

The attractiveness of Japanese ryokan to foreign visitors to Japan:

Analysis of Japanese and English reviews of Tripadvisor's "Japanese inns popular among foreigners"

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Abstract

Ryokans (Japanese inns) that have been having difficulty attracting guests will improve their management by accepting foreign visitors to Japan after the end of COVID-19 pandemic. This study finds the attractiveness of Japanese inns to foreign visitors of Japan by analyzing and comparing reviews posted in the Japanese and English language by guests of the top 20 "Japanese inns popular among foreigners" on Tripadvisor (2020). As the result, the attractiveness of Japanese inns to foreign visitors to Japan are Japanese-style rooms, Japanese food, tatami mats, yukata (Japanese summer kimono), gardens, and open-air hot spring baths, which are not special to Japanese people. Based on these findings, I proposed ways for inns under severe business situation to satisfy foreign visitors, drawing on the other successful cases of accepting foreign visitors to Japan.

Keywords

Japanese inns, foreign visitors, Tripadvisor, Japanese inns popular among foreigners, word-of-mouth

1. Introduction

The number of inbound foreign visitors to Japan has been increasing rapidly, exceeding 10 million in 2013 and 31.8 million in 2019 [Japan Tourism Agency, 2021], and is expected to grow again after the end of COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a sharp decline to 4.1 million in 2020. Foreign tourists stay at the same lodging for several days to several weeks, both during the week and on holidays, and take long vacations at different times of the year, depending on the country [Weekly Toyo Keizai, 2013]. In anticipation of these foreign visitors, new hotels have opened one after the other, and the number of guest rooms in hotels surpassed that of ryokans in 2010. In contrast, the number of Japanese inns peaked at 83,226 in 1980 and had dropped to 38,662 by 2018 [Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2020]. By proactively accepting foreign visitors to Japan, it is possible to attract customers on weekdays. In order to find out the attractiveness of Japanese inns to foreign visitors of Japan, this study compares the Japanese and English reviews of the top 20 ryokans (Japanese inns popular among foreigners) on a major online travel agency, Tripadvisor [2020], and discusses to encourage foreign visitors to Japan to stay in Japanese inns.

2. Previous research on foreign visitors to Japan and Japanese inns

2.1 Trends in foreign visitors to Japan

According to the research of JTB [2018], the travel objectives of foreign visitors to Japan include "visiting tourist attractions," "shopping," "eating and drinking local specialties," "staying at traditional accommodations," and "bathing in hot springs". More than 90 % of respondents were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their lodging facilities [JTB, 2018]. Foreign visitors to Japan, on the other hand, were dissatisfied with

Japanese inns because "the rooms are small," "the facilities are dirty and old," "the prices are expensive," "I could not interact with Japanese people," "I felt ignored," and "I had trouble understanding how to eat Japanese food, but they did not tell me." In addition, the fixed accommodation plan of two meals per night, which is a characteristic of a Japanese inn, restricts the freedom of action and is shunned by foreign visitors to Japan [Murayama, 2016].

2.2 Response to foreign visitors to Japan in inns

According to the survey of response to foreign visitors by Japan Finance Corporation [2018], 88.8 % of respondents have "websites that do not support foreign languages," and 0.6 % have "advertised on the Internet for overseas visitors," implying that many Japanese businesses do not communicate with foreign visitors. Regarding the acceptance of foreign visitors to Japan, 17.1 % of the respondents "actively accept," 47.7 % "may accept," and 35.2 % "do not want to accept, if possible," indicating that they are not proactive in accepting foreign visitors. When asked why they do not want to accept foreign visitors, 66.7 % said they "cannot understand the language," and 24.3 % said they "don't know how to accept them," indicating that communication in foreign languages is a problem. In terms of measures to accommodate foreign visitors to Japan, the Monthly Ryokan Hotel [2016] suggests (1) improvement of the Internet reservation environment, (2) support for foreign languages such as English, and (3) enhancement of websites such as vacancy management, while The Weekly Toyo Keizai [2013] suggests (1) free WiFi; (2) multilingual customer service, such as display services, voice translation devices, chat concierge services, and so on; (3) information dissemination to foreign countries via personal blogs and social networking sites; (4) multilingual websites with a lot of images; (5) variations in lodging types, such as the separation of lodging and meals; (6) meal menus such as soba, udon, curry, ramen, and sushi. To cope with foreign languages, which Japanese people are not particularly good at, there are some examples of training em-

ployees to be multilingual, securing foreign-language personnel [Nguyen, 2020], and introducing automatic translators and interpreters [Tozaki, 2018]. Other examples include Fukuoka Prefecture’s efforts to provide telephone support to foreign visitors in front of them, the seminar accepting foreigners, and free tools and translation applications, as well as the Kinoshita Tourism Association’s efforts to open information and accommodation reservation websites in English and French.

2.3 Empirical analysis targeting foreign tourists visiting Japan

There are several empirical studies on the Japanese lodging industry targeting foreign visitors to Japan. Ishibashi [2012] examined word-of-mouth reviews by foreign guests of hotels and inns in the Izu region and extracted words that influence the evaluation of accommodation facilities, such as delicious, good, not good, nice, happy, enjoyable, spacious, and pleasant. Nakamura et al. [2010] analyzed the behavioral characteristics of foreign visitors to lodging facilities in the vicinity of Narita Airport and found that convention hotel with fitness clubs and free shuttle buses were highly rated. Interaction with the management and other guests at guesthouses was appealing

to budget-conscious Western guests. Tian and Kato [2016] surveyed Chinese travelers to Japan and discovered that actual and average satisfaction levels for “hot springs” and “hospitality” were higher than prior expectations, and that the factors influencing satisfaction were food, room care, hotel facilities, and employee attitudes toward customer service. Lu and Yamaguchi [2012] conducted a questionnaire survey on the factors of satisfaction of Chinese who visited Japan and suggested that increasing (1) free time during the visit, (2) Japanese hospitality, (3) taste and price of food, and (4) service of tourist facilities and accommodations would encourage them to come back to Japan. Ishida et al. [2015] conducted a survey for the purpose of tourism in Japan for visitors from the United States in the Kansai region, and discovered four factors: “encounter/interaction,” “new experience,” “places of interest/sightseeing,” and “public transportation/convenience.” The impact of “encounter/interaction” and “new experience” is particularly significant.

Although a number of several such surveys are targeting foreign visitors, they target accommodation in specific regions or foreign visitors from specific countries, and the results are vague, such as “hot springs” and “hospitality.” What is the attractiveness of Japanese inns to foreign visitors to Japan, and

Table 1: Frequent words in Japanese word-of-mouth (top 60 words)

Word	Japanese	Freq.	Word	Japanese	Freq.
Room	部屋	1169	Nice	素敵	156
Inn	宿	687	This time	今回	154
Ryokan	旅館	583	Place	場所	151
Good	良い	561	High	高い	150
Bath	風呂	528	A little	少し	143
Onsen	温泉	490	People	人	142
Food	料理	455	Wide	広い	137
Meal	食事	421	Really	本当に	136
Stay	宿泊	398	Too bad	残念	130
Staff	スタッフ	372	Japan	日本	130
Delicious	美味しい	370	Oh, my God.	大変	129
Breakfast	朝食	313	Travel	旅行	129
Open-air bath	露天風呂	300	Clean	清潔	124
Very	とても	296	Price	値段	124
Nothing	ない	280	Foreign country	外国	121
Hotel	ホテル	259	Sightseeing	観光	121
Time	時間	248	Family	家族	120
Satisfaction	満足	222	Old	古い	112
Dinner	夕食	222	Stay	滞在	112
Service	サービス	216	Building	建物	109
Wonderful	素晴らしい	207	Check in	チェックイン	108
Feeling	感じ	187	Bath	浴場	108
Great	最高	177	Care	気	107
landlady	女将	177	Polite	丁寧	105
Many	多い	177	Other	他	104
Reservation	予約	176	Kindness	親切	102
Before	前	172	inside the building	館内	100
Response	対応	172	Guest	客	100
Star	星	157	Hot water	湯	100
Atmosphere	雰囲気	157	Expectation	期待	99

how do they differ from Japanese visitors?

3. Survey and Analysis of Word-of-Mouth Reviews of Japanese inns popular among Foreign Visitors to Japan

3.1 Survey and analysis method

To clarify the attractiveness of Japanese inns to foreign visitors of Japan, KH Coder (ver. 3) is used to analyze the Japanese and English reviews of the top 20 Japanese inns in the “Japanese inns popular among foreigners 2020” sponsored by Tripadvisor, a major online travel company. The 20 Japanese inns are: (1) Hinodeya, (2) Kyoto Machiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo, (3) Ryori Ryokan Hakubai, (4) Wakakusa no Yado Maruei, (5) Hoshinoya Tokyo, (6) Sawanoya, (7) Shima-onsen Kashiwaya Ryokan, (8) Toshiharu Ryokan, (9) Maifukan, (10) Yamahisa, (11) Kyoto Machiya Rakuyu Bukkoji Higashi-machi, (12) Shimaya, (13) Kyoya Ryokan, (14) Asunaro, (15) Yoki-kan, (16) Hoshinoya Kyoto, (17) Hakone-yado Zen, (18) Ryokan Fuji Otsu, (19) Nishimiya Ryokan, and (20) Shibu Onsen Furukuya. Frequent words intercepted word for word from 1086 Japanese and 1065 English in “Tripadvisor” reviews posted by guests of these 20 Japanese inns between June 2003 and October 2021 were subjected to cluster analysis (ward method). I conducted a qualitative analysis of the word-of-mouth related to the keywords that differed between Japanese and English by comparing the frequent words with the results of cluster analysis.

3.2 Results of word-of-mouth analysis for Japanese

Table 1 shows the top 60 most frequently occurring words (frequency of occurrence) in Japanese word-of-mouth. Words such as room (1169), inn (687), ryokan (583), good (561), bath (528), hot spring (490), cuisine (455), meal (421), stay (398), and staff (372) were frequently found in the Japanese word-of-mouth. Figure 1 depicts the results of a cluster analysis performed on this word-of-mouth data. The frequency of occurrence is indicated by the horizontal bar to the left of the words in the figure. I defined the clusters based on these frequencies

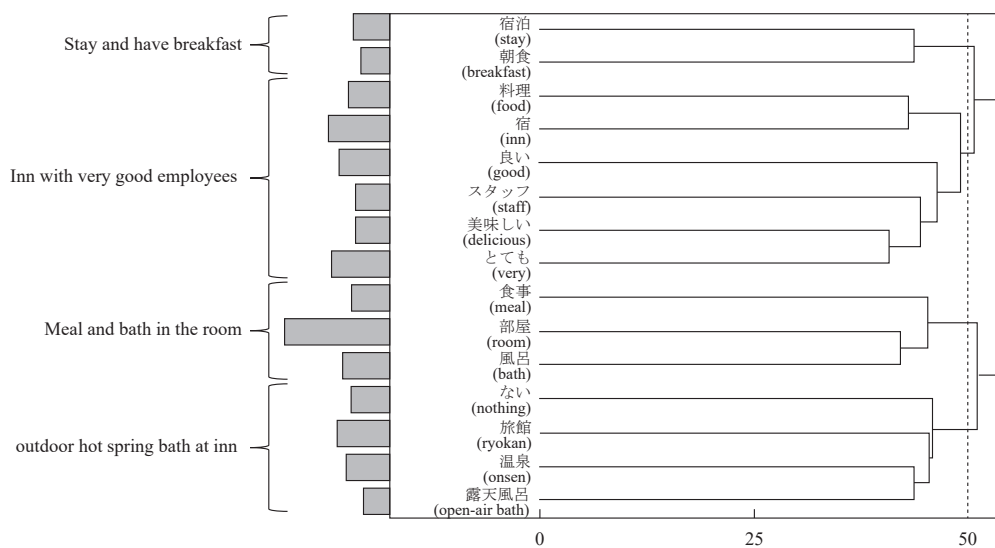


Figure 1: Cluster analysis of word-of-mouth in Japanese

as “stay and have breakfast,” “inn with very good employees,” “meal and bath in the room,” and “outdoor hot spring bath at the inn.”

3.3 Results of Word-of-Mouth Analysis in English

The top 60 most frequent words in English word-of-mouth are shown in Table 2. Room (1401), stay (748), staff (724), Japanese (670), hotel (660), ryokan (572), breakfast (556), experience (534), night (476), dinner (465), and other words were frequently found in the English word-of-mouth.

Figure 2 shows the results of cluster analysis using this word-of-mouth data. As in Japanese, each cluster is defined as “experience at a traditional Japanese inn,” “great staffs and time at the place of stay,” “private onsen (hot spring),” and “breakfast and dinner in the room.”

4. Discussion

Table 3 shows the results of a comparison of frequent word-of-mouth expressions in English and Japanese.

Frequent words found as common meanings in English and Japanese are room (1401) and *room* (1169), ryokan (572) and *ryokan* (583), onsen (528), and *onsen* (463), and food (368) and *food* (455). On the other hand, Japanese (670), experience (534), night (476), traditional (438), and private (401) are words that appear frequently in English but not in Japanese reviews. Furthermore, the words that occur approximately twice as often in English as in Japanese are stay (748) and *stay* (398), staff (724) and *staff* (372), hotel (660) and *hotel* (259), breakfast (556) and *breakfast* (313), and dinner (465) and *dinner* (222).

Table 4 shows typical examples of each cluster and word-of-mouth. Examples of reviews for the cluster “experience at a traditional Japanese inn” consisting of Japanese, experience, traditional and ryokan. These are just a series of the attractiveness of experiencing the traditional lifestyle of Japan itself, including Japanese rooms, tatami mats, yukata, and gardens at the ryokan. The cluster “great staffs and time at the place

Table 2: Frequent words in English word-of-mouth (top 60 words)

Word	Freq.	Word	Freq.	Word	Freq.
room	1401	Kyoto	357	want	208
stay	748	service	322	meal	207
staff	724	good	310	best	198
japanese	670	day	300	tea	195
hotel	660	amazing	292	hot	194
ryokan	572	Ryokan	289	lovely	189
breakfast	556	friendly	277	bus	188
experience	534	beautiful	275	clean	186
night	476	feel	268	use	186
dinner	465	nice	267	trip	185
onsen	463	JAPAN	265	other	182
place	455	enjoy	259	wonderful	182
traditional	438	area	258	location	180
time	425	view	253	give	179
great	412	small	239	serve	179
private	401	come	230	comfortable	176
bath	381	provide	227	look	174
food	368	station	218	style	174
recommend	358	TOKYO	216	excellent	172
stay	358	helpful	211	delicious	171

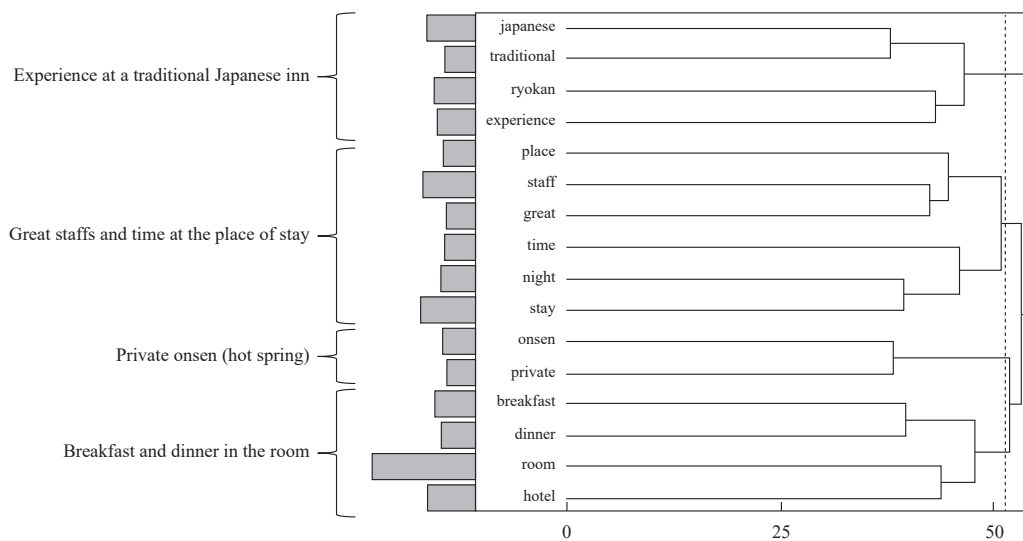


Figure 2: Cluster analysis of English word-of-mouth

of stay” is consisted of place, staff, great, time, night and stay. The guests were impressed with the staffs’ excellent. However, the words “night” and others are not related and appear as independent sentences in one review. The cluster “breakfast and dinner in the room” is consisted of dinner, room and hotel. The guests reviewed that they appreciated the one-of-a-kind experience of eating delicious Japanese food in their own rooms.

Furthermore, co-occurrence network analysis (jaccard method) is shown in Figure 3. There are four main clusters: (1) residence experience (staff, friendly, stay, night and experience), (2) accommodation (room, hotel and ryokan), (3) meal and hot spring (breakfast, dinner, private and onsen) and (4) Japanese tradition (Japanese and tradition). Although the results are

slightly different from those of the former cluster analysis, the attractiveness of Japanese inns is interpreted the experience and hospitality to stay in Japanese traditional accommodations.

From the word-of-mouth analysis, Japanese people’s familiarity with Japanese-style rooms, tatami mats, yukata, Japanese gardens, and Japanese food served in their rooms are unique experiences for foreigners and are attractive features of Japanese inns. When the results of a cluster analysis of Japanese word-of-mouth with “stay and have breakfast,” “very good employees at the inn,” “food and bath in the room,” and “outdoor hot spring bath at the inn,” are compared, foreign guests are more impressed with the traditional Japanese experience of staying at the same inn. It is possible for Japanese inns, where

Table 3: Comparison of words that appear frequently in Japanese and English word-of-mouth

Common meanings		More frequent English words than Japanese		Only in English
English	Japanese	English	Japanese	
room (1401)	部屋 (1169)	stay (748)	宿泊 (398)	Japanese (670)
ryokan (572)	旅館 (583)	staff (724)	スタッフ (372)	experience (534)
onsen (463)	温泉 (528)	hotel (660)	ホテル (259)	night (476)
food (368)	料理 (455)	breakfast (556)	朝食 (313)	traditional (438)
		dinner (465)	夕食 (222)	private (401)

Note: Number of occurrences.

Table4: Typical examples of cluster and word-of-mouth

Cluster	Examples of word-of-mouth
Experience at a traditional Japanese inn	“The rooms are very traditional and quite spacious for Japanese standards.” (Shima-onsen Kashiwaya Ryokan), “We were in love with our original Japanese styled room had tatami mats, changing our clothes to wear Japanese robes” (Sawanoya), “Toshiharu is a beautiful old style building with traditional Japanese gardens.” (Toshiharu Ryokan), “Traditional Japanese clothes to relax in too.” (Maifukan)
Great staffs and time at the place of stay	“From the moment we arrived the staff were so helpful.” (Kyoya Ryokan), “The staff is outstanding” (Asunaro), “We hope to return to Yokikan and spend additional nights” (Yoki-kan), “The only regret is that I only stayed for one night which was way too short to truly indulge myself in the beauty and serenity of the place.” (Kyoto Machiya Rakuyu Horikawa Gojo)
Private onsen (hot-spring)	“Private open-air onsens are beautiful and very relaxing” (Shima-onsen Kashiwaya Ryokan), “Every room has a private outdoor onsen, which is great for Westerner husbands who are adamantly against being nude in front of other people.” (Shimaya), “Because of my husband’s tattoo, I only researched options with private onsens and while Zen ended up being a little more than we originally wanted to spend, it was 100 % worth it.” (Hakone-yado Zen), “we’re definitely happy for the unintended onsen privacy” (Wakakusa no Yado Maruei)
Breakfast and dinner in the room	“Dinner, which was served in our room, was delicious.” (Yamahisa), “We opted to have the Traditional Japanese dinner and it was delivered to our room.” (Ryori Ryokan Hakubai), “Dinner was served in our room and was the best meal we ate in Japan.” (Shima-onsen Kashiwaya Ryokan), “Breakfast is served downstairs, dinner is served in your own room - both are a delicious parade of more than ten different dishes!” (Shibu Onsen Furukuya)

Note: Name of inn.

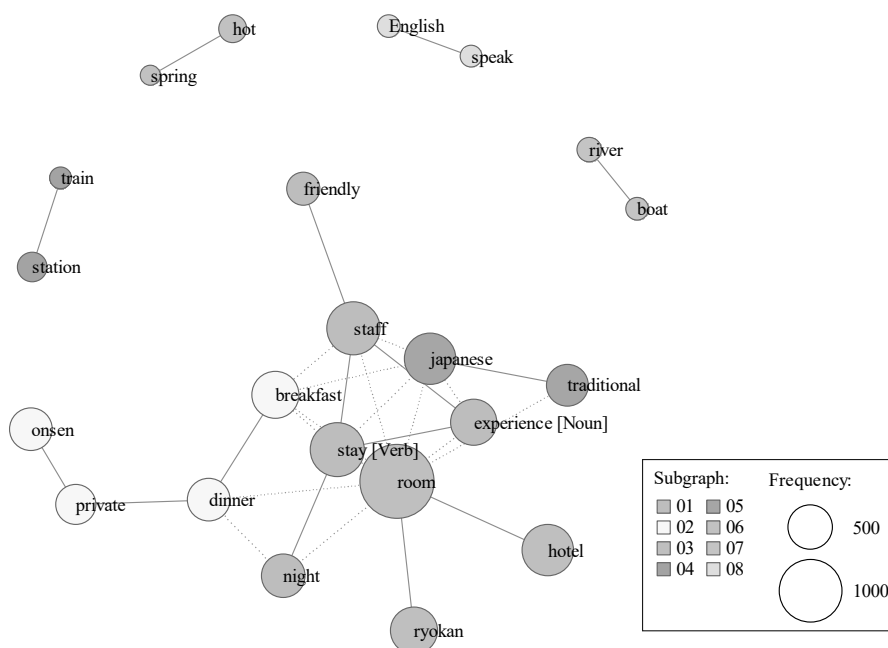


Figure 3: Co-occurrence network analysis of English word-of-mouth

it is difficult to invest in modern facilities and equipment, to offer these experiences to foreign guests with some ingenuity. For example, *Yamashiroya* has maintained its old facilities and equipment, and foreign guests appreciate the atmosphere and the experience of a Showa-era Japanese inn [Morishita, 2021]. In addition, one of the purposes of foreigners to visit Japan is to enjoy hot springs in open-air baths. Tattoos, on the other hand, are prohibited in many hot spring facilities in Japan, and many foreigners are uncomfortable taking a bath naked with others. There would be no problem if private baths were installed, but this would require a significant financial investment. As one example, *Fuji Hakone Guesthouse* changes by the hour for their outdoor hot spring baths [Morishita, 2021]. With these small efforts, foreign guests can enjoy the experience of staying in traditional Japanese inns.

5. Conclusion

Various efforts to improve the environment and accommodate foreign visitors to Japan, who were rapidly increasing before COVID-19, were attempted. Efforts to improve the reception of foreign visitors to Japan and to make it more multilingual have earned a reputation. It was unclear, however, what foreign visitors to Japan find appealing about Japanese inns. To clarify the appeal of Japanese inns in more specifically, this study analyzed and compared Japanese and English reviews of the top 20 Japanese inns in Tripadvisor's "Japanese inns popular among foreigners 2020." For foreign visitors to Japan, the experience of wearing a yukata and eating Japanese food in a Japanese-style room at a ryokan (Japanese inn) and taking in an onsen (hot spring) in a private open-air bath without hesitation is attractive. While decreasing the dissatisfaction of foreign visitors with basic multilingual support and ICT, Japanese inns should appeal to them about the uniqueness of Japanese inns, which offer the Japanese lifestyle experience and hospitality. Foreign visitors will not accept one-sided hospitality based on the providers' beliefs. It is necessary to take steps to provide the unique experience of Japanese inns from their point of view. Furthermore, based on their evaluations, foreign visitors to Japan are dissatisfied with their low interaction with Japanese people, Japanese lifestyle, and local communities, which means they prefer to experience more of these [JTB, 2018]. The attitude and response of not only those in the lodging industry, but also residents in accepting and welcoming foreign visitors to Japan are a topic for future research.

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