

Chapter 12

Designing Online Laddering Studies

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ABSTRACT

Laddering is a well-established research technique in the social sciences which provides rich data to help understand means-end considerations otherwise hidden from quantitative research. It does this through revealing relationships between the attributes of individuals, objects or services (i.e., means), the consequences these attributes represent for the respondent, and the values or beliefs that are strengthened or satisfied by the consequences (i.e., ends). This chapter describes how qualitative researchers can successfully apply laddering in an online environment. Through an explanation of the different stages of the online laddering process, the authors hope to encourage researchers to use this technique in their urban planning research projects. To illustrate the benefits of the technique, the authors describe a research study that successfully used the laddering technique in an online environment. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the limitations of using laddering online and suggests avenues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Urban marketing is concerned about changing people's perceptions of a place with regard to urban regeneration (Skinner, 2008). Negative perceptions can have a damaging impact on the success

of urban regeneration and “destroy the confidence of local communities, leading to the notion of a ‘lost’ city with no clear identity or brand” (Trueman, Cornelius, & Killingbeck-Widdup, 2007, p. 20). As urban places increasingly compete for resources, visitors, investors and residents, it is crucial for them to offer an excellent environment to attract new users and activities but also “to keep

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existing ones happy with their place” (Kavaratzis, 2005, p. 329).

To find out what place users value in the “place product” which is co-produced by a large number of autonomous public and private organisations (Hankinson, 2007), researchers can use qualitative research methods to get a deep understanding of social phenomena in context and interpret “phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). In this regard, Laddering is a well-established qualitative research technique, which has been used successfully in several disciplines (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). This technique enables researchers to reveal the “reasons behind the reasons” (Gengler, Mulvey, & Oglethorpe, 1999, p. 175) and has been frequently used especially in exploratory qualitative phases of research projects (e.g., Botschen, Thelen, & Pieters, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Zanolli & Naspetti, 2002).

The aim of the chapter is to describe in detail how qualitative researchers can apply the established qualitative laddering technique to an online environment. To counter criticism that qualitative researchers produce unclear or ambiguous reports, we will describe the online laddering process thoroughly. Common difficulties include, not explaining how the research was conducted, why a certain research method was selected, how respondents were recruited, how data analysis was carried out, and conclusions reached (Bryman, 2008). Even though qualitative research is less structured and rule driven than quantitative research, this does not prevent the standardisation of data collection and analysis such that it is comprehensible to other researchers who may want to replicate the study in a different context. Reynolds, Dethloff, and Westberg (2001) distinguish the laddering method from typical qualitative research methods because the technique has a definite structure using standard probing questions and following an explicit agenda. They contrast the typical qualitative structure as shallow and broad while results from laddering are deep and focused. Thus, the

laddering method can be described as a structured qualitative method that leads to deep and focused results. By explaining the different stages of the online laddering process thoroughly, we hope that fellow researchers will become interested in using this technique and apply it to their urban planning projects to find out what place users value in a place.

To illustrate the benefits of the technique better, we describe a research study that used the laddering technique successfully in an online environment. This case study (see also Gruber, Szmigin, Reppel, & Voss, 2008; Reppel, Szmigin, & Gruber, 2006) aimed at getting a deeper understanding of the preferred product attributes of the lifestyle product “Apple® iPod®” by revealing underlying consumer benefits of and preferences for this innovative brand. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the limitations of using the laddering technique online and suggests some fruitful avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND

The laddering technique has been described as “one of the most promising developments in consumer research since the 1980s” (Grunert, Beckmann, & Sørensen, 2001, p. 63). While qualitative in terms of its focus on the individual consumer, it also produces quantitative results. Through laddering researchers discover the salient meanings that individuals associate with products, services and behaviours to reveal so-called means-end chains. The focus is on the associations in the individual’s mind between the attributes of products, services or behaviours, which are the “means”, the consequences of these attributes for the individual, and the personal values or beliefs, the “ends”, which are satisfied by the consequences. While the attributes are the characteristics of a product or service, the consequences are the reasons why an attribute is important. They are the psychological or physiological aspects, which

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