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Theoretical vs Conceptual Framework: The Difference, With Research Examples

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Abstract

Students writing a research proposal or thesis are routinely asked for a theoretical framework, a conceptual framework or both, yet the two terms are often used interchangeably, by students and examiners alike. A section written to the wrong definition does the wrong job. This article sets out the difference: a theoretical framework is an established theory that a study adopts as its lens, whereas a conceptual framework is the researcher's own map of the concepts or variables in a study and the relationships expected between them. Each is illustrated with extracts from completed doctoral and master's theses, and a redrawn research model shows how a theory is turned into measurable variables and testable hypotheses. The article then considers whether a study needs both frameworks, where each is usually placed, how qualitative studies use frameworks differently, and five errors that recur in student work. It is intended for students and early-career researchers writing a proposal or thesis, and for the educators who teach research design.

Keywords: theoretical vs conceptual framework; difference between conceptual and theoretical framework; conceptual framework research; theoretical framework; conceptual framework; research hypotheses; research methods; open educational resource

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1. Introduction

A student may be asked by an advisor (a supervisor, in British usage) for a theoretical framework and by a program template for a conceptual framework, and then find that the two terms are often used as if they meant the same thing. The confusion has a cost. If the two are mixed up, a whole section of a proposal or thesis can end up doing the wrong job: describing a theory where a map of the study's own variables was expected, or presenting a diagram where a justified choice of theory was required.

The difference is simpler than the terminology suggests. Section 2 summarizes the difference. Sections 3 and 4 define each framework, with an extract from a completed thesis for each. Section 5 shows how a conceptual framework is built from a theory, using a redrawn research model. Section 6 considers whether a study needs both, Section 7 where each is placed, and Section 8 how qualitative studies use frameworks differently. Section 9 describes five errors that recur in student work.

2. The Difference in Brief

Put simply, one framework is borrowed from the literature and the other is built by the researcher for the study at hand, usually on the basis of the first (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, pp. 16–17). Table 1 sets the two side by side.

Table 1. The theoretical framework and the conceptual framework compared.

	Theoretical framework	Conceptual framework
What it is	An established theory, or a small set of theories, on which the study builds	The researcher's map of the concepts or variables in the study and how they are expected to relate
Where it comes from	The literature: someone else developed it	The researcher builds it, from theory and previous studies
Usual form	A written discussion	Often a diagram of boxes and arrows, with a written explanation
The question it answers	Through what lens is the problem viewed?	What is expected, and how do the parts connect?
Where it usually goes	Varies by program; often developed in the literature review	Alongside or directly after the theoretical framework

Table 1 presents the distinction in its simplest form. In practice the terms are used loosely, so the question of whether a given study needs both (Section 6) matters as much as the definitions.

3. The Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the established theory, or small set of theories, on which a study is built. Grant and Osanloo (2014) describe it as derived from an existing theory that others have already tested and that the scholarly literature generally accepts (p. 16). It is "the researcher's lens

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with which to view the world" (Merriam, 2001, as cited in Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 16). The theoretical framework supplies the concepts, assumptions and explanations used to design the study and to interpret what it finds.

The researcher does not invent the theoretical framework but selects it from the literature and then justifies the choice: why this theory suits the research questions, and how much of it the study adopts. The whole theory is rarely needed. Many studies take the parts that matter to them and state which parts those are.

Stating a theoretical framework can be brief. The following extract, from a doctoral dissertation in information science, names the framework and gives the reason for it in a single sentence:

> In this research, we adopt the process-based perspective as our guiding theoretical framework because it better accounts for the influential role of information in career decision making.
>
> Chen (2025, p. 68)

The key word is "because". Chen names the perspective and then states why it fits: it accounts for what the study is concerned with, the role of information in career decisions. Naming a theory and justifying it against the study's focus is the core of a theoretical framework statement, and a single sentence can be enough to introduce it.

4. The Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is the researcher's own map of the concepts or variables in a study and of how they are expected to relate. Grant and Osanloo (2014) describe it as "a logical structure of connected concepts that help provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another within the theoretical framework" (p. 17). It is often drawn as a diagram, with boxes for the constructs or variables and arrows for the relationships expected between them.

In a quantitative study, each arrow is usually a hypothesis: the arrow stated in words. Each should be supported by a theory or by previous studies, since an arrow for which no argument has been made is no more than a guess. The hypotheses, like the research questions, should "embody recognizable aspects of the theoretical framework" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 18).

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework from the author's master's dissertation, which examined which factors are associated with a client's trust in an online broker of contracts for difference (CFDs). In the figure, the trustor is the client and the trustee is the broker.

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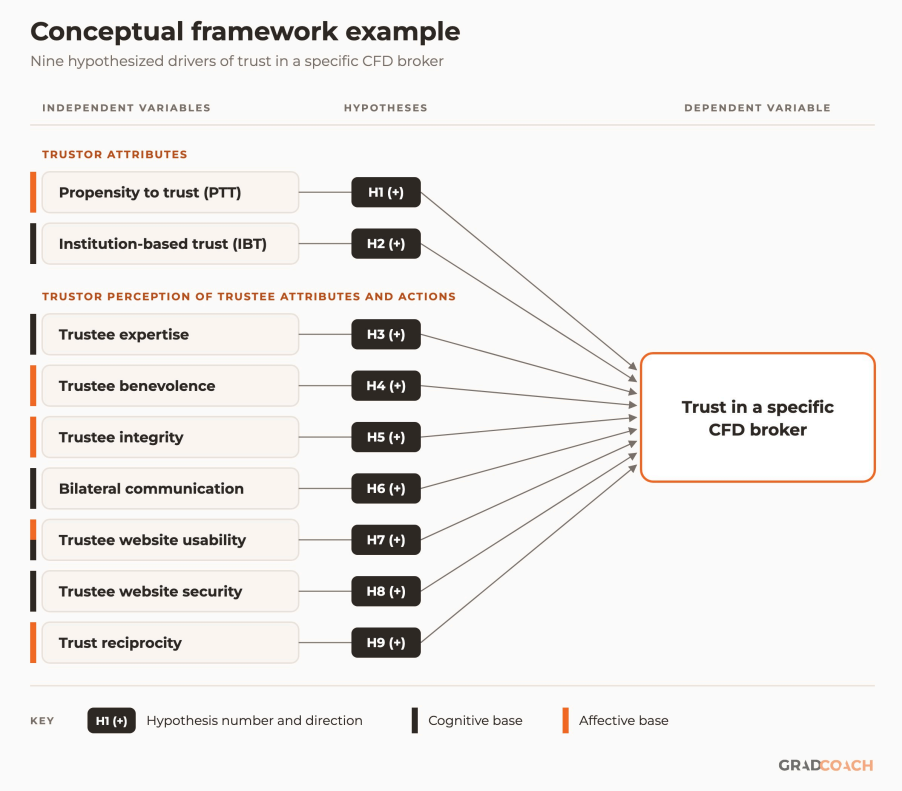


Figure 1. A conceptual framework: nine variables, one outcome, a hypothesis on every arrow. From Jansen (2016).

Eight of the arrows were tested as correlations. The ninth, trust reciprocity (H9), works differently: it predicted a difference in trust between clients who felt trusted by their broker and those who did not, and was therefore tested by comparing the two groups.

The left-hand column holds the study's independent variables, divided into the client's own attributes (propensity to trust and institution-based trust) and the client's perceptions of the broker's attributes and actions. The box on the right is the single outcome the study aimed to explain. The study's whole argument fits on one page, with each arrow labeled by its hypothesis (H1 to H9).

A conceptual framework can be stated just as plainly in writing. The following extract, from a doctoral study in finance, describes its own:

> Gender diversity represents the independent variable of the study while the dependent variables comprise financial performance and risk-taking. ... Besides this, a few control variables are also included in the research which comprises Firm Size, Asset Turnover, GDP per Capita Growth and Inflation Rate.
>
> Houphouet (2024, p. 27)

The extract names the independent variable, the dependent variables and the control variables, but not the relationships between them. Those are stated in the study's hypotheses, and a diagram of the same framework should show them as boxes and arrows.

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5. How the Two Frameworks Fit Together

The two frameworks are not alternatives. In most quantitative studies, the theory comes first and the conceptual framework is built from it. The theory identifies which concepts matter, and the conceptual framework turns them into variables that can be measured and relationships that can be tested.

A master's thesis at Cornell University shows this transition clearly. In the thesis, "phygital" refers to store design that integrates digital experiences into the physical store (Verdiguel, 2024, p. 1). It opens with its theory and then turns that theory into constructs, abstract concepts that can only be measured indirectly:

> The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis, 1989) is the most frequently cited theoretical framework designed to explain how users form attitudes and behavioral intentions toward technology. … In this study, hedonic and utilitarian attitudes in phygital shopping environments are measured via perceived usefulness and perceived playfulness.
>
> Verdiguel (2024, pp. 7–8)

These two constructs then become boxes in the study's research model, which the thesis presents as its "Overall Research Model" (Verdiguel, 2024, p. 17) and which serves as its conceptual framework. Figure 2 shows the theory on the left and the study's model on the right. The theory is the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) as later extended to include playfulness; the arrow marked "becomes" shows its two measured beliefs entering the model as boxes. Davis's original model used perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use; playfulness entered through later extensions of it (Verdiguel, 2024, p. 8).

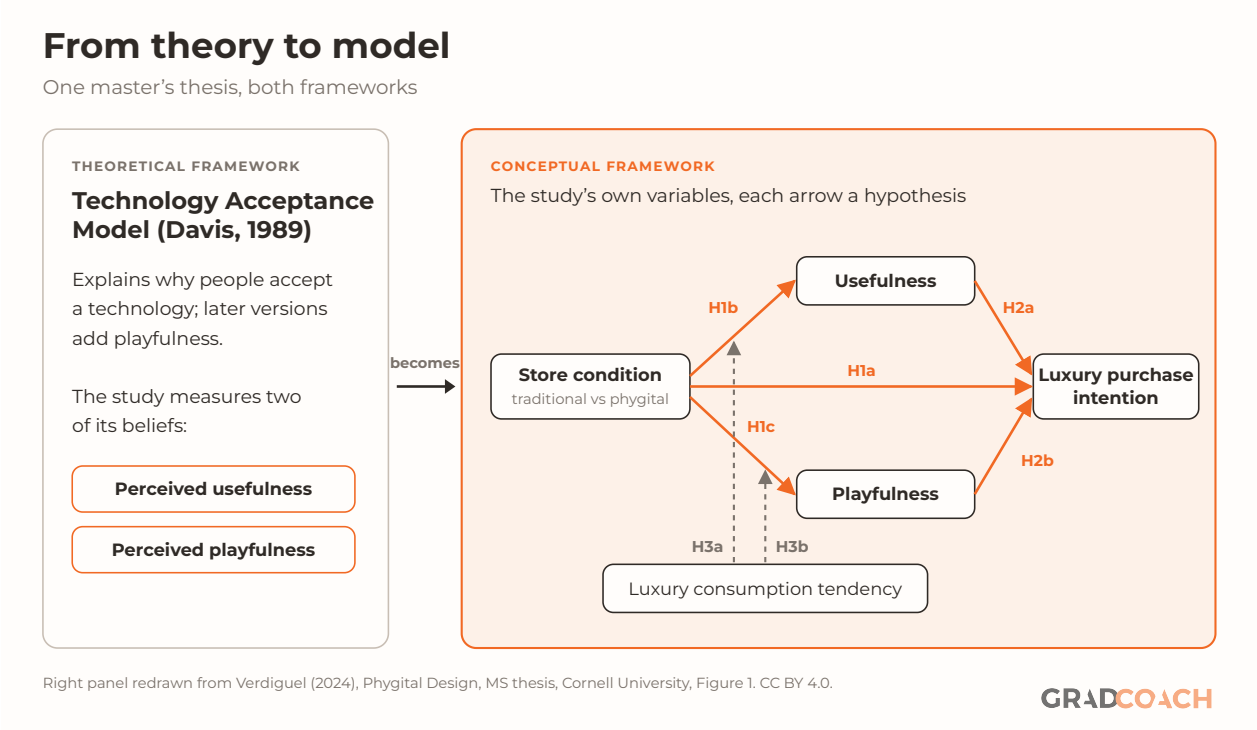


Figure 2. From theory to conceptual model. Right panel redrawn from Verdiguel (2024), Figure 1, CC BY 4.0.

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Read from left to right, the figure shows how a theory becomes a model. The theory, with its later extensions, explains why usefulness and playfulness should matter; the conceptual framework states exactly how they are expected to matter in this study, and turns each claim into a hypothesis that the data may or may not support. If no line can be drawn from a study's theory to its model, one of the two needs further work.

6. Whether a Study Needs Both

A study often needs only one framework: a qualitative study may need only a theoretical lens, and some quantitative studies present their theory and their model as a single framework. Some programs, however, require both as separate sections, so a program's own guidelines are the first point of reference.

Part of the difficulty is that the terms are not used consistently, even by academics. Writing about dissertation research, Grant and Osanloo (2014) state the problem directly:

> Theoretical frameworks are sometimes referred to as a conceptual framework; however, these terms are neither interchangeable nor synonymous. They can be vague and lead to confusion for students and dissertation committee members alike.
>
> Grant & Osanloo (2014, p. 16)

Writing for health professions education, Varpio et al. (2020) add that theory, theoretical framework and conceptual framework "are terms that are used in different ways in different research approaches" (Abstract). Where an advisor or a program uses either term differently from the definitions given here, the student should establish what is meant and write to that definition.

7. Where Each Framework Is Placed

There is no single answer, because programs differ. A common pattern is to introduce whichever framework is used (theoretical, conceptual or both) briefly in the first chapter and then develop it in the literature review, where the theory and the studies behind it are discussed. Other programs require a separate section or chapter. Past theses from the same department show the local convention.

Where a study has both, the theoretical framework usually comes first, and the conceptual framework follows from it, often ending with the hypotheses it implies.

One point does not vary: a framework should not be introduced once and then left behind. Grant and Osanloo (2014) describe students who "briefly make mention of a theoretical framework at the start of the dissertation and never return to it throughout the rest of the document" (p. 12), and argue that the framework should guide the study throughout (p. 21). The methodology should refer back to the frameworks to justify what was measured and how, and the discussion should interpret the findings against them.

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8. Frameworks in Qualitative Research

Qualitative studies use frameworks differently. Many begin with a theoretical lens that shapes what they examine, but without a diagram of variables and hypotheses. Varpio et al. (2020) distinguish three ways in which inductive research (research that builds explanations from the data) can use theory: fully inductive theory development, fully theory-informed inductive analysis, and theory-informing inductive data analysis, in which theory is brought in partway through. There is a real difference between a framework that informs the analysis and one that dictates it: if every interview question and every code (a label applied to the data) is taken directly from the framework, the analysis has become largely deductive, whether or not that was intended.

Some strongly inductive studies begin with little or no framework and allow theory to emerge from the data. Grant and Osanloo (2014) note that where a qualitative study begins with a less structured theoretical framework, "the theoretical framework often emerges in the data analysis phase" (p. 16). This approach is legitimate, provided the researcher states it and explains why it was chosen.

9. Common Errors

Common problems with frameworks in student work include the following five.

Listing theories instead of using one. A theoretical framework is not a survey of every theory the researcher has read. One or two theories should be chosen, each should be given a role, and the text should show how each shapes the study.

Drawing arrows without an argument. Every relationship in a conceptual framework needs support from theory or previous studies. An arrow for which no reason can be given should be justified or removed.

Proposing relationships that are never tested. Every arrow in a conceptual framework is a commitment that the analysis must test. A relationship the study does not examine should not appear in the diagram.

Confusing the framework with the research philosophy. A research philosophy (or paradigm), such as positivism or interpretivism, is a set of assumptions about reality and knowledge; a theoretical framework is the theory through which the study is conducted. The two should be discussed separately.

Adopting a whole theory by default. A study may take the parts of a theory that fit it and leave the rest, provided it states which parts it uses and why.

10. Conclusion

A theoretical framework is the established theory on which a study builds; a conceptual framework is the researcher's own map of how the study's concepts or variables connect. In a quantitative study, the two work in sequence: the theory identifies the concepts that matter, and the conceptual framework turns them into variables and relationships that can be tested. Each arrow is

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usually a hypothesis supported by theory or previous studies. Many studies need only one framework, and because the terms are used inconsistently, a student should establish what the program and the advisor mean before writing. Where the frameworks are placed varies by program, but wherever they are introduced, the methodology and the discussion should return to them.

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