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The Power of Contextual Talking: On Stimulation, Incorporation, and Situational Motivation that Lead to Communicational Chain

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Introduction

Information behavior is crucial in tourism. Communication of travel information is a phenomenon commonly found in everyday life, and there are diverse information formats and situational contexts in which such communication takes place (Bieger and Laesser 2004). In particular, information behavior about a destination experience can be found as a peripheral topic for casual conversation.

This study highlights the situation where individuals' travel experience may not be the core topic for casual and serious conversation, but the topic is intermittently raised during the conversation. Such a situation is observed especially before and after holiday seasons. People commonly bring up the topic about what they do during the vacation as a tool to build interpersonal relationship and to exchange information. Despite the importance, the effect of situational and contextual interpersonal communication has not been fully examined in tourism.

To fill in the research gap, the present study focuses on the process of contextual talking, which leads to problem recognition, situational motivation, and the pattern of communicative action in tourism by partially applying and extending the *situational theory of problem solving* (Kim and Grunig 2011), conceptually and empirically.

Conceptualization

Contextual Talking and Problem Recognition

Contextual talking, a newly-suggested concept in the present study, is differentiated from other similar and generalized concepts of recommendation, referral, and communication. It is the term suggested to describe the initiation and continuation of conversation during the communication not purposely set to focus on a particular topic. The concept denotes the intermittent emergence of the relevant topic during non-purposely organized, casual interpersonal conversation, which triggers problem recognition and also causes the information receptor to be situationally-motivated to think about the issue.

Contextual talking may not directly and explicitly impact the information receptors, and the information may not be fully transmitted to the receptors as much as in purposely-organized talking, such as a lecture session as a part of a university course. However, the intermittently-communicated information, such as ideas, thoughts, and facts, may latently exist in the information receptors' mindsets, and the information may be internally triggered with problem recognition later on, with internally-reacted cognition and perception.

Meanwhile, those who become associated with the trip--especially those who consider visiting a certain destination--tend to recognize problems such as political issues, change of

travel costs, safety issues, and unexpected change of schedule, which are associated with a destination experience. This mental stage motivates them to solve the recognized problems (Grunig 1997).

The present study proposes that contextual talking functions as an external agent that triggers problem recognition. The function of contextual talking can be understood from diverse aspects in tourism. First, somebody close to the individuals who consider visiting a certain destination brings up the topic about the problem with the destination during casual conversation. Then the individual may newly recognize or may be reminded of the problem, and the level of problem recognition would become higher. Second, somebody close to an individual may accidentally initiate a topic about the issue with the tourism destination experience, which may latently exist in the information receptor's mindset and be reactivated after problem recognition.

Situational Motivation as the Consequence of Contextual Talking and Problem Recognition

Situational Motivation is conceptualized as “the extent to which a person stops to think about, is curious about, or wants more understanding of a problem” (Kim and Grunig 2011). The concept captures the willingness to be involved in the problem solving process about a destination experience. In specific, it indicates the inclination of being involved with knowing more about what is happening and which concerns need to be addressed to solve the problem. In order to reduce uneasiness, individuals desire to solve the problem when they recognize it. The present study, accepting the mediating role of situational motivation in individuals' problem solving (Kim and Grunig 2011), proposes that problem recognition, triggered by contextual talking, leads to more active communicative action when it is intervened by situational motivation.

Communicative Action as an Outcome

Communication is a crucial tool—coping strategy—for individuals' problem solving (Grunig, 1997). In the present study, we highlight information acquisition and information forwarding as the outcome of the recognition of the problem and the situational motivation to solve it. As having more information enhances possibilities to solve the encountered problem, individuals tend to seek more information if they recognize the problem as more crucial and if they are situationally motivated to solve it. Information forwarding, which is “a planned, self-propelled information giving to others” (Kim and Grunig 2011), is included in the model as the aspect suggesting what predicts another round of contextual talking. In the situation of contextual talking, an information forwarder is likely to be self-motivated to transmit information based on the accumulated information they have and prior first-hand destination experience.

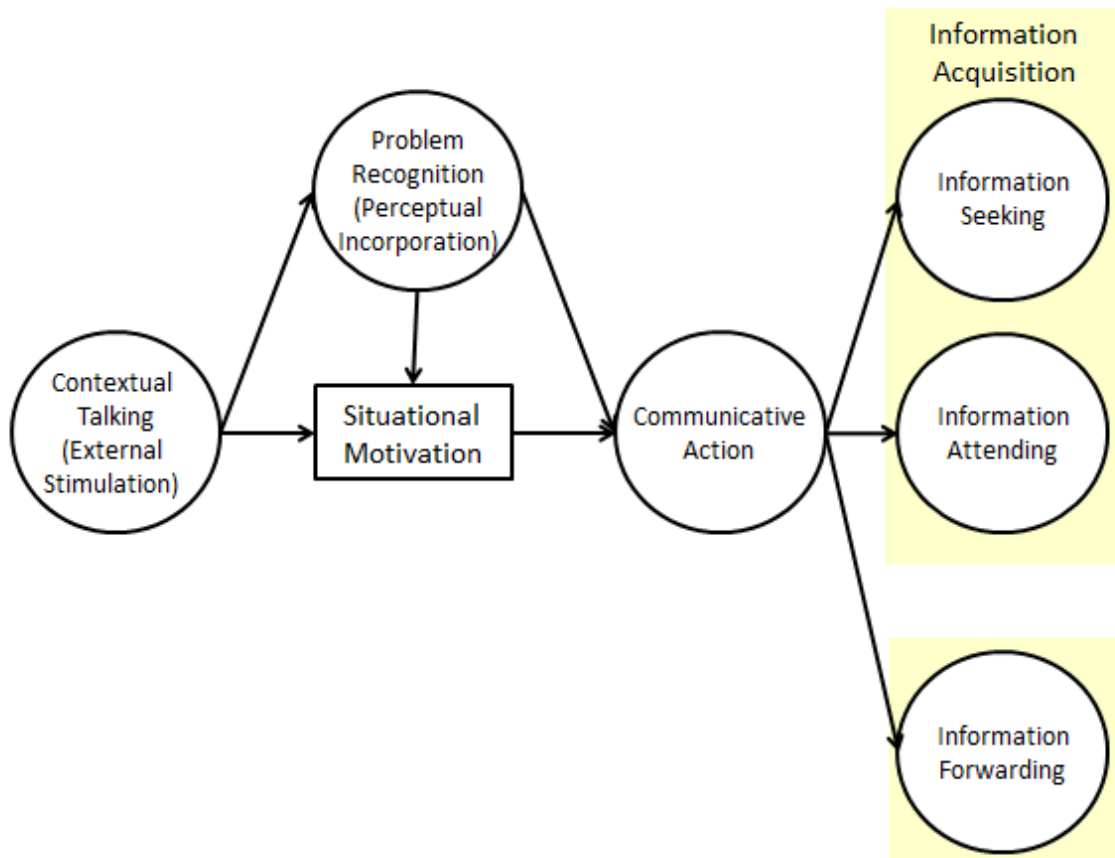


Figure 1. Model of Contextual Talking

Method

The context of the study was communicative action regarding the spring break experience of students in the United States. An online survey was conducted about one month after the spring break, and students were asked to recall their most recent spring break destination experience to answer the questions. A total of 312 undergraduate students in a Midwestern public university participated in the survey anonymously. Structural Equation Modeling was used for analyses (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). A structural model was set with contextual talking, problem recognition, situational motivation, and three dimensions of communicative action as a second-order factor being included.

Results

The structural model (Figure 1) fit well with the data ($\chi^2=190.669$, $df=112$, $\chi^2/df=1.702$, $SRMR=.061$, $CFI=.964$, $RMSEA=.048$). The results from the model showed that all the paths had significant positive associations other than the direct path of problem recognition to situational motivation.

First, the results showed the significant effects of contextual talking, which triggers problem recognition with the standardized coefficient of .212 and the p -value of .005. A relatively high standardized path coefficient (.541) was found in the path from contextual talking to situational motivation. The direct effects of the two variables—problem recognition and

situational motivation—on communicative action were all significant. However, the path of problem recognition to situational motivation was not significant with the p -value of .122. Such a result may have been found either because of the context of tourism for this study or because of the way the concept was operationalized. The constructs of contextual talking and situational motivation were operationalized by asking generalized questions while problem recognition captured diverse aspects of problems associated with the destination experience in this study. Respondents might have separated the concern about the specific aspects of problems, such as the price level, safety, and unexpected change of schedule, from the occasions to think about the spring break destination experience occurring with situational motivation, which does not focus on the thought about the specific issues or problems. Future studies may need to be conducted to address such issues.

Table 1. Maximum Likelihood Estimates of Structural Paths of the Model of Contextual Talking

Path	SDE	USDE	SE	CR	p
Contextual Talking -> Problem Recognition	.212	.242	.086	2.820	.005
Problem Recognition -> Situational Motivation	.089	.097	.063	1.545	.122
Contextual Talking -> Situational Motivation	.541	.676	.096	7.072	<.001
Situational Motivation -> Communicative Action	.378	.237	.046	5.192	<.001
Problem Recognition -> Communicative Action	.408	.280	.056	5.012	<.001
Communicative Action -> Information Seeking	.759	1.000			
Communicative Action -> Information Attending	.521	.513	.097	5.275	<.001
Communicative Action -> Information Forwarding	.512	.671	.125	5.362	<.001

Note. SDE: Standardized Estimate, USDE: Unstandardized Estimate, SE: Standard Error, CR: Critical Ratio, p : p -value

Conclusion

The present study makes a theoretical contribution to the understanding of a particular communicative pattern of tourism information by highlighting situational conversation. The concept of contextual talking enhances the understanding of specific yet frequently-observed situations where tourism conversations take place. In addition, the study proposed and provided empirical evidence of contextual talking about tourism destination experience, which causes the information receptors' problem recognition and situational motivation and eventually leads to their communicative actions. This study also is the first attempt to develop items to measure the proposed constructs in the tourism context.

The study implies that information forwarding is triggered by communicational motivation which is enhanced with information accumulation through information acquisition—information seeking and attending—as well as information behavior effectuated with first-hand destination experience. Future studies which further identify the causes that lead to information forwarding as the outcome of the process--which initiates another round of contextual talking--are warranted. In addition, further examination about segmenting individuals who sensitively react to such contextual talking would provide a clearer and differentiated idea of the communication patterns and their antecedents.

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