

# The impact of photographs on the on-line marketing for tourism: The case of Japanese-style inns

**Abstract:** This paper examines the impact of the use of photographs in on-line marketing for tourism through a case study based in Japanese-style inns. Nowadays, most Japanese-style inns present photographs of what they think are their key appealing elements on their own social networking and/or video/photo-sharing websites, while guests upload their photographs and write comments on travel or social networking websites and/or on the websites of e-travel agents. Through the medium of ‘netnography’ this research has identified that the photographs presented on-line by Japanese-style inns can affect guests’ decision-making processes and/or expectations in both a positive and negative way, and eWOM can work together with the photographs to influence prospective guests.

**Keywords:** Photographs; e-word of mouth; Tourism marketing; Japan; Ryokan.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of studies that have looked at the accommodation sector’s marketing activities and strategies in various countries, including their use of visual media such as photographs (Liu, Wang, Shao, & Li, 2018). However, considering its significant position and contribution in terms of the cultural, religious, historical, and traditional perspectives of Japan, the Japanese-style inn (Ryokan) has been overlooked by most researchers (Choi, Meng, & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2017). Given the spectacular increase in inbound tourism to Japan, it is timely and important to examine this relatively unknown topic in the global accommodation industry even though most of the guests of Japanese-style inns are still domestic tourists. How marketing strategies and activities, especially those using photographs, are perceived by the Japanese is highly worth researching as in principle the ‘visual’ can be regarded as a primary sense for a large number of people (Lee & Rha, 2013; Panchal, 2014).

There are two main types of Japanese-style inns, *minshuku* and *ryokan*. They are distinguished by management style, level of services, facilities and price. Generally, a *minshuku* is a family-run accommodation facility and its price is cheaper than that of a *ryokan* (Choi et al., 2018;

Jimura, 2011a). In addition, the owner's family tends to live in their *minshuku*. In contrast, a *ryokan* is usually managed by a company, has more luxurious facilities and more sophisticated services, and is, therefore, more expensive.

Japanese-style inns are unique in many ways. There are three main differences between Japanese-style inns and Western-style hotels: First, in Japanese-style inns, it is common that guests are asked to change their shoes into *zori* (Japanese sandals) at the entrance (Japan Ryokan Association, 2006). Guests are expected to take off their *zori* when they enter their room whose floor is covered with *tatami* mats. *Tatami* mats are an essential component for a *washitsu* (a Japanese-style room). The quality of *washitsu* and the decor of Japanese-style inns are one of the guest's main concerns. Even so, the exterior of Japanese-style inns, which is often in harmony with the townscape, can create cultural and nostalgic atmospheres for Japanese guests. Second, the price for a stay at Japanese-style inns usually includes dinner and breakfast (Japan Ryokan Association, 2006). These organizations take pride in the meals they offer, which can be their actual appeal, while their guests look forward to them. In general, the inns try to use locally-sourced meat, fish and vegetables as much as possible. Lastly, most *ryokan* and some *minshuku* have hot spring facilities. Hot springs are very popular amongst Japanese people (Choi et al., 2018; Matsuda, 2002); therefore, the quality of hot spring facilities is also be important in Japanese guests' decision making.

These three main characteristics of Japanese-style inns are also the main interests for Japanese guests (Jimura, 2011b). In fact, most Japanese-style inns upload various photographs of their guest rooms, the interior and exterior of their building; meals; and the hot spring facilities on their websites (Choi et al., 2018). These photographs are often supported by text information to fascinate their prospective guests. Furthermore, an increasing number of hoteliers, including Japanese-style inns, also utilise social networking and/or video/photo-sharing websites in an attempt to present the best possible image with their photographs for marketing purposes (Liu et al., 2018; Zhang & Yun, 2014). Such active usage of on-line photographs also applies to guests. Guests also upload photographs of what they think are key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns on various types of websites with their comments which can work as very influential eWOM (Jimura, 2011b; Lee & Rha, 2013). However, Japanese-style inns have not been examined closely in previous tourism, hospitality and/or marketing studies. The number of studies that have explored the impact of photographs in on-line tourism marketing from both the supply and demand side perspectives of tourism is also limited.

This paper examines the impact of the photographs used in on-line tourism marketing through a case study of the approach of Japanese-style inns (Sarkar & George, 2018). In other words, it investigates how photographs provided by Japanese-style inns themselves or their guests influence prospective clients decision-making processes and/or expectations, by using the netnography of e-word of mouth (eWOM) (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Its objectives were to: (i) Identify photographs of those key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns that are influential for guests; (ii) Analyse how such photographs affect guests' decision-making process and/or expectations; and (iii) Identify the sources of such photographs for further study. Each of the three objectives set in this paper is distinctive. Objective (i) was 'to identify photographs of which key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns are influential for guests. The key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns for Japanese guests are diverse. However, such attractive factors can be identified by carefully reading a review or eWOM. For example, they can be the exterior of a Japanese-style inn, dinner and/or breakfast offered at the inn, communal hot spring facilities of the inn, and/or the townscape of the area where the inn is located.

We then moved to fulfilling objective (ii); 'to analyse how such photographs affected the guests' decision-making process and/or expectations'. For instance, it was confirmed by examining a review or eWOM that the photographs of dinner at a Japanese-style inn encouraged a Japanese guest to stay at the inn. When he/she stayed in the inn, however, his/her experience with the dinner may not have met the high expectations which had been created by looking at a photograph(s) of the dinner provide. Objective (iii) aimed to identify the source(s) of those photograph(s) mentioned as an influential factor in a review or eWOM by reading it carefully, although the source(s) was not always mentioned. Objective (iii) is significant as it tries to identify which photographs influence Japanese guests' expectation and decision-making processes. For instance, the source(s) of such photographs can be those available at the official website of a Japanese-style inn, those available at an e-travel agent but provided by a Japanese-style inn for promotion, and/or those taken by a former Japanese guest of the inn and uploaded on the website of an e-travel agent or travel website by the guest. By looking at these, this should reveal the types of photographs that tend to be more influential than others. Such findings are useful for both Japanese-style inns and the Japanese guests of those inns, especially the future marketing strategies and activities of the former.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Photography and Tourism**

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is the time when two modern phenomena, photography and mass tourism, emerged in our society (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011; Urry, 1990). It is generally agreed that photography was invented by Louis Daguerre in 1839 (Garlick, 2002). Just two years later, in 1841, Thomas Cook started his international travel company with a successful one-day rail trip (Garlick, 2002) from Leicester to Loughborough on 5<sup>th</sup> July. This event is deemed as the beginning of mass tourism (Garlick, 2002) and mass tourism is a typical example of ‘modern’ tourism. Markwell (1997) argues that these two modern phenomena are integrally linked to each other. Groves and Timothy (2001 cited in Garrod, 2007) also note that photography is an essential element of the tourism phenomenon. Both photography and tourism have since become widespread (Garlick, 2002). Photography (Jenkins, 2003) and tourism (Urry, 1990) may also be critical factors in being acknowledged as a modern society.

The visual sense is regarded as a prime sense for most people and is closely connected with photography (Liu et al., 2018). The visual also plays a vital role in the concept of the tourist gaze of Urry (1990). What tourists gaze upon and their experience with those objects (sight) is intangible; however, it is transformed into something tangible by being recorded in photographs (Lo et al., 2011; Osborne, 2000). In short, photographs lie between sites and tourists: photography supports the process in which sites become tangible and personal for tourists and allow tourists to take ownership of what they gaze upon and their individual experience with the sights. Photographs taken by tourists also work as a proof of their visit to a place where they may want to have authentic experience (Zhang & Yun, 2014), or an extraordinary experience (Urry, 1990), and so on. The photographs tourists take also play a significant role when their memories of a destination are integrated into their own stories or narratives (Lo et al., 2011) and will be shared with their family and friends when tourists return to their ordinary environments. Photographs also have other kinds of importance in relation to tourism. Visual aids, including photographs, together with text information play an important role in the formation of designation image (Francesconia, 2011).

Photographs also inspire people to visit a particular place (Jenkins, 2003). This research attempts to identify how photographs affect guests’ decision-making process and/or

expectations when they are planning to stay at a Japanese-style inn, but first we need to consider how the two areas of ryokan accommodation and photography are related through E-consumer behaviour. Decision-making process of tourists has been widely discussed by various tourism researchers. Smallman and Moore (2010) reviewed the research looking at tourism decision-making paradigms and conclude that such research often adopts causal analysis of independent variables explaining choices by tourists. In this current study, 'photographs' of Japanese-style inns can be seen as independent variables.

## **2.2 E-Consumer Behaviour**

For the last 30 years the Internet has been steadily growing in influence. According to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan (2014), 82.8% (100.44 million) of Japanese people had access to the Internet as of 2013 with the usage rate being more than 90% in the age group 13-59 years, but the usage rate in the age group 50-69 years showed a more rapid increase than any other age groups at this time. Such trends are not confined to Japan and are also confirmed in other developed countries (Bitterman & Shalev, 2004; Doyle & Goldingay, 2012; Helsper, 2009). Early research on e-consumers suggests that their main interests were in the functional and practical aspects of the internet (Dennis et al., 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that the Internet was initially utilised by highly limited market segments in its early development stage. However, recent e-consumers are much more diverse in terms of their demographic backgrounds. As stated above, for instance, an increase in the number of silver surfers is observed in developed countries (Gummesson & Polese, 2009). Jayawardhena, Wright, and Dennis (2007) argue that consumers' orientations in purchasing via websites are like those in the real world.

Consequently, four key interests for E-consumers can be identified: (1) the functions the website has, (2) its ease of use, (3) its opportunities for social interaction, and (4) its provision of facilities for recreation. Kim, Kim, and Kandampully (2009) investigated how the characteristics of buying environment which are not directly associated with price or product information influence overall e-satisfaction; and found that 'convenience', 'web appearance' and 'entertainment value' have a direct effect on e-satisfaction. Of these three characteristics, 'convenience' and 'web appearance' seem to be associated with (1) and (2), and 'entertainment value' appears to be related to (3) and (4). As Dennis and colleagues (2009) argued, the significance of (3) opportunities for social interaction and (4) provision of recreational motives

for e-consumers can be evidenced by virtual ethnography (webnography), also called netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Martin & Woodside, 2011), of on-line blogs and eWOM on the websites of E-travel agents (e.g. Booking.com) and travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor).

In tourism and hospitality studies, research about on-line marketing and websites emerged in the early 2000s. There are a lot of studies which examine on-line marketing in various sectors in the tourism industry all over the world (Doolin, Buegess, & Cooper, 2002; Hudson & Lang, 2002). Regarding the Japanese studies in this field, Otani (2002) explored the changes the Internet is likely to cause in the industry and listed three possible changes: (i) sharing the information with others on the Internet (e.g. eWOM); (ii) the rise of direct marketing from service suppliers (e.g. accommodation) to consumers (e.g. guests); and (iii) availability of updated information on a real-time basis. Now it can be said that what Otani (2002) predicted more than ten years ago has been realised. Some of the existing studies examine on-line marketing in the accommodation sector. Regarding the websites of hotels, for example, Wang (2002) reveals that 50% of the total sample of hotels and tour wholesalers in Taiwan already have their own websites. eWOM and its impacts on future guests have also been studied. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) concludes that exposure to eWOM enhances consideration of hotels in Dutch consumers and both positive and negative comments can increase their awareness of hotels, whilst positive reviews can improve their attitudes toward hotels. Finally, Ye, Law, and Gu (2009) explore the impact of eWOM on hotel sales in China and state that there is an important relationship between eWOM and hotel sales.

### **2.3 The Tourism Industry and Netnography**

In the tourism industry the product is an intangible service as much as it is a tangible item. In the case of the accommodation sector, the services are guests' experience with an inn or hotel. Page and Connell (2009) declare five underlying principles of services marketing: intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity, inseparability, and lack of ownership. Because of these characteristics, it is impossible for guests to test their experience with a Japanese-style inn before they actually stay there. What they can do in advance is restricted. Typically, they will collect information such as photographs of and/or eWOM about the inn as much as possible. This point indicates that the information consumers (guests) can obtain prior to the purchase should play a more important role in the purchase of services (experience) than in the purchase of goods. This is where photographs can become important (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017).

In the study of Mkono and Markwell (2014), 37 tourism-related studies in which netnography was employed, were analysed. The analysis involved reading through the articles, with particular focus on the method sections, to ascertain the specifics of how netnography was carried out. This covered how data were generated, whether the researcher was covert or overt, whether netnography was triangulated with other methods, and the format of data that were collected. Wu and Pearce (2014) analysed the blog postings of an influential set of Chinese tourists who share on-line their recreational vehicle (RV) travelling experiences in Australia. It used a netnographic approach to collect qualitative data from 22 rich and detailed Chinese blogs which in total consisted of 77 pages of Mandarin text plus images. The archival work was supplemented by on-line messages and email interaction with the RV travellers. Coding followed a consultative thematic approach. Segments from the narratives were used to illustrate some of the themes. The travellers' motive items were consistent with much previous motivation work and fitted into an experimental and experiential framework and revealed parallels with the career patterns of experienced western tourists. The need for further samples and contexts, and suggestions for exploring and developing this emerging market were offered.

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Zhang and Hitchcock (2017) offers insights into women travellers' experiences and discusses the gendered views of female travellers originating from China on cross border trips to Macao. The analysis is derived from a careful reading or 'thick description' of blogs posted by female tourists that may be characterised as a web ethnography or netnography. The study indicates that the perception of Macao by Chinese women travellers embodies their confusion concerning modern life and their memories of tradition. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that

Chinese women travellers conceptualise travelling as a way of underpinning the status of their self-identity. Travelling in Macao for them is not just a leisure practice but a means to improve and enhance personal relationships.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The objectives of this research were thus to identify eWOM in the Japanese context and gather evidence of the impact of photographs on decision-making process and/or expectations of guests of Japanese-style inns. Concerning a research outline, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007) suggest a research framework titled ‘the research onion’. The research onion consists of several different layers and layers become more detailed and specific from the outermost layer (philosophies) to the innermost layer (techniques and procedures) (Venable, 2011). As the statement ‘the research onion’ indicates, there are many alternative research philosophies in social scientific research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007). Of these, the distinction between positivist and interpretive philosophies is a primary dichotomy (Veal, 2006). This study stems from interpretivism and adopts an inductive approach as its main research orientation. In other words, this research examines mainly qualitative data and aims to identify significant phenomena emerging from these data. Netnography was selected as the strategy of this research. Netnography can be deemed as on-line ethnography and was first established in the mid-1990s (Kozinets, 1997). As this research aimed to investigate the impacts of photographs in on-line tourism marketing through a case study of Japanese-style inns, netnography was regarded as the most appropriate research strategy given the research aim. Also, compared with other research strategies and data collection methods, netnography is easier to control as no one other than the researcher is involved in its data collection process.

In short, Netnography as utilised in this research deals only with secondary data, namely photographs and eWOM available on websites. Netnography is also advantageous in terms of the costs and time for data collection and analysis: It allows the researcher to deal with a large amount of data within a limited time, to identify which of key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns are influential for guests [Objective (i)], and to analyse how photographs of Japanese-style inns affected guests’ decision-making process and/or expectations [Objective (ii)]. Ideally, some of these eWOM could also allow the researcher to identify the source of such



photographs (provided by guests or Japanese-style inns) and where they are available (on which travel website or which Japanese-style inn's website) [Objective (iii)].

Kozinets (2010), a pioneer of netnography, argues that this methodology follows six overlapping steps: (i) Research planning; (ii) Entrée; (iii) Data collection; (iv) Interpretation; (v) Ensuring ethical standards; and (vi) Research representation. In principle, this research also followed these six phases. In application of these six steps to the current studies: (ii) entrée: the researcher set clear aims and objectives for this research, and identified three websites (TripAdvisor Japan, Rakuten Travel, and Jalan); (iv) interpretation, in this research, content analysis is the chief method of 'interpretation' of the data (i.e. eWOM); and (v) ensuring ethical standards are maintained. That is because this research deals with eWOM that is open to public access and does not contain any personal or confidential information. As these are overlapping steps, it is not necessarily possible to distinguish each step in a completely clear way. However, Step three 'Data collection' means searching and identifying on-line data relevant to this research. Step six 'Research representation' signifies that the results of this research does not represent any specific individuals but represents the overall views of general guests of Japanese-style inns.

Xu and Wu (2018) suggest that netnography is an appropriate method to understand the behaviour of emerging or niche markets. Japanese-style inns and their guests are such emerging or niche markets. In a study by Wu and Pearce (2014), netnography was the centrepiece of their appraisal of tourism markets. The authors argue that netnography could play a valuable role in enhancing our understanding of (a) rapidly changing tourist markets, (b) the growth of new markets, and (c) the perspectives of culturally distinctive groups. The analysis of the blogs of Chinese recreational vehicle tourists who had visited Australia was chosen in their case study. In studying an emerging market segment from a rapidly changing and culturally different community, this study was a key test of the value of the netnographic approach in generating insights. Practical steps to employ the method – entrée, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation and member checks – are illustrated, and issues arising from the case study for the application of netnography in tourism research are highlighted. These include the value of the detail inherent in the postings, the attendant ability to consider the material using conceptual schemes, the practicality of getting additional information, the need to fully address ethical concerns and the value of supplementary perspectives. Suggestions for ways to adapt the technique for better information retrieval and interpretation are also provided.

The sampled target is all the people who left eWOM in Japanese on established Japanese travel websites (TripAdvisor Japan, Rakuten Travel, and Jalan). While examination of the views of non-Japanese tourists might demonstrate greater practical importance in the current rapid rate of growth in inbound tourism, this research, however, focuses on those of Japanese tourists written in Japanese. That is mainly because this type of existing data has not been explored enough in previous research, especially research that is written-up in English. Just like every research design, the present study has methodological limitations, even if it has followed the previous work closely. Under the limitations of labour, budget and time, the adopted method was considered as the best that would allow us to achieve the three objectives of the research and answer the research question.

### **3.2 Reliability, Validity, and Objectivity**

Netnography has limitations as well as the advantages mentioned above. As netnography is seen as a qualitative research strategy, reliability, validity and objectivity of the data and/or in the data analysis may be regarded as its limitations. Reliability and validity, however, stem from quantitative research; hence, their meanings should be redefined in the context of qualitative research. For instance, Golafshani (2003: 604) stated “Reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in the qualitative paradigm”. The methodology adopted in this research tries to confirm these points as well as objectivity with the following approaches and measures.

First, only eWOM on travel websites and websites of e-travel agents were selected as secondary data for the present study. This is because there are numerous travel bloggers who tend to write only about positive aspects of the Japanese-style inns they stayed at. Comments available at social networking websites were also excluded mainly due to access issues. Second, of the various travel websites and websites of e-travel agents, only three were selected as data sources because of their trustworthiness, rigor and quality, namely TripAdvisor Japan (travel website), and Rakuten Travel and Jalan (websites of e-travel agents). TripAdvisor was chosen as it is the most influential international travel website and some of their eWOM are available in Japanese. Moreover, TripAdvisor Japan (2008) prohibits users from using their website or its contents for any commercial purposes. Rakuten Travel and Jalan were selected since they are e-travel agents which are most widely used by Japanese people (The Nielsen Company, 2014).

The authors are convinced that a high level of neutrality is secured for the following reasons: (a) this research looks at eWOM that were posted by unspecified people; and (b) the researcher examined each eWOM chosen for the sample in a systematic way. It allows the researcher to deal with a large amount of data within a limited time, to identify which of the key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns are influential for guests [Objective (i)], and to analyse how photographs of Japanese-style inns affected guests' decision-making process and/or expectations [Objective (ii)]. Ideally, some of these eWOM could also allow the researcher to identify the source of such photographs (provided by guests or Japanese-style inns) and where they are available (on which travel website or which Japanese-style inn's website) [Objective (iii)]. Furthermore, eWOM on these three websites follows a specific format. This enabled the researcher to avoid difficulties in the data analysis. eWOM on these websites are also desirable in terms of anonymity as guests can upload their photographs and eWOM using their username. However, of these three websites, only TripAdvisor Japan allows guests to post the photographs they took as well as their eWOM. Regarding objectivity, the fact that the research deals only with secondary data generated by diverse guests other than the researcher ensures a high level of objectivity in the data and its analysis. Thus, eWOM about Japanese-style inns where the researcher was a previous guest were not considered to ensure objectivity in the data analysis.

### **3.3 Analytical Methods**

Netnography, using interpretive content analysis, is the main analytical method used in this research. In the data analysis process, one of the authors in the current study plays a role as an 'interpreter' of each eWOM. A set of Japanese words equivalent to "eWOM", "look", "photographs", "Japanese-style inns", "room", "meals", and "hot spring" were used as keywords to spot eWOM which refer to the impacts of photographs on guests' decision-making process and/or expectations. There are two giants in the Japanese search engine market. In 2013, Yahoo Japan shares 53% and Google Japan shares 40% (Austin Return on Now Internet Marketing, 2014); hence, these two were adopted when the search was conducted. Two searches per day, one on Yahoo Japan and the other on Google Japan, were conducted for one week in April. The top 50 results from every search (in total 700 results from 14 searches) were checked to confirm whether each of them was eWOM posted on one of the three websites and mentions any impact of photographs on guests' decision-making process and/or expectations.

The population for this research is almost indefinite; therefore, in principle the minimum sample size for reliability, validity, and objectivity of the data cannot be obtained statistically. Moreover, the nature of the sample (i.e. which/who should be selected as sample in terms of the aim and objectives of the research) is more crucial than the number of samples (sample size) for this research. Of the countless reviews and eWOM available on the Internet, those available at the websites of only one travel agent (TripAdvisor Japan) and two e-travel agents (Rakuten Travel and Jalan) were selected as data sources because of their trustworthiness, rigor and quality.

#### **4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

This research aimed to examine the impact of the use of photographs in on-line marketing for tourism through a case study of Japanese-style inns by analyzing eWOM (reviews) available at the travel websites. To achieve these aims, three distinctive objectives were set: (i) Identify photographs of those key appealing elements of Japanese-style inns that are influential for guests; (ii) Analyze how such photographs affect guests' decision-making process and/or expectations; and (iii) Identify the sources of such photographs for further study. These aims and objectives have been achieved as a result of this research. The key contribution of this research to the relevant study fields is to shed a light on the experience of Japanese-style inns, accommodation facilities unique to Japan, and analyze the impact of photographs on tourist decision making through netnography.

The titles and contents of 700 searches by customers were checked; however, many of the eWOM that appeared as the search results of Yahoo Japan and Google Japan were the same. Moreover, which of the key appealing elements of Japanese-inns are significant for guests was relatively well-presented in most of the suitable eWOM [Objective (i)]. How photographs affected their decision-making process and/or expectations was well described in most suitable eWOM [Objective (ii)]. It was also found that a few suitable eWOM specified the source of the photographs and whether they were available [Objective (iii)]. In short, all of three objectives of this research have been achieved; however, some limitations of the research were also confirmed. The following sections reveal the examination results of two samples of suitable eWOM that most clearly refer to the impacts of photographs on guests' decision-making process and/or expectations, from each of the websites.

#### **4.1 TripAdvisor Japan**

The first sample of suitable eWOM on TripAdvisor Japan shows that: (a) The elements in the photographs attractive for the guest were the nostalgic townscape of the Ginzan onsen area and the exterior of Kozankaku (a *ryokan*); (b) Photographs of these elements motivated the guest to visit the Ginzan onsen area and stay at Kozankaku; and (c) The source of the photographs seems to be the official website of Kozankaku, although photographs taken by other guests are available on TripAdvisor Japan. The second one on TripAdvisor Japan indicates that: (a) The elements in the photographs appealing to the guest were communal hot spring facilities, a room with a small private hot spring facility, and dinner of Shosenkaku (*ryokan*); (b) The photographs of these elements motivated the guest to stay at Shosenkaku. In every aspect, however, his/her experience did not meet his/her high expectations developed by these photographs and the relatively high price of the facility; and (c) The source of the photographs seems to be the official website of Shosenkaku, although photographs taken by other guests are available on TripAdvisor Japan.

#### **4.2 Rakuten Travel**

The first sample of suitable eWOM on the Rakuten Travel site demonstrated that: (a) The element in the photograph fascinating for the guest was a dinner prepared with a wide range of seafood at Seaside Osawa (a *minshuku*); (b) The photograph of this element motivated the guest to stay at Seaside Osawa. However, his/her experience with seafood dinner did not meet his/her high expectations that had been developed by seeing the photograph; and (c) The source of the photograph is the official website of Seaside Osawa; however, the same photograph provided by Seaside Osawa is also available on Rakuten Travel. The second one on Rakuten Travel presents the outcome that: (a) The element in the photographs which discouraged the guest from staying there was the poor exterior of Ichinoya (*minshuku*) which looked like a common Japanese house; (b) Photographs of this element almost made him/her to choose another Japanese-style inn; however, Ichinoya's famous and unique dining reputation made him/her to decide to stay there; and (c) The source of the photographs was the website of Rakuten Travel provided by Ichinoya.

#### **4.3 Jalan**

The first sample of suitable eWOM on the Jalan site shows that: (a) The elements in the photographs that attracted the guest were the exterior of Umenoyu (*ryokan*) and the meals at Umenoyu; (b) Positive eWOM submitted to Jalan by previous guests reinforced the photographs of these elements and encouraged the guest to stay at Umenoyu. His/her experience with Umenoyu was excellent and met expectations; and (c) The source of the photographs seems to be the websites of Jalan and Umenoyu. The photographs available on Jalan are provided by Umenoyu. The second one on Jalan indicates that: (a) The element in the photographs attractive for the guest was the communal hot spring facilities of Kichimu (*ryokan*); (b) The photographs of this element were the main reason why the guest chose Kichimu. However, his/her experience with the hot spring facilities did not meet his/her expectations at all as the photographs looked much better than reality; and (c) The sources of the photographs seem to be the websites of Jalan and Kichimu. Kichimu provides Jalan with their photographs.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The importance of the ‘look and feel’ of websites in on-line marketing is noted by many researchers (Gilbert, Powell-Perry, & Widijoso, 1999; Miyazaki, 2009; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002). The ‘look and feel’ can be rephrased as the atmosphere websites create and the images websites project to consumers, and its significance for the on-line marketing of Japanese-style inns is also confirmed. All the websites of the Japanese-style inns that were mentioned in suitable eWOM contained at least one photograph. Each website also tries to convey its unique atmosphere to viewers through the design of, colouring of, and text information on the website. As Jimura (2011b) suggests, most photographs available on the websites of Japanese-style inns are those of what they think their key appealing elements are (guest rooms, interior and exterior of the inn, meals, and hot spring facilities). It is identified that most of the photographs uploaded by guests on TripAdvisor Japan are also those containing these elements. In the light of this, it can be confirmed that there is a common understanding about what attracts guests to Japanese-style inns between these inns and their guests. Each of these elements was referred to in suitable eWOM as an influential factor for guests when they decided to stay.

Photographs also inspire people to visit a specific place (Jenkins, 2003). The results of the present research; however, show that photographs can either encourage or discourage guests to stay at Japanese-style inns. Photographs of key appealing elements influenced guests' decision-making process positively and increased the level of their expectations (Kozankaku, Shosenkaku, Seaside Osawa, Umenoyu, and Kichimu), while those of the facility's poor exterior discouraged a guest from staying at Ichinoya. However, not only their content but also the *quality* of the photographs used can affect guests' decision-making process and expectations as Kichimu's case shows. As highly presentable photographs of key appealing elements can attract guests to Japanese-style inns and increase the level of their expectations, they can be deemed an effective marketing tool. On the other hand, it is very demanding for Japanese-style inns to offer the services which could satisfy such a high level of expectation. Even if an inn offers very good level of service to their guests, they would not be satisfied with such services when they expected an *excellent* level of services. Consequently, such guests would feel that it was not a good experience. Hence, it can be said that even highly presentable photographs of key appealing elements can work as a double-edged sword in the on-line marketing of Japanese-style inns.

The results also imply that guests tend to rely on photographs taken by Japanese-style inns themselves rather than those taken by other guests (Kozankaku and Shosenkaku), although the latter would portray more of the 'reality' of the inns compared with the former. The main reason for this trend seems to be the fact that photographs provided by Japanese-style inns are accepted by these three websites, while those submitted by guests are accepted only by Trip Advisor. Relating this to the four key interests of e-consumers identified earlier: (1) the functions the website has, (2) its ease of use, (3) the opportunities for social interaction, and (4) the provision of recreational motivations (Jayawardhena, Wright, & Dennis, 2007), photographs and eWOM make most of their contributions to (3) and (4). Francesconia (2011) emphasised the vital role which visual images (photographs) and text information (eWOM) play together in the formation of destination image. Our research also shows that photographs and eWOM work together in effective on-line tourism marketing. In the case of Umenoyu for example, photographs of two key appealing elements worked together with the positive eWOM on Jalan and encouraged the guest to stay at Umenoyu.

eWOM is thus very influential in on-line tourism marketing in the accommodation sector (Ye et al., 2009). Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) note that exposure to positive or negative eWOM

increase guests' awareness of hotels and they will more likely to consider those hotels when they plan their trips. They also state that positive reviews can improve future guests' attitudes towards hotels. This phenomenon would also apply to Japanese-style inns and their guests. Jimura (2011b) emphasises the impacts of eWOM posted on different types of websites. As discussed above, eWOM can work together with photographs in on-line tourism marketing as the example of Umenoyu indicates. As far as all the eWOM checked for our study are concerned, the impacts of previous guests' eWOM on prospective guests' decision-making process and/or expectations seem to be even greater than those of photographs as the number of eWOM which refer to other eWOM is larger than that of eWOM mentioning photographs.

The impact of photographs on the on-line marketing of Japanese-style inns is confirmed through this research. Most importantly, Japanese-style inns and their guests seem to share a common view about what their key appealing elements are. Photographs of these elements are uploaded to the websites of inns, travel websites and/or websites of e-travel agents by Japanese-style inns, and are also posted on travel websites by guests. Photographs taken by previous guests would portray more reality of the Japanese-style inns; however, prospective guests tend to rely more on those taken by the inns. This is mainly because there is a lack of websites which allow guests to submit both their photographs and eWOM.

Photographs can work in both positive and negative ways in on-line marketing: each can either encourage or discourage guests to stay at Japanese-style inns. The level of guests' expectations can be influenced by photographs they saw. Highly presentable photographs prepared by Japanese-style inns can be regarded as an effective marketing tool as they can actually attract a number of guests to the inns. Simultaneously, however, it is challenging for the inns to offer the fantastic services that could satisfy the high expectations of guests which were much enhanced by seeing impressive photographs. As a result, such guests may not think it was good experience. Thus, eWOM works together with photographs in the on-line marketing of Japanese-style inns as the case of Umenoyu shows. According to all the eWOM checked for this research, the impacts of previous guests' eWOM on prospective guests' decision-making process and/or expectations seem to be bigger than those of photographs as the difference in the number of eWOM, which mention their impacts implies. In short, it can be stated that the impacts of photographs on guests' decision-making process and/or expectations are great, but they can be even more influential if they are supported by eWOM.



Although this research provided insights into internet-based tourism marketing with photographs, there is room for improvement, especially in the methodology. As the number of eWOM written about Japanese Ryokan in non-Japanese languages has been gradually increasing in recent years, future research can be focused on these eWOM to the benefit of our knowledge about the acceptance of imaged based marketing by inbound tourists. In addition, this current study concentrated on secondary data; primary data collection such as interviews might be adopted in future research to increase the range of views studied.

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