Conducting Qualitative Research Online – an Exploratory Study Into the Preferred Attributes of an Iconic Digital Music Player

Alexander Reppel, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK
Thorsten Gruber, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK
Isabelle Szmigin, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK
Rodiger Voss, PH Ludwigsburg, Germany

This paper presents two online variations of the laddering interviewing technique to reveal the preferred attributes of an iconic music player. The results suggest that the proposed methods (online laddering interviews and questionnaires) can be transferred successfully to an online environment to combine the effectiveness of qualitative research with the efficiency of quantitative research. While the online laddering interviews produced significantly more depth in understanding, the results of the two online laddering methods are broadly similar. The results indicate that consumer particularly value the control elements of the music player such as the click wheel and the menu navigation, the sound quality, and its aesthetical design.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13916/eacr/vol8/E-08

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
ABSTRACT
This paper presents two online variations of the laddering interviewing technique to reveal the preferred attributes of an iconic digital music player. The results suggest that the proposed methods (online laddering interviews and questionnaires) can be transferred successfully to an online environment to combine the effectiveness of quantitative research with the efficiency of qualitative research. While the online laddering interviews produced significantly more depth in understanding, the results of the two online laddering methods are broadly similar. The results indicate that consumer particularly value the control elements of the music player such as the click wheel and the menu navigation, the sound quality, and its aesthetic design.

INTRODUCTION
Although qualitative researchers have already discovered the usefulness of the internet to design and conduct qualitative research projects and increasingly use online data collection methods to benefit from time and cost savings, authors such as Comley (2002) rightly point out that researchers have been using online qualitative research at a significantly slower pace than online quantitative. By using online qualitative research methods, qualitative researchers could benefit in several ways. According to Joinson (2001) respondents reveal more personal information in computer-mediated communication than in traditional face-to-face discussions due to visual anonymity and higher levels of private self-awareness. Similarly, Hanna et al. (2005) found that respondents are more likely to express their deeper feelings in an online environment than during traditional interviews. As respondents are also less inhibited online, they are willing to state their opinions more directly than in a traditional interviewing environment (Pincott and Branthwaite 2000; Sweet 2001; Tse 1999).

Online qualitative research methods allow researchers to sample minority and professional groups that would otherwise be difficult to contact. Individuals who spend a lot of their free time online may not be willing to have personal face-to-face interviews with researchers but may be interested in online interviews. Miller and Dickson (2001, 146) support this view by saying that online qualitative research is appropriate “when the target population is small, very specialized in its skills, and difficult to find and recruit, and when the issue relates to high-tech products and services”.

Based on these initial findings and following O’Connor and Madge (2003) who suggest that the topic of online qualitative research should attract more attention, we decided to use the established qualitative laddering technique in an online environment to get a deeper understanding of an interesting consumer phenomenon—Apple’s iPod. Apple has effectively redefined the portable music market by creating an entirely new market segment. According to a recent Forrester report (Collingwood 2005), the iPod accounts for around three quarters of the digital music players market in the United States. For a thirty year old company, this development is not only impressive but also surprising considering that the original iPod, introduced in a difficult market environment at the end of 2001, was neither the first digital music player, nor initially compatible with the majority of personal computers. The first iPod could only be used with Apple’s own Macintosh computers, a platform accounting for less than 4% of US computer sales (Belk and Tumbat 2005). Apple was able to extend the iPod market from the group of early adopters to the early majority “without diminishing the product’s cool factor” (Olson, Czaplewski, and Slater 2005, 14), which refers to those aspects of a product that are considered to be of particular importance to the small but influential segment of innovators and early adopters. Consumers of Apple products are a particularly interesting customer group as they are highly involved with the brand. They can also be characterized by their “fierce loyalty to the brand” (Belk and Tumbat 2005, 205) and regarded as a subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

The study’s objective was to develop a deeper understanding of the attributes of the iconic brand and market leader, Apple’s iPod, preferred by consumers. The study used two online versions of the qualitative laddering technique which to date have not been applied in the investigation of the preferred attributes of a digital mobile music player. They are, however, particularly appropriate to this research area as we explain below.

THE LADDERING TECHNIQUE
Reynolds, Dethloff, and Westberg (2001) point out that the laddering method can be distinguished from typical qualitative research methods in the following way: the laddering method has a definite structure as interviewers use standard probing questions, follow an explicit agenda, and the questioning flows much the same for each interview. Reynolds et al. (2001, 99) also argue that “the qualitative results from a laddering structure are deep and focused while a typical qualitative structure are shallow and broad”. Thus, the laddering method can be described as a structured qualitative method that leads to deep and focused results. Laddering allows researchers to reach deeper levels of reality and to reveal the “reasons behind the reasons” (Gengler, Mulvey, and Oglethorpe 1999, 17). Researchers can examine the consumer’s individuality in depth while still producing quantifiable results. Although originally used for product or brand positioning issues (Gutman 1982; Olson and Reynolds 1983), in succeeding years it has been applied to a range of areas such as consumer behavior (Bagozzi and Dabholkar 1994; Pieters, Botschen, and Thelen 1998).

Laddering is normally done in person and involves semi-standardized in-depth interviews, where respondents are restricted as little as possible in their natural flow of speech. Laddering interviews attempt to discover the salient meanings that consumers associate with products, services and behaviors and to reveal so-called means-end chains. The focus is on the associations in the consumer’s mind between the attributes of products, services or behaviors, which are the “means”, the consequences of these attributes for the consumer, 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 motivate a customer.

Conducting Qualitative Research Online–An Exploratory Study into the Preferred Attributes of an Iconic Digital Music Player
Alexander Reppel, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK
Thorsten Gruber, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, UK
Isabelle Szmigin, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK
Rodiger Voss, PH Ludwigsburg, Germany
to use a product or service (Gutman 1982). Values are a more universal concept and may be considered as life goals; personal and general consequences individuals are striving for in their lives (Rokeach 1973). The linkages between attributes, consequences and values are what produce the means-end chains. Consumer knowledge is assumed to be hierarchically organized in the consumer’s memory spanning different levels of abstraction (Reynolds, Gengler, and Howard 1995); the higher the level of abstraction, the stronger the connection to the self. Thus a hierarchy exists with attributes (low level of abstraction) as less relevant to the self than consequences (mid level of abstraction) and values being of most relevance (high level of abstraction) (Olson and Reynolds 1983).

All laddering interviews consist of an elicitation and laddering stage (Grunert and Grunert 1995). Initially an elicitation stage, which may use techniques such as triadic sorting, direct elicitation or free sorting to derive preference based distinction criteria is undertaken. Criteria thus derived act as the starting point for the laddering probes, which should eventually uncover attribute-consequence-value chains. This is achieved through repeatedly asking questions as to why an attribute/consequence/value is important to the respondent with the answer serving as the starting point for the next question. Interviewers use these probe questions to reveal attribute-consequence-value chains by taking the subject up a so called ladder of abstraction, starting with concrete attributes and ending with abstract values. The laddering process continues until respondents give either circular answers, or are not able or willing to answer or have reached the value level.

Although the majority of published studies use in-depth laddering interviews, there has been some use of the paper-and-pencil version of laddering (Walker and Olson 1991) with the advantages mainly being reduction of interviewer bias and ease in management (Botschen and Hemetsberger 1998). Respondents are asked to fill in a structured questionnaire and to write down up to four attributes that are of relevance and then specify why a certain attribute is important to them. For each attribute, respondents can give up to three reasons (Botschen and Hemetsberger 1998).

**ONLINE LADDERING**

The two laddering methods of data collection (personal interviews and paper-and-pencil version) can also be adapted to online laddering chats and questionnaires. Laddering interviews can be conducted online in the form of online chats. These one-on-one electronic in-depth interviews may be carried out in the form of text-, audio- or video-chats. We decided to conduct text-based online chats, which are conducted in rounds: after some introductory words (thanking the respondent for taking part in the interview, introducing oneself and the aim of the research project, and assuring confidentiality) the interviewer can start the online laddering interview by typing the first question in a small text box of the chat software. By clicking a “send button”, the question is immediately sent to the interviewee who can read the question in a larger text box. The interviewee can then send an answer to the interviewer the same way. As the flow of conversion is broken into text “chunks” with a time-lag between questions and answers, online interviews are more ordered and structured than traditional face-to-face interviews (Chen and Hinton 1999). Based on findings in the online focus groups literature (e.g., O’Connor and Madge 2003; Reid and Reid 2005; Sweet 2001), it can be assumed that online laddering chats are cheaper to conduct than traditional laddering interviews as there are no travel and accommodation expenses. Researchers do not have to tape and transcribe interviews as online chat programs automatically generate interview transcripts, which allow a quicker analysis of data. Further, the whole interviewing process may be less stressful and more convenient for respondents as they can chat at home or at work in a familiar and non-threatening environment. Due to the anonymous and faceless interviewing situation, respondents cannot be influenced by the interviewers’ appearance, tone of voice and body language. Thus, social desirability bias and especially interviewer/interviewee bias will most probably not occur (Duffy et al. 2005; Miller and Dickson 2001).

The paper-and-pencil version of laddering can also be conducted online in the form of online laddering questionnaires. For this purpose, respondents have to write down the three most important attributes of a product first. Then, respondents have to type in a text box why the first attribute is important to them. In a second text box, respondents then have to specify why what they indicated in the first box is important to them. Respondents then have to complete the third and any additional boxes (if necessary) in the same way. After having completed the laddering process for the first attribute, respondents then have to fill in text boxes for the second and third most important product attributes as well.

**THE STUDY**

As stated, we were particularly interested in developing a deeper understanding of what consumers value in an innovative lifestyle product such as Apple’s iPod. We aimed at investigating the desired attributes of the iPod and the underlying benefits that users look for to better understand this consumer phenomenon. In addition we wanted to see how successful the traditional laddering technique might be once transferred to an online environment, and compare laddering interviews and questionnaires as two online methods.

Grunert and Gruner (1995) suggest that researchers using laddering should collect data from a homogeneous group of respondents. A suitable approach for identifying a suitable group of homogeneous respondents is the selection of opinion leaders. Because opinion leaders exercise informal influence upon other peoples’ behaviors and attitudes through product-related conversations (Goldsmith and De Witt 2003), they are considered attractive targets for marketing communication (Stern and Gould 1988), as well as for the adoption and diffusion of newly developed products (Chan and Misra 1990). Providing information or advice perceived as more credible than mass advertising opinion leaders can informally influence others’ attitudes and behaviors (Stern and Gould 1988). Opinion leaders are particularly important for the success of new products, as when they are among the early adopters themselves, they pass on important information to opinion seekers (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996).

Thus, we decided to draw our sample for the online laddering interviews and questionnaires from a group of opinion leaders in the specific product field of MP3 players. Following Creswell (2003, 4) who believes that the idea of applying only quantitative or qualitative methods “falls short of the major approaches being used today in the social and human sciences”, we decided to employ a quantitative web survey serving “as a springboard for identifying possible participants” (Bryman 2004, 475). We thought that a web-based research approach would be particularly appropriate for researching the iPod for a variety of reasons; music can only be downloaded onto the iPod through a computer and the iTunes software and in order to purchase music through ‘iTunes’, the iPod user requires a connection to the Internet. Moreover, iPod users would have been difficult to contact otherwise.

For our study, we invited German users of the Apple iPod music player to fill in a web survey that covered topics such as satisfaction with the iPod in general and with its product attributes.
in particular (e.g., design, usability etc.), and importance of iPod product attributes. The web survey also included an opinion leadership scale to identify the homogeneous group of opinion leaders. The opinion leadership scale we applied was originally constructed by Flynn et al. (1996) consisting of six items. Our scale was adjusted by including a ‘no answer’ option to exclude those participants who would otherwise only consider the end points of the scale. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient for our opinion leadership scale was .73.

A total of 2,472 people participated in our web survey and 2,178 (88% out of 2,472) of them provided complete answers to the opinion leadership scale. From the 317 respondents that scored highest on this scale, 273 (86% out of 317) agreed to be contacted for a further study and 198 of them were not only opinion leaders but also owners of an iPod and regular users of instant messenger software.

Concerning minimum sample size, Reynolds et al. (2001) recommend that laddering studies should, as a rule of thumb, include at least 20 respondents. This sample size could already give a significant understanding of the main attributes, consequences, and values of products, services or people. As a consequence, we conducted 22 online laddering interviews and 26 respondents filled in the online laddering questionnaires.

As our research study was concerned with identifying the attributes of the iPod that users value the most, we asked all respondents to tell us the three most important attributes of their iPod. This simple technique of direct questioning was sufficient to elicit salient attributes of the iPod and what distinguishes it from its competitors. The derived criteria were then the starting point for the laddering probes to uncover the complete means-end structure. For this, both interviews and the online laddering questionnaire began with one attribute and asked: “Why is attribute X important to you?” with the answer to this question serving as the starting point for further questioning.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

We coded sequences of attributes, consequences and values (the ladders) to make comparisons across respondents. We used the decision-support software program LADDERMAP (Gengler and Reynolds 1993) to enter up to ten chunks of meaning per ladder with the categorization of each phrase as either an attribute, consequence or value. Then we identified and grouped meaningful categories. Codes for individual means-end chains were aggregated and expressed in an implications matrix which details the associations between the constructs. The implications matrix acts as a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative elements of the technique by showing the number of times one code leads to another (Deeter-Schmelz, Kennedy, and Goebel 2002). A graphical representation of the aggregate chains was presented in a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) that consists of nodes, which stand for the most important attributes/consequences/values (conceptual meanings) and lines, which represent the linkages between the concepts. A hierarchical value map only displays associations beyond a specific “cutoff” level, which means that associations have to be mentioned by a certain number of respondents in order to be graphically represented.

Two resulting HVMs detailing the online laddering interviews and questionnaires are described below. They only display concepts of meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) and associations beyond cutoff level 2, meaning that concepts and linkages to the corresponding HVM due to the chosen cutoff level. As stated, the HVM only displays associations that a certain number of respondents mentioned. Thus, only a few respondents mentioned these concepts during the interviews. Similarly, the concepts that appear in the interview HVM but not in the questionnaire HVM were also mentioned in the questionnaires but are not displayed in the HVM due to the cutoff level. Apart from these differences, however, the results from both laddering techniques are generally similar.

Table 1 shows that far more concepts of meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) were elicited during online laddering interviews than in the online laddering questionnaires. In particular, respondents mentioned twice as many values during the online interviews as in the questionnaires. It seems to be more difficult for respondents to climb the ladder of abstraction and to elicit associa-
Conducting Qualitative Research Online

tions on the highest value of abstraction without the presence of an interviewer. In laddering interviews, interviewers can employ several laddering techniques (Reynolds and Gutman 1988) to help respondents reach the value level. These techniques cannot be employed in laddering questionnaires.

Table 2 shows that a total of 71 ladders were collected from the chats and the 22 respondents provided between two and five ladders each, with an average of 3.25 ladders per respondent. The longest ladder consisted of six concepts of meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) and the shortest two, with an average of 3.2. By comparison, a total of 70 ladders were collected from the online laddering questionnaires and the 26 respondents provided between one and four ladders each, with an average of 2.7 ladders per respondent. The longest ladder consisted of four concepts of
meaning (attributes, consequences, and values) and the shortest two, with an average of 2.6. These results demonstrate that researchers can collect significantly more ladders (in total and per person) and concepts of meaning during personal online laddering interviews than with the online application of the paper and pencil version of laddering. The ladders collected from the online interviews are also on average longer than the ladders from the online questionnaires.

**CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

The aim of the study was to give a first valuable in-depth insight into what matters for iPod users by revealing several important constructs. These have been highlighted above. We also wished to see how successful the traditional laddering technique could be in an online environment. The quality of the results suggests that the traditional laddering technique can be transferred successfully to an online environment. While the online laddering interviews produced significantly more depth in understanding, the results of the two online laddering methods are broadly similar. In addition to displaying the most important attributes of the iPod, the two hierarchical value maps also showed why they are important. In this way, the HVM offered a deeper understanding of the attributes of the iPod that users desire by graphically illustrating the underlying benefits that users look for. By including an opinion leadership scale in an initial web survey, we were able to sample a homogeneous group of respondents for the following online laddering interviews and questionnaires. These online laddering techniques allowed an inexpensive and fast collection of qualitative data. There was no need to tape and transcribe online interviews as transcripts were automatically generated, which allowed a quick data analysis. The filled in online questionnaires were also available in electronic form, which made a quick analysis of the laddering data possible. Moreover, by applying the laddering technique to an online environment we were able to gather information from an interesting group of respondents that would have been difficult to contact otherwise. The whole online laddering process was convenient for respondents who did not have to leave their homes and offices for the interviews and questionnaires.

**LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study was explorative in nature as it was the first to apply two online versions of the laddering technique to the issue of desired attributes of an innovative product—Apple’s iPod. Further research studies, however, should improve our knowledge of this topic. There are a number of limitations to this work that have to be discussed and we make some suggestions for further research.

A general problem with online research is that it excludes all those individuals who are not online and it is known that these individuals differ from their offline counterparts. For example, the demographic profile of online users does not represent the population at large (Duffy et al. 2005). Thus, online samples are not representative of the population and findings cannot be generalized to the population nor to alternative populations. In this connection, our results are limited by the nature of our sample. Firstly, the study was conducted in Germany, where the iPod has a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Comparison of Attributes, Consequences, and Values.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Interviews</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Questionnaires</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Comparison of Number and Length of Ladders.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of ladders</td>
<td>Number of ladders per respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Interviews</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Questionnaires</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lower market share in comparison to the United States. In Germany, the market share of the iPod is estimated to be around 50% (Kaufmann 2005). Furthermore, the study applies an online laddering technique and is therefore limited to iPod users that have access to the Internet. However, both limitations are not considered to be serious as Apple is still the market leader in Germany, albeit by a lower margin compared to some other countries. Similarly, limiting the study to an online context is acceptable as it was a central aim of the study to identify opinion leaders, rather than a representational group of iPod users. However, it is important to note that the results should not be directly compared to those achieved through an offline study, which might result in a different type of opinion leaders. In order to answer this question, a similar study would have to be conducted offline, based on the same opinion-leader selection.

Concerning the depth of insights gained from online research, Sweet (2001, 134) believes that “real-time online groups may not always provide the depth of response necessary”. By contrast, Reid and Reid (2005), who compared the contributions of face-to-face focus groups with focus groups conducted via computer-mediated communication, found that both approaches generated the same number of answers/new ideas. Thus, further research should investigate this issue and explore whether online methods provide more or less insights than traditional methods.

The analysis of the online laddering questionnaires indicates that only a few respondents were able to reach the highest level of abstraction, explaining the lack in codes at the value level. However, in comparable traditional paper-and-pencil laddering studies (e.g., Botschen and Hemetsberger 1998; Pieters et al. 1998) respondents were also only able to come up with few values like “feeling good”, “harmony with yourself”, and “satisfaction”. All personal construct approaches depend on the ability and willingness of respondents to reveal their individuality, reflect on their knowledge, and verbalize their experiences. Banister et al. (1994), however, point out that many people may find it difficult to verbalize their experiences and to reflect on their behaviors and attitudes. This may explain why only few respondents who filled in the online laddering questionnaires mentioned values. Without the guidance of interviewers most respondents were not able climb the ladder of abstraction.

After having shown that the qualitative laddering technique can be combined successfully with a quantitative survey to reveal the preferred attributes of an iconic brand and market leader and uncover the underlying benefits sought by Apple iPod users we hope that fellow researchers develop further studies that use the two online versions of the laddering technique to investigate interesting consumer phenomena.

REFERENCES


SESSION SUMMARY

The concept of home represents one of the fundamental structures of orientation in time and space (Altman and Werner 1985), a salient aspect of the extended self (McCracken 1989; Tian and Belk 2004), as well as an important context of consumer decision-making and commercial exchange (Frenzen and Davis 1990; Grayson 1998). Contemporary life conditions have transformed emic notions of home and have increased the role of the market in the social construction of home (Bardhi and Arnold 2005; Miller 2001; Venkatesh et al. 2001). However consumer research on home and its influence on consumer behavior remain scarce. This special session attempts to a) examine the different influences that home has on certain consumer behavior aspects, such as consumption and meanings of technology, brand relationships and meanings, consumption of place, and family relationships; and b) advance our understanding of consumers’ relationships to meanings of home. Each of the papers in the session presents new, empirical studies.

The three papers in this session examine the relationship between home and consumer behavior in three diverse contexts under which the cultural framework of home becomes salient, such as cross-cultural consumer experiences as well as fragmented, mobile, and intergenerational families. More specifically, taking a domestic perspective, the first paper by Venkatraman, Coulter and Bardhi examines the relationship between home and technology among military families living in military posts. Through 18 interviews and observations with military wives, the paper demonstrates that consumption and meaning of technology in domestic spaces is influenced by consumers’ notions of home. Further, the meaning and use of technology are continuously negotiated as part of a consumer identity project of sustaining the moral economy of the home, characterized as the identity project of being the “stoic military wife”. The second paper by Bengtsson and Venkatraman looks at home and brand consumption in the context of cross-cultural experiences. The study illustrates how consumers’ relationships to brands change during cross-cultural experiences. These relationships are shaped by a much valorized interpretative framework of home. They find that global brands can become home symbols for tourists abroad by providing them with a sense of order, predictability, and national identity. The third paper by Epp and Price is part of an ongoing research project on family identity based on 23 intergenerational family dyads. This study examines how family identity is acted out to make the home as well as the ways that home shapes the family identity. The study argues that family identity defines the meaning and value system of the home and sets the spatial and relational boundaries of the home. As such, possessions and consumption practices associated with family identity come to symbolize and sustain the home through time and space.

This session contributes to consumer research in several ways. First, the papers illuminate two different ways that consumers relate to home. On one hand, home represents a moral and symbolic interpretative framework from which consumers draw meanings that shape consumption. As such, the session argues for the importance of research in developing cultural models of home from consumers’ perspective. On the other hand, these studies suggest that home is an important on-going consumer project carried out through consumption and as such not only structures consumer behavior related with it, but also is shaped by consumption processes. Second, these papers further suggest that the home models are situated in consumer’s socio-economic and childhood experiences. Third, the session shows that consideration of the home concept in consumer research shifts the research focus from an individual or a community unit of analysis to the much neglected mezzo level of family.

ABSTRACTS

“Harnessing the Power of Technology in the Home: The Case of Military Households in the US”
Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University
Robin Coulter, University of Connecticut
Fleura Bardhi, Northeastern University

How do consumers integrate technology into the home? While prior research has investigated the ways technology has transformed the home, little is known about the ways that home shapes meanings and consumption of technology. Through a qualitative study of military families living in two different military posts, this research illustrates how meanings of home are being nuanced by technology and its use. More importantly, however, our research indicates the fundamental nature of technology to the meaning of home—to maintaining the day-to-day routines, nurturing the family, educating and entertaining the children, inculcating a sense of values, and sustaining the moral economy of the home.

“Consuming Global Brandscapes as Home”
Anders Bengtsson, Suffolk University
Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University

This study examines the meanings consumers ascribe to global brands consumed in out-of- the ordinary settings. In an interpretive study of consumers temporarily crossing cultures from the U.S. to China, we show that contrary to conventional brand management dogma, brands take on different meanings when consumed in an unfamiliar context. Our study reveals that global brands take on the meaning of home not in the familial, material sense of the word, but in the phenomenological, metaphoric, and symbolic sense, and this home became a means for consumers to reconstitute their sense of self and make sense of their culture-crossing experience.

“Performing Home: The Storied Life of Objects, Spaces, and Identity Practices”
Amber M. Epp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Linda L. Price, University of Arizona

Given the importance of home to consumers and the tightly linked ideologies of home, family, and identity (Carsten 2004; McCracken 1989; Oswald 1999), we examined how constellations of spaces, objects, and identity practices shape the participatory roles of particular consumption objects in the performance of home. Based on a longitudinal case study and 48 depth interviews with 21 families, we uncovered variations in family identity that are reflected in goals for the articulation of home. In addition, we observed that contextual shifts as well as object—spatial constellations that alter the roles of objects may in turn modify and displace self, relational, and family identity practices over time.

References Available on Request!