THE STYLES OF ONLINE WOM-SENDERS AND ONLINE WOM-RECEIVERS AMONG HOT SPRINGS TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

Japan has numerous numbers of hot-spring resorts (onsen). Visiting hot-spring resorts is one of popular leisure in Japan. The spread of broadband in Japan has increased the consumer interactions about hot springs in online communities. It is important to evaluate the impact of the consumer interactions in online communities on the decision making process of the hot-spring resorts' visitors. In this study, we investigated the ecology of word of mouth (WOM) communication for hot springs in web-based communities. We conducted a qualitative interview-based study by adopting the methodology, Cognitive Chrono-Ethnography (CCE: Kitajima et al., 2010). 18 adults (14 women; 4 men; mean age, 33.4 years) participated in in-depth interviews, who have experience using WOM in online community about hot spring trip. We found that the WOM-receivers showed different use characteristics of WOM depending on the degree of dependence on WOM. The WOM-senders were different in terms of motivation of writing.

KEYWORDS

Word of mouth; customer to customer relationship; Cognitive Chrono-Ethnography (CCE); tourism; hot springs

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, a trip intended to take in hot spring "onsen trip" is popular in Japan. There are more than 2,800 hot spring resorts in Japan, and a total of 1.3 billion people visited there in 2008 (Ministry of the Environment, 2010). When a person plans an onsen trip, he or she visits the websites managed by hot spring resorts and accommodations, and obtains various kinds of information though online C2C-WOM, i.e., consumer-to-consumer interaction in the form of word of mouth (hereafter, we simply put it just "WOM"), when making decisions as to where to stay, visit, buy, etc. Since WOM influences the behavior of tourists, both practitioners and researchers in tourism are interested in the ecology of WOM (Litvin et al., 2008). WOM exits in the industries other than tourism. Since its influence on consumers' decisions is enormous, WOM has become a hot research topic in various industry fields as well (Allsop, et al., 2007). In addition, service providers also have a great interest in WOM because it contains useful information for them to estimate and improve the services they are currently providing. However, there is no systematic way of using WOM because its ecology has not yet well understood.

WOM is a collection of texts written by WOM-senders and read by WOM-receivers. The purpose of this study was to derive a typology of WOM-senders and that of WOM-receivers. The subject of WOM we focused on was "onsen trip." We conducted an interview-based study by adopting a methodology for qualitative study, called "Cognitive Chrono-Ethnography (CCE)" developed by Kitajima et al. (2010), which has been successfully applied to understand various kinds of customers.

2. METHOD

CCE consists of two stages: (1) selecting "elite monitors" and (2) conducting in-depth interview with the elite monitors. In a CCE study, researchers need to construct an initial hypothesis about the typology of the customers in question. In this study, it corresponds to the initial hypothesis about WOM-senders and the one about WOM-receivers. In a CCE study, monitors are recruited who represent respective types defined by the

typology. They are called “elite monitors.” A series of in-depth interviews with the elite monitors (typically, twice or three times) are conducted to understand their behavior in detail. The results of the in-depth interview are used to construct models that represent WOM-sender and WOM-receiver, which are essentially the refinements of the initial hypotheses (See Kitajima et al. (2010) for the methodology of CCE).

Table 1. The characteristics of elite monitors as the sender.

ID	Age	Gender	Attitude	Content	Frequency	Needs to convey	Intention to convey	Contents of information						
								Accommodation					Sightseeing	
								Diet	Facilities	Spa	Staff	Location	Local	Surrounding area
S1	40s	Female	High	General	High	Strong	Influencing receivers' activity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
S2	20s	Female	High	Spa	High	Strong	Contributing to receiver		✓					
S3	20s	Female	High	Accommodation	Low	Weak	Just for infromation	✓						
S4	30s	Female	Middle	General	Low	Weak	Contributing to receiver		✓	✓	✓			
S5	40s	Female	Middle	Spa	Low	Weak	Just for infromation		✓	✓				✓
S6	50s	Male	Middle	Accommodation	Low	Weak	Just for infromation	✓	✓	✓	✓			

Note) Check marks mean applicable.

Table 2. The characteristics of elite monitors as the receiver.

ID	Age	Gender	Attitude	Content	Frequency	Acceptance of information	Influence of information	Contents of information						
								Accommodation					Sightseeing	
								Diet	Facilities	Spa	Staff	Location	Local	Surrounding area
R1	30s	Female	High	General	High	Strong	Strong		✓✓		✓✓			
R2	30s	Female	High	Partial	High	Strong	Strong	✓✓	✓✓					
R3	20s	Female	High	Spa	High	Strong	Moderate		✓✓		✓✓			
R4	50s	Male	High	Accommodation	Middle	Moderate	Moderate		✓✓	✓✓				
R5	30s	Female	Middle	General	High	Strong	Moderate	✓✓		✓✓		✓✓		✓✓
R6	30s	Female	Middle	Partial	High	Strong	Moderate	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓			
R7	30s	Female	Middle	Spa	High	Strong	Moderate		✓✓			✓✓	✓✓	
R8	30s	Female	Middle	Accommodation	High	Strong	Moderate	✓✓						
R9	40s	Female	Low	General	Low	Weak	Weak	✓✓				✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
R10	20s	Male	Low	Partial	Low	Moderate	Moderate	✓✓	✓✓			✓✓		
R11	30s	Male	Low	Spa	Middle	Moderate	Weak	✓✓	✓✓					
R12	20s	Female	Low	Accommodation	Low	Weak	Weak	✓✓						

Note) Check marks mean applicable.

2.1 Elite Monitors

By conducting a Web survey, eighteen adults (14 females; 4 males; mean age, 33.4 years old) were selected as the elite monitors. All of them had experience in using WOM about onsen trip. Twelve of them were representative WOM-receivers, and six of them were representative WOM-senders (See Table 1 and 2 for detail). Based on the preliminary research on WOM, we derived a number of parameters that should be useful for defining typologies of WOM-senders and WOM-receivers, and we designed questionnaires accordingly. The followings show the Web questionnaire items for screening WOM-senders and WOM-receivers, respectively:

The Web questionnaire items for WOM-senders:

1) frequency of writing WOM,
2) subjective estimate as to how much the written information is needed by the receivers,
3) subjective estimate of intention of writing WOM, and
4) subjective estimate as to how much he/she wants to contribute to the receivers.

The Web questionnaire items for WOM-receivers:

1) frequency of using WOM,
2) subjective estimate of acceptance of information on WOM,
3) subjective estimate of influence of information of WOM on their decision making, and

4) subjective estimate of the degree of helpfulness of WOM.

The responses from the Web were analyzed by Hayashi's quantification method type III and the factors that corresponded to the large eigenvalues were fed into a cluster analysis. Eventually we categorized them into 12 groups of WOM-receivers and 6 groups of WOM-senders. Each of the elite monitors belonged to one of the eighteen groups exclusively.

2.2 In-depth Interview

We carried out in-depth interviews twice for each monitor. After the first in-depth interview, the monitors were asked to record their daily use of WOM as diary memo. The diary memo was used in the second interview, carried out two or three weeks after the first in-depth interview. The purpose of the diary memo was to help the monitors remember their current and past use experience of WOM. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured with several critical items to be clarified by their answers in the in-depth interview sessions.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results from the in-depth Interviews for the WOM-senders

As shown in Table 1, the typology of WOM-senders was based on the patterns of weightings of contents of information. S1 (high attitude and general content) sent general information including diet, facilities, spa, and staff. S1 posted general information and wrote WOM that the other senders had never written. S2 (high attitude and content of spa) and S3 (high attitude and content of accommodation) wrote the same things as the other senders. However they had a different viewpoint. In fact, they sent the limited information about facilities or diet. Although S4 (middle attitude and general content) wrote general information, S4 was not so aggressive as S1 as to post WOM. S5 (middle attitude and content of spa) and S6 (middle attitude and content of accommodation) sent non-specific information based on their travel experiences.

The initial typology was based on the contents. However, the results of the in-depth interviews suggested that it would be better to consider their motivations; in other words, a revised typology would be based more on subjective feature of WOM than objective feature of WOM, i.e., contents. However, it would require more extensive research for actually formulating the typology.

3.2 Results from the in-depth Interviews for the WOM-receivers

High attitude receivers: The monitors with high attitude (R1, R2, R3, and R4) were particular about the contents of information that they want to get. For instance, R1 (high attitude and general contents) didn't always receive the contents of information in general. Individual experiences for hot spring trip might be important to receive WOM. If a good service was provided by the staffs at the accommodation they stayed, they might focus on staffs. The receivers with high attitude were more likely to directly connect their experiences to how they received WOM.

Middle attitude receivers: The monitors with middle attitude (R5, R6, R7, and R8) received WOM in a variety of ways. They had high demand in finding out what the tourists visited the location they considered really thought. Therefore, they were sensitive at the way of writing of WOM.

Low attitude receivers: The monitors with low attitude (R9, R10, R11, and R12) used WOM selectively. This is different from the high attitude WOM-receivers who also used WOM selectively based on their preferences. The low attitude WOM-receivers intentionally narrowed the range of the WOM they would pay attention to even at the time they had started to collect information. Their use of WOM was limited but they had never try to change their attitude even if they knew more information was available which might be useful for their purposes.

As described, the typology based on the degree of attitude would be useful to understand WOM-receivers. The three types, i.e., the high attitude, the middle attitude, and the low attitude monitors showed qualitatively different usage patterns of WOM.

3.3 WOM-texts from the Viewpoint of WOM-senders and WOM-receivers

The interface between WOM-senders and WOM-receivers is the texts WOM-senders wrote and WOM-receivers read. We call them WOM-texts. Even if the appearance of WOM-texts exist as a text object physically but their meanings from the WOM-senders' point of view may be different from those from the WOM-receivers' point of view. Our WOM-senders tended to write *positive* information about the place they visited and the services they received, which they considered useful for potential visitors. On the other hand, some of our WOM-receivers selectively used *negative* information when they examined the candidate places.

4. CONCLUSION

A numerous amount of WOM are continuously generated on the Web. They are easily accessible by researchers, service providers, WOM-receivers, and WOM-senders. This study showed clearly that WOM, i.e., a collection of texts, should convey more information than mere textual information. WOM exists as the objects to be shared by WOM-senders and WOM-receivers but what WOM actually means are different depending on which side a person is in, i.e., he/she is a WOM-sender or a WOM-receiver. This paper showed that there is difference, and provided hypothetical typologies for WOM-senders and WOM-receivers, which were partially confirmed but refinement is definitely necessary to come to a true typologies. Once the typologies are established, we will be able to envision the entire horizon that extends from a collection of textual WOM. This is also useful for service providers in tourism.

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