

# Using Visualization and Text Mining to Improve Qualitative Analysis

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**Keywords:** Qualitative Analysis, Coding, Feasibility Study, Visualization, Experimental Software Engineering, Empirical Software Engineering.

**Abstract:** Context: Qualitative analysis is a scientific way to deeply understand qualitative data and to aid in its analysis. However, qualitative analysis is a laborious, time-consuming and subjective process. Aim: The authors propose the use of visualization and text mining to improve the qualitative analysis process. The objective of this paper is to explain how the use of visualization can support the Coding in multiple documents simultaneously, which may allow codes standardization thus making the process more efficient. Method: The Insight tool is being developed to make the proposal feasible and a feasibility study was performed to verify if the proposal offers benefits to the process and improves its results. Results: The study shows that the subjects who applied the proposal got more standardized codes and were more efficient than the ones who applied the process manually. Conclusions: The results derived from the use of visualization and text mining, even in a feasibility study, encourage proceeding with the project, which aims to combine both techniques to obtain more benefits on qualitative analysis conduction.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

According to Basili, “*The only way to discover how applicable a new method, technique, or tool is in a given environment is to experiment with its use in that environment*”. (Basili et al., 1996). Considering it, one of the essential steps of any scientific research is its evaluation, for obtaining results and clarifying its contributions and limitations.

The evaluation of a scientific research should apply a scientific method, adopting procedures for planning, collecting and analyzing research data. In general, these procedures are related to the different kinds of experimental studies as surveys, case study and controlled experiment (Wohlin et al., 2000).

For the data analysis step both the qualitative and quantitative analysis can be applied. The major differences between these methods are the type of data – usually, text for qualitative analysis and numbers for quantitative analysis – and the procedure to draw the study conclusions.

For qualitative analysis, the basic procedure to analyze data begins with the labelling of relevant excerpts of the collected data, with the purpose of identifying the differences and similarities among

them. The labels, called *codes*, shall facilitate the identification and interpretation of the relevant excerpts, called *quotations* (Hancock, 2002). After this procedure, called Coding, new or complementary information about the studied object can be acquired.

However, as mentioned by Seaman (2008), “*qualitative analysis are sometimes boring, often tedious, and always more time-consuming than expected*”. When the amount of data is large, the qualitative analysis process can be slower and more tedious, inducing to relaxation of the label definition criterion (coding), loss of relevant excerpts for the study, or definition of different codes for similar excerpts, which may affect the conclusions on the data and consequently, the evaluation of the study.

Even though qualitative analysis is a method usually applied by researchers from the medical and humanities areas, Seaman (2008) explains that the use of this method has been intensified in the software engineering area since the human behaviour can influence the use of the techniques of this area.

Seaman (2008) mentions that one of the advantages of using qualitative analysis methods is

that the researcher tends to get deeper into the complexity of the issues from her/his study and is not concerned with abstractions of the inquiry. Moreover, this type of analysis requires more effort compared to quantitative methods.

Considering the advantages of applying qualitative analysis in software engineering area and how difficult it is to apply this method when a study involves a lot of data, we propose the use of visualization and text mining techniques to support the qualitative analysis process. We expect that these techniques make the process easier, allowing the documents to be handled simultaneously, providing more consistent results, ie, quotations, codes and categories (which organizes the codes) more concise when compared to results obtained without the use of such techniques.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly presents qualitative analysis, Section 3 presents the proposal and Section 4 the feasibility study performed to evaluate it. Finally, Section 5 presents the conclusions and further works.

## 2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the qualitative research aims to understand a specific topic by means of descriptions, comparisons and interpretations of data, unlike to quantitative research, which uses numbers to understand a topic. Thus, qualitative research concerns a type of research in which the results are not achieved through statistical procedures, since the data is represented by words, pictures, videos, sounds, and not just numbers.

Coleman and O'Connor (2007) argue that while quantitative studies are concerned with questions like "How much?" and "How often?", qualitative studies are related to questions like "Why?", "How" and "In what way?". Somewhat, the authors' explanation highlighted that the research methods are complementary and if used together, might improve the research results.

Thus, this type of analysis can bring relevant insights for software engineering researchers. For instance, when two similar techniques are compared, knowing the reasons why one of them is more effective than the other may be more important than just knowing which one is most effective.

Seaman (1999, 2008) presents two sets of qualitative data analysis methods: Generation of Theory: methods used for generating hypothesis that

are grounded in the data. For instance, Constant Comparison Method and Cross-Case Analysis; and Confirmation of Theory: methods used to construct the "weight of evidence" that is necessary to confirm hypothesis. The goal of these methods is not to prove a theory. For instance, Validation, Triangulation, Anomalies in the data, Negative case analysis and Replication.

Though some of these methods could consider quantitative data analysis, to analyze qualitative data (usually textual data) the Coding technique is usually applied.

The Coding technique can be split in three steps (Seaman, 2008): (i) open coding: the researcher shall read the text looking for references about the research interest topic and shall insert labels (codes) to each relevant excerpt (quotation or quote); (ii) axial coding: the researcher shall cluster the codes and excerpts creating categories to better understand the data, and (iii) selective coding: the researcher shall reanalyze the codes and categories and elaborate a description that synthesizes the analyzed data.

Hancock (2002) describes the Coding technique as the following set of steps:

- 1) Read the textual data looking for excerpts (quotations) with relevant information and write a short note (code) that represents its topic;
- 2) Elaborate a list of all different codes;
- 3) Group the codes into categories that should represent the main topic related to the codes and elaborate a list of these categories;
- 4) If there are interrelated categories, create another category and define a hierarchy of categories;
- 5) Analyze and compare all categories, changing their position in the hierarchy and creating new categories if necessary;
- 6) Repeat steps 1 to 5 to all research documents;
- 7) Be sure that the excerpts tagged with the same code are interrelated;
- 8) Be sure that the categories, their hierarchy and all labels are representative;
- 9) Analyze possible relationships among the categories because they may suggest important insights about the research. This analysis should be performed after the certainty that all codes and excerpts are in the suitable categories;
- 10) Revise the documents taking the categories into account and look for excerpts not considered before but that now seem relevant.

As these steps suggest, the Coding technique seems an arduous activity and requires commitment

and skill of the researcher for analyzing qualitative data. When the Coding technique must be applied on a large amount of documents, problems may occur that can hamper or jeopardize the results:

- the process may be susceptible to relaxation of the coding criterion, because the researcher may start coding carefully, searching for implicit details in the text, and after a while he or she can become less detail-aware. Hence, relevant excerpts about the research may be lost in the last documents analyzed;
- different codes may be assigned to similar quotations once the documents may be analyzed at different moments. In this case the steps 7 and 8 may require additional effort.

Some software can support the researcher to conduct this activity, for example, NVivo ([www.qsrinternational.com](http://www.qsrinternational.com)), Atlas.ti ([atlasti.com](http://atlasti.com)), The Ethnograph ([www.qualisresearch.com](http://www.qualisresearch.com)) and SaturateApp ([www.saturateapp.com](http://www.saturateapp.com)). Moreover, some researchers have reported the use of spreadsheets (Gu, Lago, 2009) and documents or word processing software (Seaman, 1999).

Regardless of whether these software related to Insight tool are free or not, they offer many resources for supporting the Coding technique. However, they do not provide computational resources to facilitate the analysis of a set of documents simultaneously. Although the codes could be reused in different documents of the same project, finding excerpts correlated should be done exclusively by the researcher, a fact which does not avoid the problems mentioned before.

### 3 THE CODING SUPPORTED BY VISUALIZATION AND TEXT MINING

As mentioned before, the qualitative analysis allows exploring issues deeply, providing results and drawing more relevant conclusions for the research question. Considering the explanation presented in the last section the proposal here presented intends to make the qualitative analysis process more efficient (faster) and effective (better results).

Despite of the fact that qualitative analysis can also be applied on pictures and videos, the files frequently investigated are textual documents. As the codes are inserted in the documents under analysis, the researcher's goal is to find patterns, such that the data is grouped according to them,

aiming to understand and discover new information in an easier way.

Hence, considering the objective of the qualitative analysis and our intention of improving the process, the proposal is based on the use of two resources: (i) treemap visualization (Johnson, Shneiderman, 1991) to allow navigating on various documents at the same time, in order to jointly handle similar information contained in different documents; and (ii) text mining techniques to facilitate the search and identification of patterns in the documents (Feldman, Sanger, 2007).

We observe that our hypothesis is that processing many documents at the same time (combining the use of these techniques) can help to standardize the attribution of codes as well as make the activity more efficient.

Aiming to implement the proposal, a tool named Insight tool has been developing. Figure 1 shows the main screen of the tool where some parts are tagged.

To explain the proposal through the support available in the tool, let's suppose that there is a set of documents containing qualitative data to be analyzed. After defining the project identification (name, analysts and description), the documents should be inserted into de project.

Initially, each box of the treemap visualization represents a document. On the TreeMap setting area (Figure1-C), the user can modify the visualization - colors, labels and hierarchy - adopting a better hierarchy for the analysis (e.g. based on similar quotations).

To analyze and coding the documents using the resources currently available in the tool, the user must follow the steps:

- Identify and select a relevant excerpt, and create a label to code it. If appropriated, the option "*Apply this code for equal quotations*" will be labelled all the equal excerpts in all documents with the same code. Also, a code equal to the selected excerpt is created and stored;
- Insert a keyword from the excerpt or the whole excerpt in the Search area (Figure1-D). If other documents (boxes) become highlighted (blue border) in the visualization (Figure1-B), this means that they also have the searched text;
- Clicking on one of the highlighted boxes the correspondent document will be showed in the Coding area (Figure1-A) and the matched keyword or excerpt will be highlighted in the screen. ;
- After reading the excerpt in the context of this new document, codes previously created can be reused, promoting their standardization;

- If more than one document were highlighted, the user can process all of them at this moment, aiming to facilitate the interpretation of each excerpt and, consequently, the attribution of codes.

It is also possible to analyze and create a code based on the similarity of excerpts. Selecting the excerpt and choose the option "Mining this quotation", a new Treemap is showed and boxes which represents documents with similar excerpts will be coloured according to a legend that indicates their percentage of similarity. To determine the similarity percentage between the excerpt selected by the researcher (Insight user) and all the other documents the Frequency Vector and Cosine Similarity methods (Salton, Allan, 1994) are used.

Aiming to support the Axial Coding and Selective Coding (Seaman, 1999), the Insight tool allows grouping the codes by categories, and categories into other categories, without restriction

of levels. Moreover, a simple text editor is available for writing down comments, insights or a theory.

#### 4 FEASIBILITY STUDY

According to the empirical methodology for introducing software processes, presented by Shull, Carver and Travassos (2001), we performed a feasibility study to evaluate our proposal of using visualization for enhancing the Coding process.

The original Coding process was adapted by the introduction of visualization, providing facilities for dealing with various documents at the same time a document is being analyzed and codes are being defined. This way of dealing with documents may standardize the code definition and make the process more efficient.

In the following subsections the steps of the study are presented: Subsection 4.1 presents the

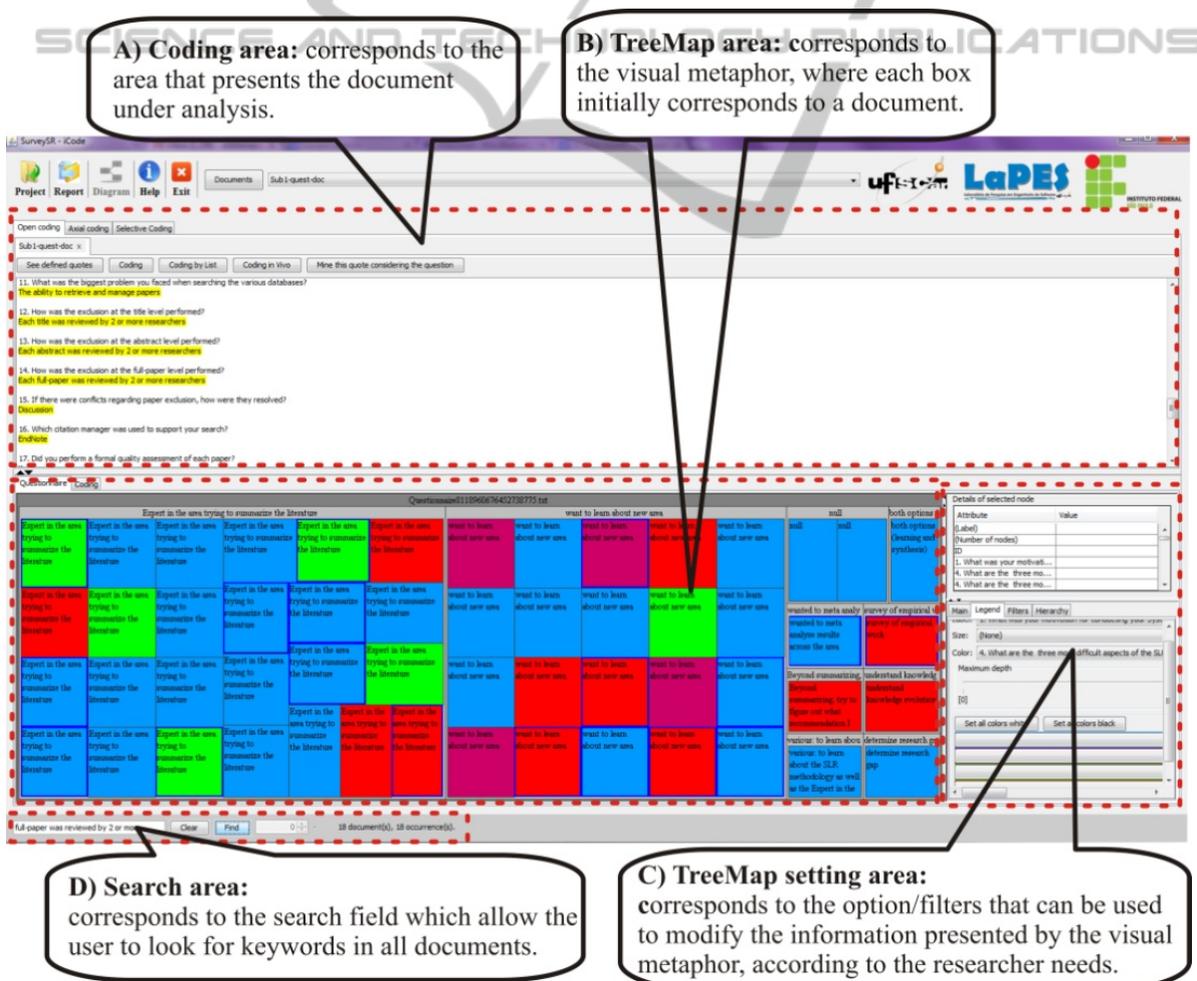


Figure 1: Main screen of the Insight tool.

identification, definition and planning of the study; Subsection 4.2 comments the study conduction; Subsection 4.3 presents the data analysis, results and discussion; and finally, Subsection 4.4 presents the threats to validity.

#### 4.1 Identification, Definition and Planning

The study was planned using the GQM template (Basili, Caldiera, Rombach, 1996), presented by Table 1.

Table 1: Goal of the feasibility study.

<i>Analyze</i>	the modified process for applying the Coding technique
<i>for the purpose of</i>	evaluate the feasibility of applying the process
<i>with respect to</i>	effectiveness (standardization of codes) and efficiency (time spent) in applying the Coding technique with the tool and manually
<i>from the point of view of</i>	Researchers
<i>in the context of</i>	MsC and Ph.D students

The artefacts created to this study were nine: lecture on Qualitative Analysis and Coding; lecture on the Treemap technique; lecture on the Insight tool, subject characterization questionnaire; a set of newspaper articles about the 2014 World Cup; feedback questionnaire; report form (for Group C); consent form and reference model of the Coding application

It is important mention that the reference model was elaborated manually by one of the authors and reviewed by another one, and was used just to compare the subjects' results. We emphasize that it was not considered as a correct version, but a version created by people who know the Coding technique more deeply than the subjects.

The study design was defined aiming to identify the effects of applying Coding in a set of documents according to two different procedures: analyzing various documents simultaneously using the Insight tool, and analyzing one document at a time. In the latter case, there were two possibilities – with and without the tool.

To select the subjects, a message was sent to an e-mail list of graduate students. One MsC. and five Ph.D. students have participated in the study as volunteers. A characterization questionnaire was applied aiming to define the groups. Table 2 summarizes the subjects' profile.

Based on the result of the characterization

questionnaires, the six subjects, labelled as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6, were distributed into the 3 groups. Group C is the control group since this option is the usual way to apply Coding and the other two groups – A and B – are the treatment groups since these options are the ones we want to evaluate. Table 3 presents the study design.

Table 2: Subjects' characterization.

Question	Wide knowledge	Little knowledge	No knowledge
1) What is your level of qualitative analysis knowledge (theoretical)?	P1, P2, P4		P3, P5, P6
2) What is your level of Coding technique knowledge?	P5, P6	P1, P2, P3, P4	
3) What is your level of Treemap visualization technique knowledge?	P5, P6	P1, P3	P2, P4
4) What is your level of Treemap tool knowledge?	P5,	P1, P3, P6	P2, P4

Table 3: Study design.

Group	Group A	Group B	Group C
<i>Subjects ID</i>	(P1 & P2)	(P3 & P4)	(P5 & P6).
<i>Way to conduct the Coding activity</i>	(Insight tool + simultaneous analysis);	(Insight tool + one document at a time)	(manually + one document at a time)

#### 4.2 Conduction

The study was carried out in two days. In the first day, an instructor (one of the authors) explained the purpose of the feasibility study, and got the subjects' agreement in the Consent Form. The subjects also have answered the characterization form. Moreover, the subjects of Groups A and B received training about the Insight tool and the Treemap technique to understand how the tool works and how visualization should be used for applying the modified process.

During the second day the Coding technique was applied by the three groups. The document set was composed of newspaper articles about the 2014 World Cup and the objective was to identify any topic highlighted in the articles. The subjects performed the activity in the same place and no communication was allowed among them.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

Aiming to verify if it is feasible to apply the Coding process dealing with many documents at the same time, the collected data was analyzed based on the

meaning of codes, the number of categories, codes and quotations, the time spent by treatment groups and finally, the qualitative analysis of the subjects' feedback questionnaire.

Moreover, a rate of number of quotations divided by number of codes was measured aiming to observe the consistency of defined codes. In other words, this rate means how much the codes were reused to label similar excerpts.

### 4.3.1 Analysis of the Subjects' Results

Considering that in the context of qualitative analysis it is not viable to argue that some result is wrong or better than another one, we analyzed the results of this study mainly from the semantic point of view.

The steps applied for analyzing the results were: i) tabulating the codes of subjects and the reference model; ii) based on the meaning, the codes of each subject were compared to the codes of the reference model to identify the ones that were interrelated and, iii) the coincidental codes were identified. Table 4 summarizes the results, showing the number of agreements and disagreements between each subject result and the reference model. Complementary data is presented in Table 5.

We highlight that every code defined in the reference version was also defined by at least one subject. Besides, five from the six subjects have more than 50% of codes semantically similar to the codes of the reference model. This suggests that the subjects understood the objective of the activity as well as the Coding technique.

In relation to the effectiveness, i.e., the standardization of codes, Group A presents the most standardized results, once the number of codes defined by its subjects (19 and 15) were the smallest ones, and the rate (#quotations/#codes) of subjects was similar (see Table 5). This information gives insights that analyzing the set of documents simultaneously, may facilitate the reuse of codes created by the user as the coding technique is executed.

The subjects of Group B presented the most different results in semantically (Table 4) and numbers (Table 5), when compared to each other. P3 created many codes but a number of categories similar to the others, except for P4 who created few categories. The subjects of Group C presented codes and categories similar in numbers, but a little different in meaning. Observe that this group defined few codes. Probably this occurs due to the fact that conducting Coding manually is a boring and laborious activity.

The number of codes is not a crucial data to qualitative analysis, unless the coding is being performed to transform qualitative data into quantitative data. However, comparing the codes defined by the subjects P5 and P6 with the codes of the reference model, we can observe that relevant information was not identified by them. This fact may jeopardize the final summary of the analysis.

The time spent by the Group C was higher than the time spent by the Groups A and B. This result was expected and corroborated the known information that applying the Coding technique manually is a laborious task.

Table 4: Summary of subjects' results.

Reference model (22 codes)	Group A		Group B		Group C	
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
# and % of agreements	13 59%	15 68%	12 54%	8 36%	13 59%	11 50%
# of disagreements	6	0	12	12	7	6

Table 5: Number of categories, codes and quotations and time spent by each subject.

Group	# Categories	# Codes	# Quotations	Quot./Codes	Time spent
GroupA - P1	8	19	40	2,1	0:40h
GroupA - P2	6	15	34	2,2	0:52h
GroupB - P3	7	24	80	3,3	1:16h
GroupB - P4	3	20	32	1,6	1:00h
GroupC - P5	6	20	24	1,2	1:30h
GroupC - P6	7	17	21	1,2	1:56h

Comparing the lowest and highest spent time by each subject, it can be noticed that Group A was about 55% more efficient than Group C and Group B was about 33% more efficient than Group C: Group A x C: (i) highest time - P2 was 55.56% more efficient than P6; (ii) lowest time - P1 was 55.18% more efficient than P5; Group B x C: (i) highest time - P3 was 34.49% more efficient than P6; (ii) lowest time - P4 was 33.34% more efficient than P5.

In summary, the time spent in conjunction to the result presented in the previous section shows that analyzing various documents as the codes are being defined is a promising approach that deserves the continuity of our research.

### 4.3.2 Analysis of the Feedback Questionnaires

After the Coding application each subject answered a short feedback questionnaire, according to the

participation group.

Question 1 was related to the use of the Treemap technique and according to the subjects, the use of it is useful to: (i) quickly identify the results of a search aiming to manage various documents simultaneously; (ii) help in the Coding application, aiming to visualize and reuse the codes that were previously created. These benefits mentioned by the subjects are in accordance with the intention of the authors' proposal.

Question 2 was related to the search functionality that combined with visualization helps the simultaneous analysis of documents. According to the subjects, this functionality was used all the time and helped to locate the excerpts in the documents and reuse the codes, promoting their standardization. Question 3 was related to the simultaneous analysis of documents. According to the subjects, the possibility to deal with various documents simultaneously also helps the reading of documents and the standardization of codes.

Question 4 was related to text mining functionality. According to the subjects, this functionality was used when a long quotation was identified and the participant wanted to check if there were any excerpt of similar text in which the same code could be applied.

Question 5 was related to the difficulties faced by the subjects who conducted the analysis manually. These subjects reported that the manual application of the Coding technique leads to the analysis of one document at a time, since dealing with all documents at the same time is hard. The main difficulties mentioned were the definition of different codes for the same topic and the difficulty to define the categories. Moreover, the functionalities requested by the subjects were to comb through relevant information in the documents, to prevent the definition of different codes for similar excerpt, and to aid the analysis of more than one document at the same time.

In summary, the analysis of the feedback questionnaire showed functionalities that should be inserted into the Insight project and that the search functionality combined with visualization provides evidences that the proposal is feasible and the project should be continued.

#### 4.4 Threats to Validity

Threats to validity are inherent to experimental studies, despite the experimental design. Then, according to (Jedlitschka, Ciolkowski, Pfahl, 2008), every study report should expose its threats.

In relation to the study presented in this paper, the authors could identify the following threats to internal, external and conclusion validity.

The topic to be analyzed can represent a threat to **Internal Validity** because the subjects may have different knowledge on it. Hence, to minimize it, the authors have chosen a set of documents about a generic topic - the 2014 World Cup. Although the newspaper articles do not represent a research domain, it was the way found to guarantee the same level of domain knowledge of the subjects.

We understand that the results can be different in a different sample of subjects. The subjects of this study were graduate students and most of them have little knowledge about Qualitative Analysis and Treemap technique, which is considered an threat to **External Validity**. However, considering the positive results even in this non-experienced group, we understand that the proposal can be considered as a benefit for this activity.

One of the challenges of this study was analyzing the coding results of each subject and characterizing the effectiveness of the proposal. For minimizing the risks related to the wrong application of the Coding, the authors have used for comparison a reference model, even though this comparison may be considered a threat to **Conclusion Validity**, since the comparison itself, as well as the reference version, are both subjective.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative analysis is relevant to software engineering considering that this area is a blend of technical and non-technical issues (Seaman, 2008) - the success of a process depends on the process and on who perform the process as well.

Despite the advantages that this kind of analysis can offer to researchers, its application is laborious, time consuming, error prone, and requires ability to be conducted correctly. These characteristics are emphasized when there is a large volume of data distributed in many documents. In addition, for conducting qualitative analysis, the main used technique is Coding, which, in general, is applied on a document at a time. This procedure makes the Coding application more difficult and leads to few standardization of the created codes.

Considering this context, to enhance the Coding application, we are proposing the use of visualization and text mining to allow that various documents are analyzed at the same time. This simultaneous analysis of various documents can

make the Coding application more agile and more standardized, because when a quotation is identified and a code is created, this action is evaluated on all the documents that are being analyzed.

Hence, this paper presented the concept of simultaneous analysis, explaining the steps that compose its application. The use of visualization and text mining makes the proposal feasible. To apply these techniques, a tool is indispensable and this is the reason why Insight tool is being developed.

Therefore, through an experimental study we explained the proposal and have conducted a first feasibility study.

In relation to effectiveness, the results of this study showed that *Group A* presented the most standardized and homogeneous results. This result gives insights that analyzing the set of documents simultaneously, may facilitate the reuse of codes. In relation to efficiency, the results showed that the proposal makes the Coding (qualitative analysis) procedure more agile than when this procedure is conducted manually, what was expected.

Based on the subjects' feedback questionnaire we drew evidences that the search functionality combined with visualization make the Coding activity easier, which may improve the qualitative analysis process.

Considering the experience of conduct this study, we can cite two lessons learned. First, the difficulty to analyze the subject's results, since in the context of qualitative analysis it is not appropriate to establish an oracle. Hence, we created a reference model for comparing the results, just to minimize the assumption that the subjects could apply the Coding technique in a wrong way. Second, in this study we required that the subjects extracted all relevant information contained in the newspaper documents; maybe, if we establish a specific topic for the Coding application (perspective), the analysis of the results could be easier and more precise.

Despite these questions, we consider that the proposal is feasible and promising. As future works we plan to conclude the development of the proposal through the Insight tool and make it available under the GPL license. Besides, we will explore the proposal in the context of experimental studies for analyzing the characterization form and feedback questionnaires and a study to compare Insight tool with Atlas.ti software.

In addition to these further works realized, the proposal has been used for analyzing primary studies in the context of secondary studies (Thematic Synthesis (Cruzes, Dybå, 2011)) and in the context of software inspection process for analyzing defects lists.

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