suggestion analysis: because the analysis of the data reveal participants' own ideas for change, while naturally lending itself to actionable outcomes. Unlike other forms of qualitative analysis that may require an additional step to translate insights into practice, suggestion analysis produces findings that are already oriented toward informing policies, guiding service redesigns, or shaping future programming.

### **Strengths, applicability, and limitations**

One of the core strengths of suggestion analysis rests in its unique focus on forward-looking, action-oriented expressions embedded within qualitative data—which may be overlooked by traditional analytic approaches. Its structured yet interpretive process is particularly well-suited for qualitative studies that aim to generate actionable insights, especially in applied, evaluative, or participatory contexts. It is valuable in evaluative research that gathers feedback on services, programs, or interventions. It also aligns well with participatory and co-design approaches, where participants contribute actively to shaping outcomes. Additionally, suggestion analysis can be applied in studies focused on lived experience, including phenomenological or narrative inquiries, by drawing specific attention to how participants envision meaningful change. In policy-relevant or reform-oriented research, it may provide a structured way to extract participant-driven suggestions that can inform decision-making. Nevertheless, it comes with certain limitations. The process of interpreting what qualifies as a "suggestion"—particularly when dealing with implicit or indirect language—requires significant judgment and contextual sensitivity. This makes the approach vulnerable to inconsistency or bias if not conducted reflexively. There is also the risk of flattening complex narratives into simplified categories of action, particularly when producing outputs designed for practical use. Moreover, not all research questions are well-served by this method; in studies where meaning, identity, or symbolic expression are the focus, suggestion analysis may be too narrow or pragmatic. Finally, the emphasis on forward-looking ideas could inadvertently marginalize participants who do not offer suggestions—either because they feel disempowered or because their critique lies not in proposing solutions but in naming systemic problems. To mitigate these limitations, researchers should engage in ongoing reflexive practice, revisiting the original data to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' language and context, and to document decision-making transparently especially when identifying and categorizing implicit suggestions.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to introduce suggestion analysis as a distinct form of qualitative analysis. Unlike existing approaches that often focus on describing experiences, emotions, or patterns of meaning, suggestion

analysis brings attention to participants' own ideas for change. These suggestions, whether expressed directly or subtly, represent a powerful yet often overlooked form of data. By outlining its conceptual foundations, methodological steps, and practical applications, this paper has positioned suggestion analysis as both a rigorous and adaptable approach. Rooted in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, it treats suggestions not as isolated statements, but as socially situated acts of meaning-making. The five-step process—from familiarization through interpretation and presentation—provides a systematic way to engage with suggestions in all their forms, whether explicit, or embedded in broader narrative accounts.

One of the greatest strengths of suggestion analysis lies in its immediate relevance to practice. Because the data itself consists of proposals for change, it lends itself naturally to informing policies, shaping programs, or improving services. This makes it especially valuable in applied fields, such as tourism and hospitality, where stakeholder input is essential. Ultimately, suggestion analysis expands the researcher's analytic lens—not only to what is, but to what participants believe *could be*, hence contributing to direct, rich, and actionable recommendations for change or improvement.

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