REVISITING MASLOW:

What Models Can We Use to Understand and Explain Consumption Behavior?

Self-Actualizatia

Self Esteem

Belonging

Safety

Physiological

Max-Neef Matrix

Spradley's Nine Dimensions

DIAGRAM IT, MAP IT, MATRIX IT!
VISUALIZING DATA FOR DEEPER INSIGHTS

DECISION ARCHITECTURE:
A NEW WAY TO APPROACH WEB USABILITY STUDIES

STAND AND DELIVER...
MASTERING DEBRIEFS

LISTENING to Nonverbal Cues

When Conducting ONLINE

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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By Ilka Kuhagen and Janina Kuhagen
Munich, Germany ■ ilka.kuhagen@ikmarketing.de and janina.kuhagen@ikmarketing.de

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First of all, a fact: The majority of all communication is nonverbal! Only a small portion of any communication is based on the words that come out of our mouths. The majority consists of body language, surrounding smells, tastes and many other clues.

One of the major criticisms I hear from my clients regarding online qualitative research is, "But you cannot see your respondents — how can you get good results without any nonverbal cues?" Or "What can be done to improve the communication and increase the learning and insight in an online environment?" Granted, while online communication is only text, platforms have improved, and nowadays respondents themselves are becoming more savvy and experienced and have many different ways to express themselves beyond typed letters. For the experienced researcher, the clues and tools are there, if you know how to "listen" to them.

Emoticons

Many people communicating online use "emoticons," ranging from a simple smiley face to more sophisticated ones. Most platforms offer an array of emoticons that can be quickly selected

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and inserted into a post. In addition, respondents can use the keyboard to just type them.

Interestingly, there is a big difference in the Western and Eastern worlds of emoticons. In the West, we tend to make the distinction mainly with the mouth — e.g., :-(or :-) or :-8. The Eastern world keeps the mouth the same and instead changes the eyes: ** (stars) shows excitement, UU means tired, and ^^ is actually a smile.

Modified Text

Participants in an online qualitative study tend to carefully consider the words they use to make a point, and sometimes they use quite strong language. Respondents may also use punctuation and capitalization to emphasize their feelings or emotions. They might highlight or color different thoughts in different ways, or they might use different font sizes and capital or bold letters — "This is REALLY VERY important to me" or "This makes me so maaaaaaaad." You can hear the intonation when reading the posts.

If respondents already feel comfortable in a chat environment, they may use abbreviations common in the world of text-savvy consumers. A special language is being developed for online communication (and even more for tweeting and texting, where space is limited). This saves time typing and conveys additional information about the emotions experienced that are not captured in words, but rather in abbreviations — for instance, ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing), LOL (laugh out loud) or BG (big grin).

In addition, respondents make themselves *heard* by using sound words and action words, such as *hmmm, hehehe* or *argh*. Sometimes, if you read a respondent's post aloud, you can actually visualize that person speaking. Also, the online moderator may use icons and pictures (like a thumbs up) to show appreciation or involvement while reading respondents' posts or when giving them more time to complete a task. In face-to-face settings, the moderator would make eye contact with respondents who finish earlier and/or make gestures to show that others are just finishing; in an online setting, the icon tells the respondents, "It is all fine; I am just waiting for others to finish."

Colors

Colors can also be used online to express feelings. For example, respondents can be asked to write a keyword in the color that would match their feelings. Some respondents even choose different colors for one word and tell exactly what made them choose a specific color. Although simple, this is a very effective task. While the color adds to better understanding, it is also appropriate to ask the respondent what feeling the color is supposed to convey and thus help the respondent to better express his or her feelings.

Audio and Video

Online qualitative research platforms offer possibilities besides the written word. More than just text can be collected when doing online qualitative research — with new media, faster internet access and improved platforms, digital media like photos, videos and voice can also be included. Ways to embrace pictures and voice include asking respondents to upload pictures and videos, search the internet for appropriate photos and videos (e.g., Google images or YouTube), use a webcam or voice recording or simply mail the pictures to the moderator, who can then upload these onto the platform.

Such images can capture the respondents in their own environment and express much more of their feelings for a subject. By choosing the type of picture or setting, the respondent provides additional information that the moderator can probe. Also, the videos may show body language and non-verbal information, sometimes even more than in a face-to-face setting, since respondents are in their familiar environment and not in a facility. In addition, the moderator can ask respondents to describe their actions and movements, such as why they would use the product in a specific way or make a certain move when opening or closing a product package.

Pictures

Online collages are one of the various ways to use pictures within an online discussion. Respondents can upload the pictures and explain what they want to say with each picture. In one international study, teenagers from around the world discussed their lives, and it was quickly possible to grasp what really was important in their lives — and what was special to each country — just based on the collages.

Picture sorting is also easy in an online environment. Respondents can drag and drop pictures and leave their comments on each one. In another study, results from this question — "What picture best represents your feelings for your cell phone?" — showed that, in different cultures and countries with different languages, some people chose the same pictures to communicate exactly the same feelings.

Pictures from a product or package can also be tested, with respondents choosing from smiley faces that they drag and drop to the point on the package that they like or dislike. Thus, respondents can show their feelings and be encouraged to articulate their emotions (happy, sad, confused, etc.). Typing in their thoughts at exactly the point of interest is like physically pointing a finger in a face-to-face situation.

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The moderator will know exactly which area of an image the respondent is referring to, as well as the respondent's feeling about that aspect of the product or package.

Another way to work with images is to encourage respondents to upload pictures to tell more about themselves. For instance, the moderator can ask them to create a profile similar to what they might post on a social-networking site. With this technique, a moderator can often learn far more (and far more quickly) about a respondent and his background than even in a two-hour focus group.

Avatars are another way of accomplishing this. Actually, sometimes it is more appropriate to ask respondents to choose an avatar, mainly to keep the research respondent anonymous. Also, however, the choice of avatar adds to the understanding and conveys a lot about the respondent. The respondent can be asked to explain her choice of avatar, allowing the moderator to not only identify respondents but also to get a deeper insight.

In Summary

Clearly, online qualitative research is not just plain text — it can also provide valuable, insight-revealing nonverbal cues. In fact, with the techniques described above, online qualitative research can be exciting, creative, diverse, individual and tasty — IF you know how to listen to it!