# Means-End Theory in Tourism Research

**Seonaidh McDonald**

The Robert Gordon University, United Kingdom.


**Maree Thyne**

University of Otago, New Zealand.


**Leigh-Ann McMorland**

The Robert Gordon University, United Kingdom.


Dr Seonaidh McDonald
Aberdeen Business School,
The Robert Gordon University,
Kaim House, Garthdee Road,
Aberdeen, AB10 7QE, United Kingdom.
Tel: 00 44 (0) 1224 263896
Fax: 00 44 (0) 1224 263838
Email: s.mcdonald@rgu.ac.uk

Means-End theory has been widely used in the marketing literature to identify values-based motivations behind consumption (Reynolds and Olson 2001). It has also been adopted by tourism researchers who argue that it has deepened understanding of tourist behaviour by allowing links to be made between specific tourism product and service attributes and personal values (McIntosh and Thyne 2005). This enables effective targeting of tourism products and services, and the communications designed to promote them, leading to higher levels of tourist satisfaction.

The applicability of the Means-End technique in tourism research is not disputed. However, within the tourism literature no consideration has yet been given to the fact that there are two distinct approaches to applying Means-End theory (hard and soft laddering), which have different conventions for establishing terminal values, and, more importantly, are underpinned by quite different assumptions about what constitutes a value. Recent empirical work has prompted the authors to examine the methodological implications of both approaches and question their adequacy for qualitative tourism research.

**Generating data**

Despite being regarded as a qualitative method, Means-End theory is operationalised through quite structured interviewing techniques, known as laddering (Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Grunert and Grunert (1995) distinguish between hard and soft laddering. Hard laddering uses highly structured interview methods to elicit ladders which are then combined statistically into Hierarchical

Value Maps (HVM) that represent the joint cognition of interviewees. Soft laddering uses comparatively more discursive interviews and inductive analysis techniques to uncover ladders. Both approaches have been used in the marketing (Reynolds and Olson 2001) and tourism literatures (Klenosky, Gengler and Mulvey 1993). Strengths and limitations are apparent in both approaches.

**What is a value?**

Due to the systematic nature of the questioning in hard laddering studies, a number of ladders are formed for each respondent (Klenosky et al 1993). This is because a ladder is deemed complete when the interviewee can no longer articulate an answer to the 'why is that important to you' prompts. Thus the 'end' in each ladder is expressed in the interviewee's own words (an advantage in qualitative research terms) but does not necessarily reach the level of a universal or terminal value, defined by Rokeach (1973:5) as, "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable". For example in Mulvey, Olson, Celsi and Walker's (1994) study of tennis racquet purchase, one of the values identified was 'play my best'. Whilst this can certainly be considered to be a personal goal, it is not a terminal value.

In soft laddering, the end values are sometimes not expressed by the interviewee, but diagnosed from the transcript by the researcher, using existing universal value sets drawn from classic work by Rokeach (1973), Kahle (1983) and Schwartz (1992). The values from these lists are used to name the 'ends' of the Means-End chains. Whilst such lists form an excellent basis for determining

whether the predetermined concepts are meaningful to individuals (or not), they do not allow for the possibility that values which are not included in lists of values are also meaningful, thus limiting the range of concepts that can be investigated. This approach can lead to interviews from which no ladders are surfaced (Thyne 2001). In one recent study, 30 ladders were surfaced from 41 interviews with heritage attraction visitors in Scotland. This absence of ladders has raised the question of whether interviewees could be expressing values that are not on the established lists. In other words, do the current lists available adequately represent terminal values? Rokeach (1973:30) himself acknowledged that, "the overall procedure employed in selecting the two lists [of values] is admittedly an intuitive one, and there is no reason to think that others working independently would have come up with precisely the same list of 18 terminal and 18 instrumental values." It is therefore strongly suggested that qualitative researchers examine transcripts which have not produced ladders in order to see whether inductive analysis can surface further terminal values which are expressed by respondents and could extend existing lists, or even make them more applicable for tourism research.

One obvious advantage of relying on these classic lists is that it does ensure that only the Means-End chains which are fully developed to the value level are included in the study, unlike the ladders identified through hard laddering techniques. Using universal value sets also allows researchers to compare more directly the results of different studies. This could have particular advantages for

tourism research where studies which compare tourists in different destinations or for different kinds of attractions are an important feature of the literature.

**Mixing inductive and deductive techniques**

All the current methods of operationalising means-end theory use a combination of inductive and deductive research methods. At the quantitative end of the spectrum, even studies which replace the interviewing stage with questionnaires which can be used in large scale, postal surveys, rely on qualitative techniques to elicit the concepts on which their surveys are based (e.g. ter Hofstede, Audenaert, Steenkamp and Wedel, 1998). On the other hand, laddering research which characterises itself as purely qualitative often utilises classic lists of values in the analysis of in-depth interviews (e.g. Thyne, 2001).

The problems of mixing qualitative and quantitative elements of analysis for the formation of HVMs in hard laddering studies has been discussed elsewhere (Grunert and Grunert 1995). However the more subtle methodological implications of recourse to pre-defined, external concepts are not discussed in papers which apply these techniques.  This use of pre-determined concept-sets sits rather uneasily with the tenets of inductive data analysis. These practices are not confined to soft laddering approaches. Some studies which utilise hard laddering compare the values from their HVMs to concepts contained within the pre-defined value sets explicitly (Klenosky et al 1993). However what is more common is for the top level concepts in the HVM to 'borrow' language from these classic studies. For example, Mulvey et al (1994) identify 'Fun and Enjoyment' as

a value and Aurifeille and Valette-Florence (1995) cite 'Warm Relationships' as a value. These have obvious resonance with terms used by Kahle (1983).

Researchers also do not make explicit their reasons for utilising one scale or another and some employ more than one of these scales (Thyne 2001). This raises further methodological issues, as both Schwartz (1992) and Kahle (1983) have based at least some of their concepts on combinations of Rokeach's (1973) original list of values. This means that these three value sets are not mutually exclusive, distinct sets of universal values, but imply some nested concepts, expressed at different levels of abstraction and thus should not be combined.

The purpose of this research note is not to attempt to discredit either the hard or soft laddering forms of Means-End research. The widespread adoption of these techniques by social scientists and the wealth of insights that they have uncovered in the decades since their development are a testament to their utility. However if Means-End theory is to continue to grow in importance and use in unravelling tourist values, then further discussion is required about exactly how terminal values are being determined and interpreted. Tourism researchers must distinguish explicitly between hard and soft laddering approaches and engage in methodological discussion about the implications of these alternate norms for the values that they elicit.

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