Qualitative research to inform digital inclusion programs

Dr. Caroline Stratton
Assistant Professor
School of Information, Florida State University
caroline.stratton@gmail.com

Blending academic research and practitioner insights

Isn't qualitative research . . .
less "scientific"
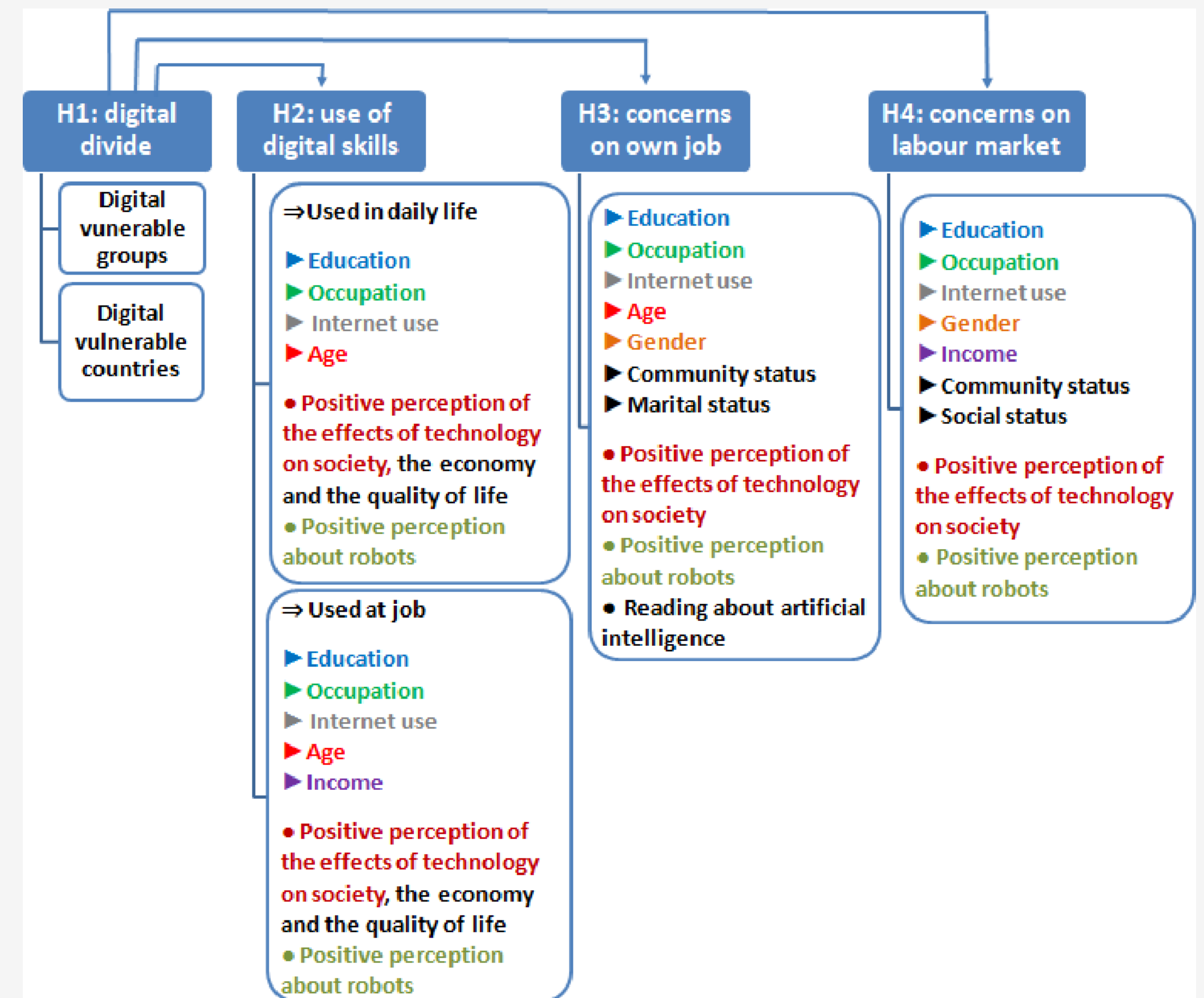harder to conduct at scale
just talking to people?

Less "scientific?"

Validity takes on a different meaning in qualitative research

Does the research represent or reconstruct participants' realities faithfully?

Are the researcher's interpretations of the data credible?

Alternatives: coherence, fruitfulness, trustworthiness, quality . . .

Vasilescu, M. D., Serban, A. C., Dimian, G. C., Aceleanu, M. I., & Picatoste, X. (2020). Digital divide, skills and perceptions on digitalisation in the European Union—Towards a smart labour market. PloS one, 15(4), e0232032.

Harder to conduct at scale?

Not necessarily . . .

Consider a range of techniques: individual interviews, focus group interviews, observations, analyzing secondary and trace data

On the quantitative side . . .

High-quality data collection has become increasingly difficult

Declining survey response rates require greater effort to obtain representative sample

Just talking to people?

It could entail:

Individual or group interviews

Observations, gathering secondary or trace data

Does not mean there's no need to design or plan the research effort

Alternatively, what can we gain from qualitative research?

Insight into community needs and challenges

Why shouldn't we assume that digital inclusion programming will lead to benefit for all?

Kvasny, L. (2006). Cultural (re) production of digital inequality in a US community technology initiative. *Information, Communication & Society*, *9*(02), 160-181.

Essential context for quantitative data

Q2. HOME MEDIA: The following questions ask about the media that you have access to at the place you currently live. Please check ☑ for your answer.

	Yes	No	Don't Know
A. Do you have a home Internet connection?	☐	☐	☐
B. Do you have a tablet computer, like an iPad, you can use at home?	☐	☐	☐
C. Is there a desktop computer you can use in your current residence?	☐	☐	☐
C. Do you have a laptop computer?	☐	☐	☐
D. Do you have a cell phone?	☐	☐	☐
E. ↳if YES, do you have a smart phone (like iPhone, Blackberry, Android phones)?	☐	☐	☐

Gonzales, A. (2016). The contemporary US digital divide: From initial access to technology maintenance. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(2), 234-248.

Essential context for quantitative data

D. Thinking about the reasons why you do NOT use the Internet, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. (CHECK ONE for each row)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
An Internet connection is too expensive.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am concerned about my safety and privacy.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do not have enough time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am not interested.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't need to go online because I have someone who will do it for me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have no one to teach me how to go online.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do not speak English well enough to use the Internet.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My computer or device is too old, or broken, to use the Internet.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't need a computer or the Internet for my work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Using the Internet is too difficult.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Gangadharan, S. P. (2017). The downside of digital inclusion: Expectations and experiences of privacy and surveillance among marginal Internet users. *New Media & Society, 19*(4), 597-615.

How do I put this into practice?

Start with who you want to learn about . . .

1. Where does this community gather and/or meet?

2. What organizations or institutions are trusted in this community?

3. Design conversation prompts to test "hunches" **and** allow for new insights to emerge

4. Ask open-ended questions

5. Demonstrate respect for participants' time and contributions

Moving from data to findings

What am I looking for? Themes, patterns, trends, and interesting outliers

Simultaneously consider: Who is speaking? How do I weigh different accounts?

Reflexivity: Whose voice(s) am I more inclined to identify with or trust? Which ideas align more closely with my expectations and beliefs?

Moving from findings to action

Program design

What does this community want to know how to do? How do they prefer to learn?

Program delivery

Schedule, reasonable expectations for attendance and practice

Program assessment

What methods are appropriate to assess learning and program effectiveness, given the community context and program content?

A note on learning assessment

What are the alternatives to traditional pre-test / post-test learning assessments?

What learning outcomes are meaningful to your participants? How could they demonstrate these outcomes under the most realistic conditions possible?

Maximizing the use of your qualitative data

Multiple uses for addressing digital inequality and pursuing inclusion

- Digital equity planning: assets, resources, needs, partners and their existing efforts

- Informing future research design: detecting change over time, developing effective survey instruments

Questions?

caroline.stratton@gmail.com

I'd also love to talk with you about my research on digital equity plans and administrative capacity for implementing the BEAD program

Image credits and sources

Slide 2: (L) Ricardo B. Braziell, Austin American-Statesman; (R) Caroline Stratton

Slide 4: Figure from study

Slide 6: Juan Camilo Pérez, Medellín Ciudad Inteligente

Slide 8: (L) Flaticon; (R) Flaticon

Slide 9: Excerpt from 2017 Austin Digital Assessment

Slide 10: Excerpt from 2017 Austin Digital Assessment