

Research Methods

Lecture Title:

Qualitative Data Gathering

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**Masters in
Human Resources Management**

Lecture Outline

- The value of qualitative data in HR research
- Different forms of qualitative data
- Data collected through observation and participation
- Data collected from individuals and groups
- Qualitative data from publicly available sources
- Visual data
- Sample size issues in qualitative research
- Making sense of the data



Qualitative HR Research Students

- There is no single “best” qualitative method.
- Each method has practical and analytical implications.
- Students must consider:
 - **Access** to participants
 - **Time** available
 - **Depth** and **type** of data needed
 - **Fit** between method and research question

The Value of Qualitative Data in HR Research

What Qualitative Data Is

- Information about **meanings**, expressed through **words, language or visual images**.
- Helps researchers understand **experiences, perspectives and interpretations**.

Why It Matters in HR Research

- Quantitative data shows **what is happening**.
- Qualitative data helps explain **why it is happening**, especially across different groups.
- Essential when exploring **people's experiences, motivations and behaviours**.

Key Advantages of Qualitative Data

- **Depth and Detail:** Provides rich, descriptive insight from the viewpoint of those involved.
- **Openness:** Allows new ideas, explanations and unexpected issues to emerge.
- **Giving Voice:** Respects people's own meanings and experiences rather than imposing fixed categories.
- **Groundedness:** Presents situations in participants' **own terms**, rooted in their real context.

Forms of Qualitative Data

- Qualitative data can be gathered **in person** or **digitally**.
- Different forms of data help answer different types of research questions.
- Choosing the right form of data is the first step in designing a strong HR research project.

Main Types of Qualitative Data

1. Observation and Participation

- In-person observation of people in real settings.
- Online observation or participation (netnography).

2. Interviews and Focus Groups

- In-person interviews or focus groups.
- Online interviews or focus groups using digital platforms.

3. Documents and Textual Data

- Digital sources: online repositories, websites, reports.
- Physical sources: books, archives, organisational records.

4. Visual Data

- Online: videos, photographs, artwork, digital media.
- Physical: printed photographs, film, artwork collections.

Working with Qualitative Data

- Qualitative data collection is often **emergent**, not fully standardised.
- Researchers must be **open-minded** and avoid imposing their own assumptions.
- Important to recognise your own **positionality** and how it may influence interpretation.
- Success depends on valuing participants' **own language and meanings**.

Why Use Observation in HR Research?

- Observation 'ethnography' allows researchers to **see behaviour directly**, not just rely on what people report.
- It can reveal **dynamics, interactions and patterns** that participants may not notice or may not mention.
- Provides opportunities for **reflection**, helping researchers think differently about the issues being studied.

Key Issues to Consider

1. Bias

Being present in the situation may influence what the researcher notices or records.

Important to reflect on how personal assumptions may shape interpretation.

2. What to Record

Observers must decide what behaviours, interactions or events are relevant. Clear focus helps avoid collecting unfocused or unusable data.

3. How to Record

Memory alone is not reliable.

Use structured notes, “memory sparkers”, reflective diaries or recordings (where permitted).

Records should be made **within 24 hours** for accuracy.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

- Observation must **never** resemble covert surveillance.
- Researchers must be **transparent** about their purpose.
- **Informed consent** is essential.
- Ethical approval and supervisor guidance is required before observing people at work.
- Being open about the research may influence behaviour, but it protects participants' rights.

Approaches to Participation and Observation

- Observation can involve **different levels of involvement** by the researcher as described in the following slides.
- The approach chosen must match the **purpose** of the research and be **ethically justified**.

Again: Transparency, planning and supervisor approval are essential.

Complete Participation

- Researcher becomes a **full member** of the setting being studied.
- Can occur through employment or online participation.
- Provides deep insight into everyday practices.
- Requires **full transparency** about the research purpose.

Participant as Observer

- Researcher's role as a **researcher** is **openly stated**.
- Researcher may also take part in activities (e.g., volunteering).
- Helps build **trust** and allows the researcher to ask questions.
- Often combined with **follow-up interviews** to deepen understanding.

Observer as Participant (Marginal Participation)

- Main role is to **observe**, but some interaction naturally occurs.
- Researcher may be present in informal spaces (e.g., break areas, online forums).
- Presence may influence behaviour, even unintentionally.
- Useful for understanding **informal culture and everyday talk**.

Complete Observer

- Researcher **does not participate** in the activity.
- Participants know they are being observed.
- Still difficult to avoid influencing behaviour simply by being present.
- Focus is on **watching without involvement**.

Key Considerations for Any Observation

- Must be **methodical**, planned and justified.
- Requires careful **recording** of what happens.
- Ethical protocols:
 - **Anonymity**
 - **Confidentiality**
 - **Informed consent**
- Researcher must reflect on how their **presence** and **positionality** may shape the data.



Types of Reflective Data

1. Primary Observations

Field notes made **during or immediately after** the event.

Jot-notes, diaries or journals.

2. Secondary Observations

How **others** who were present interpreted the event.

Gathered through brief conversations soon after the activity.

3. Experiential Data

Researcher's own **feelings, reactions and reflections** over time.

Helps identify how understanding develops during the research process.



Netnography

- Netnography is a flexible and powerful method for studying **digital work and HR practices**.
- It requires careful planning, ethical awareness and thoughtful interpretation.
- Can be used alone or alongside other qualitative methods to build a **fuller picture** of workplace experiences.

What Is Netnography?

- Netnography is a qualitative research approach used to study **online communities, behaviours and interactions**.
- It involves observing and analysing **digital spaces** where people share experiences, ideas and workplace practices.
- Especially useful in HR research where work is increasingly **remote, hybrid or digital**.

Why Netnography Matters in HR Research

- Digital work practices have created **new questions** about people management and employment relationships.
- Netnography helps researchers explore **how people experience work** in online settings.
- Offers insight into **corporate culture, communication and identity** in digital environments.



Forms of Netnographic Data

1. Archival Digital Data

Pre-existing online content (e.g., blogs, forums, social media posts).

Found in platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, YouTube.

Useful for analysing **workplace views and cultural patterns**.

2. Co-Created Online Data

Data generated through **online interaction** between researcher and participants.

Can be **synchronous** (live video calls, chats) or **asynchronous** (messages, comments over time).

Allows for **dialogue and shared meaning-making**.

3. Immersive Online Observation

Researcher **joins and observes** a specific online setting.

Generates **field notes and reflections** based on participation.

Helps answer research questions through **real-time or ongoing observation**.



Planning for Netnographic Research

- Think ahead about:
 - Time commitment
 - Ethical approval
 - Informed consent
 - Data recording and analysis
- Ensure the approach is **justifiable, respectful and productive.**

Recording and Piloting

Recording Data

- How will you **record** what you observe?
- Will your notes or recordings be **detailed enough** to support analysis?

Pilot Your Method

- Test your approach before starting.
- Observation cannot be repeated — **mistakes are costly.**



Using Interviews in HR Research

Why Interviews Are Common

- Interviews are one of the most widely used methods in HR research.
- They offer direct access to people's experiences, views and interpretations.
- Useful for exploring organisational issues in depth.

In-Person or Online

- Interviews can be carried out **face-to-face** or through **digital platforms**.
- Online interviews can increase flexibility and access to participants.

Importance of Participant Selection

- The value of interview data depends on **who you interview**.
- Participants must be relevant to the research questions.
- A well-chosen sample improves the quality and credibility of findings.



Planning the Interview Process

- Prepare carefully to ensure questions generate **rich and meaningful responses**.
- Think about:
 - the type of interview (unstructured or semi-structured)
 - the order and clarity of questions
 - how much time participants will need

Types of Research Interview

1. In-Depth Interview

- No (or very few) set questions.
- Interviewer takes a **non-directive** approach.
- Allows participants to lead the conversation.

2. Semi-Structured Interview

- Themes and questions are prepared in advance.
- Question order may vary depending on the **flow of the interview**.
- Balances structure with flexibility.

3. Structured Interview

- Uses **standardised, predetermined questions**.
- Questions asked in a **fixed sequence**.
- Suitable for comparing responses across participants.
- Note: Produces **quantitative not qualitative data**.

Example: Researching Hybrid and Office-Based Working

Research Focus

- Investigating why organisations adopt **return-to-office policies**.
- Exploring the **HR challenges** linked to these policies.
- Comparing **management views** with **employee perspectives**.

Chosen Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

- Interviews with **senior HR professionals** and **employees**.
- Allows for **flexible, in-depth exploration** of workplace experiences and decisions.
- Suitable for comparing **organisational reasoning** with **staff reactions**.

Value of Semi-Structured Interviews

- Allow exploration of **underlying themes** in remote and hybrid working.
- Enable **probing questions** to deepen understanding.
- Support **rich, detailed data** about experiences, feelings and motives.
- New insights can emerge as interviewees raise issues the researcher had not considered.



Challenges in Accessing Participants

- Organisations may **refuse participation**, especially on sensitive topics.
- Researchers may need to think creatively about recruitment (e.g., professional networks, online groups).
- Access issues can delay or reshape the research design.

Practical Issues with Online Interviews

- Recording tools can help, but **transcripts may be inaccurate**.
- Requires careful checking and correction of automated transcripts.
- Pilot interviews reveal the **true volume of data** generated.
- Large numbers of interviews can produce **overwhelming amounts of text**.

Time and Availability Constraints

- Scheduling interviews can be difficult, especially across **time zones**.
- Researchers must be **flexible** to accommodate participants' availability.
- Balancing personal commitments with interview times can be challenging.



Develop Effective Questions

- Clarify your **research objectives** and what the interview must help you discover.
- Identify the **key topics** you need to explore.
- Base your decisions on:
 - your **literature review**,
 - discussions with your **tutor**,
 - any **preliminary information** already gathered.
- Prepare several possible questions for each topic.
- Stay **flexible** in how you ask them.





Use the Right Question Types

Open Questions

- Encourage interviewees to **describe, explain and reflect**.
- Useful for exploring experiences and meanings.

Probing Questions

Examples:

- “Tell me more about...”
- “What factors contributed to...?”
- “How did you feel when...?”
- Help deepen understanding and clarify responses.

Avoid

- Closed or specific questions.
- Long or multiple questions.
- Leading questions.
- Jargon or technical language.

Structure the Conversation

A clear framework helps guide the interview:

- **Opening / Introduction**
- **Warm-up questions**
- **Main body** — explore key topics logically
- **Cool-off questions**
- **Conclusion** — thank the interviewee and explain next steps
- A planned order helps you check whether you are gathering the data you need.

Review Your Interview Plan

- Ask your **supervisor/advisor** to review your questions.
- Helps avoid mistakes that reduce the value of your data.
- Ensures your questions are **clear, relevant and achievable**.

Preparing the Participant

- Provide a **briefing** so interviewees know what to expect.
- Share the **topics** you plan to discuss (not the exact questions).
- Helps interviewees feel **confident**, respected and willing to contribute.
- Participants may offer **documents or evidence** that support triangulation.
- For sensitive topics, plan how to create a **safe and trusting environment**.

Building Trust with Participants

- Be clear about:
 - the **purpose** of the interview
 - how their data will be used
 - confidentiality and anonymity
- Use a **professional but friendly** tone.
- Show respect for the participant's time and experience.

Preparing Yourself as the Researcher

- First impressions matter — you must appear **competent and approachable**.
- Think carefully about:
 - your **appearance** (not too formal, not too casual)
 - your **language** and communication style
 - your **online presence** if interviewing digitally
- Aim to create a **comfortable atmosphere** that encourages open discussion.

Demonstrating Credibility

- Research the **organisation** or **context** beforehand.
- Shows professionalism and helps build rapport.
- Prior knowledge helps you:
 - ask more relevant questions
 - understand the interviewee's references
 - assess the **accuracy** of information shared



Key Skills for Effective Research Interviews

- Creating the right **interview environment**
- Structuring the interview
- Opening the conversation
- Asking appropriate questions
- Active listening
- Using silence effectively
- Using clear, simple language
- Observing body language
- Probing answers
- Moving smoothly between topics
- Summarising key points
- Closing the interview professionally
- Keeping accurate records



In-Person vs Online Interviewing

- **Additional considerations for online platforms**
- Stable internet connection and quiet environment
- Clear audio and camera positioning
- Managing screen fatigue and attention
- Ensuring privacy and confidentiality
- Allowing extra time for technical issues
- Using platform tools (e.g., recording, chat) appropriately
- Being sensitive to reduced non-verbal cues

Probing Techniques (Robson, 2024)

Effective probing includes:

- Allowing **silence**
- Offering an **enquiring glance**
- Using small verbal signals (e.g., “*mmhmm*”, thoughtful nodding)
- Repeating back part of what the interviewee said to encourage elaboration

These techniques help participants expand their thoughts without feeling pressured.



Using Summaries in Research Interviews

Why Summaries Matter

- Help manage situations where interviewees **talk at length or repeat themselves**.
- Allow the researcher to **check understanding** before moving on.
- Provide a gentle way to **steer the interview** towards relevant topics.
- Useful when discussing **complex issues**, ensuring both sides share the same meaning.
- Give interviewees a chance to **clarify or correct** misunderstandings.

How to Use Summaries

- Briefly restate the key point in your own words.
- Confirm accuracy: *“So what you’re saying is...”*
- Follow with a **related question** to deepen the discussion.





Keeping Accurate Interview Records

Why Accurate Records Are Essential

- Forms the basis of your **data analysis**.
- Must be explained clearly in your **methodology section**.
- Ensures your findings are **credible, transparent and traceable**.

Three Main Recording Options

- **Video recording**
 - Captures verbal and non-verbal cues.
 - Requires explicit consent.
- **Audio recording**
 - Easier to manage; still requires consent.
 - Transcripts must be checked for accuracy.
- **Manual notes**
 - Useful when recording is not permitted.
 - Risk of missing detail; best used alongside brief “memory sparkers”.
- **Good Practice**
 - Decide your method **before** the interview.
 - Ensure participants understand how their data will be recorded.
 - Keep records **secure, organised and anonymised**.



Post-Interview Reflective Notes

- Write detailed reflections as **soon as possible** after the interview.
- Include:
 - observations about the **environment**
 - the interviewee's **body language**
 - key information shared
 - your own **thoughts and reactions**
- These reflections may reveal **unexpected insights** worth exploring further.



What Are Focus Groups?

- A focus group is a **group interview** designed to stimulate discussion.
- Participants share **views, experiences and attitudes** on a specific topic.
- Useful for exploring **values, perceptions and group dynamics**.
- Popular in HR research for understanding **workplace experiences and organisational culture**.



Planning the Number and Type of Groups

- One group is rarely enough for **valid and reliable** findings.
- Experiences may differ by:
 - age
 - length of service
 - job role
 - personal circumstances
- Groups should have **enough in common** to feel comfortable, but **enough difference** to generate varied perspectives.
- Aim for **multiple groups** until you reach **data saturation** (no new themes emerging).



Designing Questions for a Focus Group

- Prepare **6–7 questions** moving from general to specific.
- Questions should encourage:
 - opinions
 - feelings
 - experiences
 - examples
- Avoid jargon, leading questions or anything that may cause discomfort.
- Be sensitive to participants' needs, especially when discussing **personal or emotional topics**.

Facilitator Skills Needed

- Creating a **safe, respectful environment**.
- Encouraging quieter participants to speak.
- Preventing dominant voices from taking over.
- Active listening and observing **non-verbal cues**.
- Managing group dynamics calmly and professionally.
- Asking probing questions to deepen discussion.
- Summarising key points to maintain focus.

Practical Considerations

- Build **trust** before the session, especially with vulnerable groups.
- Consider having a **second facilitator** to support participants and monitor wellbeing.
- Use tools such as **flip charts, whiteboards or visual aids** to help participants express ideas.
- Be prepared for emotional responses and ensure participants feel supported.
- Ensure the environment is **accessible, comfortable and inclusive**.

Key Process Issues for Effective Focus Groups

- **1. Define Clear Topic Boundaries**
- Ensure the topic links directly to your **research questions**.
- Avoid overly broad or unfocused discussions.
- **2. Select the Right Participants**
- Choose a sample that reflects a **range of perspectives**.
- Ensure participants have enough in common to feel comfortable, but enough difference to generate varied insights.

Setting Up the Focus Group

- **3. Introduce the Purpose Clearly**
 - Explain the **aim** of the session at the start.
 - Set **ground rules** (respect, confidentiality, turn-taking).
 - Outline the process so participants know what to expect.
- **4. Facilitation Skills**
 - Effective facilitation requires strong **interpersonal skills**.
 - If unsure, consider having another person facilitate while you take notes.
 - Maintain neutrality and encourage balanced participation.

Designing and Testing Questions

- **5. Generate and Pilot Questions**
 - Prepare questions that encourage **open discussion**.
 - Pilot them to check clarity and flow.
 - Plan how to keep the conversation **focused** without leading participants.
- **6. Build Rapport**
 - Create a warm, respectful atmosphere.
 - Help participants feel safe to share experiences and opinions.
 - Use positive body language and active listening.

Managing Group Dynamics

- **7. Ensure Equal Participation**
 - Encourage quieter members to speak.
 - Prevent dominant voices from taking over.
 - Reinforce that **all contributions are valued**.
- **8. Clarify Feedback Arrangements**
 - Explain whether findings will be shared with participants.
 - Be transparent about how their input will be used.
 - Communicate this at the start to build trust.

Shift to Digital Interviews and Focus Groups

- Before Covid-19, most interviews and focus groups were **in-person**.
- Now, **digitally facilitated methods** are more common.
- Online formats offer **new opportunities** but also present **new challenges**.
- Researchers must adapt their approach to suit digital environments.



Practical Guidelines for Online Focus Groups

Group Size

- Aim for **smaller groups** than in-person (e.g., 6–8 participants).
- Slightly over-recruit to allow for **dropouts**.

Duration

- Interviews: minimum **45 minutes**.
- Focus groups: up to **90 minutes max** due to screen fatigue.

Breaks

- Include a short **5-minute break** to maintain energy and focus.

Managing Online Interaction

- Agree on **signals** for participation (e.g., raise hand button or physical gesture).
- Use platform tools to manage turn-taking and visibility.
- Consider having a **second facilitator** to monitor the process and assist with technical issues.
- Be prepared to support participants who may feel **distressed or overwhelmed**.

Using Publicly Available Data in Research

- Some students may struggle to access **organisational data** directly.
- Publicly available sources offer a **practical alternative**.
- These are forms of **secondary data** — valid and useful when used appropriately.
- Fewer **ethical concerns** around consent and access.

Why Use Public Sources?

- Useful when direct access to organisations or individuals is **not possible**.
- Can help answer questions about:
 - HRM policies
 - Organisational culture
 - Business structure
 - Strategic priorities
- Supports **triangulation** when combined with other data sources.

Internal Sources for External Readers

Produced by the organisation but intended for public view:

- Website pages
- Corporate videos
- Marketing and communications content
- News releases
- Corporate blog posts
- Annual reports and strategy documents

External Sources Created by Others

Produced outside the organisation:

- Social media posts and comments
- News articles and features
- Broadcast media (e.g. documentaries)
- Online reviews and ratings
- Academic or industry commentary

Public corporate reports as a source of qualitative data.

- Public corporate reports can be a **rich source of qualitative data**.
- Research questions must match what the data can realistically provide.
- A transparent sampling strategy strengthens the credibility of the study.
- Thematic analysis is well-suited to identifying patterns in documentary data.
- This approach is especially useful when **primary data access is limited**.



Case Example

Research Using Published Corporate Reports

- Millie wanted to research into the contribution of HR to environmental sustainability. She was personally committed to addressing the climate crisis and was concerned that the HR practitioner literature contained very little reference to the role of HR to environmental sustainability. She had done some prior reading and learned about a set of standards used by large organisations to report and benchmark their sustainability related policies and impacts (www.globalreporting.org/). This website listed an impressive range of organisations, based all over the world, who had signed up to the Sustainability Standards reporting process. Millie hoped that she could find out how the HR function from some of these organisations contributed to the organisation's sustainability approaches.
- When she discussed her project ideas with her supervisor at her study centre, they agreed that it would be difficult for Millie to gain access to any of these organisations to obtain primary data. However, her advisor suggested that she select a sample of these organisations and access their corporate reports, which are in the public domain, as these could then be analysed to answer some interesting research questions.
- Discussion questions
- What research questions would be feasible if Millie were to adopt this approach?
- How might Millie choose which company's corporate reports to include in her sample?
- How might Millie carry out an analysis of corporate reports to answer her questions?



Feasible Research Questions

- Millie refined her research questions to ensure they matched the type of data available in corporate reports:
- **What is the role of HR in sustainability as described in corporate reports?**
- **What areas of HR activity are presented as contributing to sustainability?**
- These questions are appropriate because corporate reports typically outline organisational priorities, policies and achievements, including sustainability-related initiatives.

Selecting Corporate Reports for the Sample

- Millie needed a clear and justifiable sampling strategy.

She considered:

1. Relevance to Sustainability

- Some organisations are further along in their sustainability journey.
- Selecting more advanced companies increases the likelihood of identifying **leading-edge HR practices**.

2. Use of Established Rankings

- She found the **Global 100 Index**, listing the world's most sustainable companies.
- She chose to focus on the **top 20 companies** to ensure high-quality, relevant data.

3. Access to Reports

- She used the **GRI Sustainability Disclosure Database** to locate the corporate reports for her selected organisations.



Analysing Corporate Reports

Millie treated the reports as **qualitative data sources** and used a systematic approach:

Thematic Analysis

- Read each report carefully.
- Highlighted text relating to HR activities and sustainability.
- Identified recurring themes across organisations.
- Compared and contrasted findings to build a coherent picture.
- **Analytical Focus**
- HR policies linked to sustainability.
- HR practices described as contributing to environmental or social goals.
- Patterns or differences across the sample.
- This allowed her to answer her research questions using publicly available data.



Using Digital Sources of Qualitative Data

Why Digital Sources Matter

- Can serve as the **main source of data** for your research.
- Can **complement other methods** such as interviews, surveys or focus groups.
- Help provide **context and background** about an organisation, issue or setting.

Types of Digital Qualitative Data

- Discussion threads
- Online forums
- Blog posts
- Social media conversations
- Public comments and reviews
- Digital archives and organisational web content

Value for Researchers

- Useful when direct access to organisations or participants is limited.
- Offers insight into **real-world experiences, opinions and interactions**.
- Helps build a richer understanding of your research topic.





What Is Visual Data?

- A valuable but often overlooked form of **qualitative data** in HR research.
- Includes a wide range of artefacts:
 - maps, plans, drawings
 - photographs and video recordings
 - selfies, diagrams, emojis
- Can also be created through **rich pictures** involving researchers and participants.



Why Visual Data Matters

- Organisations use visual media to project:
 - a **corporate, customer-focused brand**
 - an **HR and employee-focused identity**
- These images are easy to access through:
 - advertisements
 - websites
 - corporate documents
- Visuals reveal how organisations **present themselves** and what they value.

Unofficial Visual Data

- Includes images not produced by the organisation, such as:
 - personal photos
 - informal videos
 - social media images
- Useful for understanding:
 - people's **experiences**,
 - **meanings**,
 - and **perspectives**.
- Particularly helpful when participants struggle to express ideas verbally or face **language barriers**.



Using Visual Data in Research

Visual data can be used in two ways:

- **1. As a Supplementary Source**
 - Supports interviews, focus groups or documents.
 - Adds depth and context to other qualitative data.
- **2. As the Main Data Source**
 - Images themselves become the primary material for analysis.
- Examples include:
 - photos on HR webpages
 - images of work tasks (with consent)
 - participant-generated drawings or photos



Why Analyse Visual Data?

- Visual images rarely appear by chance — they are **constructed to send signals**.
- They reveal meanings that may not be expressed in text.
- Useful for understanding **organisational identity**, culture and values.
- Can stimulate **deeper discussion** with participants.
- Often provides insights **not available in any other form**.

Step 1: Identify What Draws Your Eye First

- Notice which images or elements you see **immediately**.
- Ask what message this might be intended to convey.
- Consider how **layout, size and placement** influence attention.

Step 2: Examine People in the Images

- Look at **gender, age, ethnicity and stance**.
- Who is represented — and who is missing?
- Are certain groups placed in the **foreground** or background?
- What does this suggest about **power, inclusion or organisational values**?

Step 3: Analyse Text, Fonts and 'Flash Messages'

- Notice **font size, style and colour**.
- Identify which messages are made **most prominent**.
- Ask what the creators want viewers to **focus on or remember**.
- Compare the visual emphasis with the detailed written text.

Step 4: Interpret Facial Expressions and Emotions

- Look for signs of:
 - stress
 - relaxation
 - confidence
 - loneliness
 - anxiety
- Consider how these emotional cues shape the **overall message**.
- Ask what feelings the organisation wants to **project**.

Step 5: Look for Symbols and Tools of the Trade

- Identify visible **technology, equipment, furniture and décor.**
- Consider what these elements suggest about:
 - the nature of the work
 - organisational culture
 - professionalism or informality
 - status and hierarchy
- Notice **dress codes** and what they imply.

Step 6: Consider the Colour Scheme

- Colours carry meaning — calm, energy, authority, creativity.
- Ask what the chosen palette might **symbolise**.
- Consider whether colours align with the organisation's **brand identity**.



A Note of Caution

- Visual analysis is **demanding** — often more complex than analysing text.
- Requires careful interpretation and awareness of **bias**.
- Must be combined with a clear analytical framework (explained in next lecture).
- Always consider **who created the image** and **why**.

Why Sampling Matters in Qualitative Research

- The **credibility and trustworthiness** of your study depend on how well you justify your sampling decisions.
- You must explain your sampling strategy in your **proposal** and justify it fully in your methodology chapter.
- Sampling applies to all qualitative data sources:
 - people
 - organisations
 - documents
 - websites
 - digital materials

What Is Sampling?

- Sampling is the **deliberate selection** of people or data sources to represent a wider population.
- In very small organisations, you may be able to include **everyone**.
- In most cases, you must select a **subset** of participants or sources.
- When choices are large (e.g. many websites or documents), your **selection criteria** must be clearly justified.

Probability vs Non-Probability Sampling

- **Probability Sampling**
- Used mainly in **quantitative research**.
- Aims to create a **statistically representative** sample.
- Allows findings to be **generalised** to the wider population.
- Requires asking **the same questions** to everyone.
- **Non-Probability Sampling**
- The dominant approach in **qualitative research**.
- Focuses on **depth, richness and relevance**, not statistical representation.
- Enables researchers to explore **experiences, meanings and perspectives**.

Why Qualitative Research Uses Non-Probability Sampling

- Qualitative studies aim to understand **how** and **why**, not to measure frequency.
- Researchers select participants or sources that can provide **rich, detailed insight**.
- Sampling decisions are based on:
 - relevance to the research question
 - diversity of perspectives
 - access and feasibility
 - potential for depth of understanding



Sampling in Qualitative Research

- A strong qualitative study depends on a **transparent, well-reasoned sampling strategy**.
- You must justify:
 - **who** or **what** you selected
 - **why** you selected them
 - **how** this supports your research aims
- Good sampling is not about numbers — it is about **quality, relevance and depth**.



What Is Non-Probability Sampling?

- Used in **qualitative research**.
- Participants or data sources are selected **purposefully**, not randomly.
- Focus is on **depth, relevance and insight**, not statistical representation.
- Useful when exploring **experiences, meanings and perspectives**.

Accidental (Convenience) Sampling

What it is

- Choosing participants because they are **easy to access**.

Advantages

- Quick and practical.
- Useful when time or access is limited.

Limitations

- Sample may be **skewed**.
- Findings may not reflect the wider population.
- Should be used with caution and clearly justified.

Purposive Sampling

What it is

- Selecting people who can provide **rich, relevant information**.
- Based on **clear inclusion and exclusion criteria**.

Inclusion criteria

- Characteristics that make someone **suitable** for your study.

Exclusion criteria

- Characteristics that mean their data would be **less relevant**.

Types of Purposive Sampling

- **1. Key Informants**
 - Individuals with **specialised knowledge** or unique experience.
- **2. Sliced Sampling**
 - Selecting participants across different **levels or functions**.
 - **Horizontal slicing:** across departments or sectors.
 - **Vertical slicing:** top, middle and lower levels of hierarchy.
- **3. Snowball Sampling**
 - Existing participants recommend **new participants**.
 - Useful for hard-to-reach groups.

Quota Sampling

What it is

- Selecting a sample that reflects the **proportions** of key groups in the wider population.

Examples

- Gender ratio 40:60 → sample includes 4 men and 6 women.
- Age groups 40:40:20 → sample reflects these proportions.

Also used for observations

- Ensuring you observe:
 - different **times of day**
 - different **locations** (e.g. production, reception, admin)

Strengths and Limitations of Quota Sampling

Strengths

- Ensures **diversity** in the sample.
- Helps capture a range of **experiences and perspectives**.

Limitations

- Still **not random** — not everyone has an equal chance of being selected.
- Cannot be treated as a **probability sample**.
- Findings cannot be generalised statistically.

Sample Size in Qualitative Research

- No fixed statistical rules for sample size.
- Decisions depend on:
 - **focus of the research question**
 - **consistency or diversity** of the sample
 - **depth** required for meaningful analysis
- Sample size must always be **justified**, not assumed.

When Smaller Samples Are Acceptable

- When participants share **similar characteristics**.
- When the research question is **narrow and focused**.
- When the study is based in **one organisation**.
- As a guide, a lower limit of **around 15 participants** may be suitable for single-organisation studies.

When Larger Samples Are Needed

- When research questions are **broader**.
- When the sample includes **greater variety** (roles, backgrounds, contexts).
- When exploring **multiple sites** or complex organisational settings.
- When aiming to capture a **wide range of perspectives**.

Understanding Saturation

What is saturation?

- The point where **no new insights** or categories emerge.
- Themes begin to **repeat consistently** across the data.

Important caution

- Repetition alone does **not** guarantee saturation.
- You may need to look **deeper** to uncover hidden variation.
- Aim for analysis that is **rich** and **thick**, not superficial.

Ensuring Depth and Trustworthiness

- Sample must provide enough evidence to show:
 - **subtle differences** in experiences
 - **patterns and connections**
 - alignment with **existing literature**
- Ask yourself:
 - *Would a constructively sceptical reader trust my data?*

Documenting Your Sample Decisions

Students must record and justify:

- **Number of participants** or data sources.
- **Reasons** for choosing this sample size.
- Any **changes** (e.g., drop-outs, need to recruit more).
- **Demographic information** that may influence findings (e.g., culture, job role, employment context).
- How the sample supports the **credibility** of the study.

Making Sense of Qualitative Data

- In qualitative research, **data collection and analysis happen together.**
- As soon as you start gathering data, you begin **noticing, thinking and interpreting.**
- This early thinking is the start of your **sense-making process.**

Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data

- Read, re-read and immerse yourself in the material.
- Begin forming **initial impressions**.
- Ask yourself:
 - What stands out?
 - What feels important or surprising?
 - What questions does this raise?

Comparing New Data with Existing Data

- How does this new information compare with what you already collected?
- Are there **similarities, differences or contradictions**?
- Do any **patterns or trends** begin to emerge?
- What **story** seems to be forming?

Connecting Data to Literature

- Which **concepts, theories or research** seem relevant?
- Does the data support or challenge existing ideas?
- How might the literature help you interpret what you are seeing?

Checking Credibility and ‘Truthfulness’

- Does the information **ring true**?
- Why might it feel convincing — or not?
- What evidence supports your interpretation?
- What alternative explanations might exist?

Reflecting on Your Influence as Researcher

- How might your presence, questions or reactions have shaped the data?
- Did participants tell you what they thought you wanted to hear?
- Should any parts of the data be **discounted or treated cautiously**?
- How might this influence your **next data-gathering activity**?

Handling Unexpected Information

- What new or surprising insights emerged?
- How can you check their **relevance**?
- Should you explore these further in later interviews or observations?
- Could they point to **new themes** worth investigating?

Final comment

- Early analysis is about **noticing, questioning and reflecting**.
- Good qualitative researchers stay:
 - **curious**
 - **open-minded**
 - **self-aware**
- Sense-making is a **continuous, iterative process** (gaining more understanding) that deepens as more data is collected.

Thank
you
for
your
attention!

