
Constructing Group Identity through Narratives on BBS

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1. Introduction

In this study I investigate the function of narratives in Computer-Mediated Communication (or CMC), that is, constructing a group identity through storytelling across time and place, a topic that has not yet received much attention. More broadly, I investigate how people build interpersonal relationships through their language use in CMC. I examine so-called live reports posted on the bulletin board system (or BBS) of a Japanese web site for fans of a particular music group, focusing on the group identity built among the contributors. Although they are referred to in the vernacular as “reports,” they actually take the form of stories of shared experiences. I also look into the exchanges about “live reports” in the chat room. The research questions for this study are the following:

- What is a “live report” of a fan site?
- Why do fans tell stories?
- How do they tell stories?
- What kind of relationships do they build?
- How is identity indexed?

By learning how individual contributors weave a web on-line with others, we can perhaps better understand the way a new form of communication such as the Internet contributes to the construction of interpersonal relationships and identities in our time.

2. Literature Review: Key Concepts

At this point, I would like to review several key concepts that I draw on in this study. These are the concepts of narrative, on-line community, and communities of practice.

2.1 Narrative

Since the seminal studies by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972), much attention has been paid to the forms of narrative. However, as Marra and Holmes (2004) point out, relatively little attention has been paid to the functions of narrative, such as building a particular identity and establishing social connections. What is more, quoting Georgakopoulou (2004: 2), “the

textual and interactional aspects of narrative present a gap” in the studies of CMC.

2.2 On-line Community

Blanchard (2004) notes that a “community” refers to a group of people who share either a physical location or a common interest or characteristic, and that a feature common to both is the members’ psychological sense of community. In defining community, Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005) state that recent research considers the strength and nature of relationships to be more relevant than actual geographical proximity. A sense of community does exist in those who meet regularly on-line, and Blanchard argues that the notion of a community is applicable to some web sites (cf. Herring, 2004).

2.3 Communities of Practice

As regular interaction on-line leads to mutual engagement, an on-line community like the one in this study is, as Davies (2005) suggests, a good candidate to be recognized as a type of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “communities of practice.” In addition to mutual engagement, Wenger (1998) describes two other dimensions of a community of practice: that is, a joint enterprise, which refers to a process of pursuing a shared goal, and a shared repertoire, which includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, and *stories* that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence.

3. Data

Now, let us move on to discuss the study itself. The data for this study comes from a personal web site (which no longer exists) of a pop rock band (or duo, A and B), widely popular in Japan and some Asian countries. A “fan site” is a website created and maintained by one or more fans of a particular person/group or thing. It is often equipped with bulletin boards and chat rooms to promote communication among fans. We sometimes see frequent exchanges of information in such sites, where fans become regulars and interact with each other. In this study I pay attention to postings on a BBS for live performances held between 2000 and 2002. The number of postings for each performance varies: some draw only a few, others more than 30. The length of each posting ranges from several lines to 80 pages (400 characters per page in Japanese). I also look into some interaction in a chat room of the same site around the time of the live concerts.

Here is an example of a full “live report.” I am showing the image of an example in Japanese. Later, more examples will be shown with an English translation.

- (1) (コンサートが開催された都市名) に行って来ました。(サイトの友達の名前) お疲れ様☆もう本当に (バンド名) のライブは幸せでした!!!運良くちょっとした階段のところにいたのでAちゃんの顔がよく見れました、(^O^)/ 黒のスパンコール?か何かキラキラ光るシャツをAちゃん着てました。すごく似合っていましたよ。(曲名) から始まって、もうカッコ良すぎてクラクラして何度も倒れそうになりながら、しっかりとAちゃんを目に焼き付けてきました☆私も (別の曲名) 本当に聴けてよかった!!みんなの気持ちに correspond してくれたAちゃんとBさんに感謝感謝です。一日経った今でもまだまだ当分昨日の興奮状態から抜け出せそうにありません (><)

4. Methods

For my research methods, I employed text analysis from the standpoint of sociolinguistics/

discourse analysis and the ethnography of communication; that is, I not only observed verbal exchanges on the website but also participated in the communication as a fan of the music group (actually I am a big fan of the group). I would like to mention here that I got permission to use this data from the Webmaster.

5. Analysis

5.1 What is a “live report” of a fan site?

Postings about live performances are called “live reports.” However, many of them are not reports that convey information and describe what went on during a particular period, but stories that present personal experiences and judgments about these experiences, or make points (cf. Polanyi, 1982; Wolfson, 1982).

Take a look at Example (2)¹, which is intended to show that a so-called live report is really a story. At first sight, it seems that the following segment merely describes a moment in a live performance: (for this example, some background is needed. The author had met the musicians before and talked about the fan site and the frequent contributors to the site. In addition, since the regulars of the site were almost always in the front rows of the small concert halls, the musician could recognize them easily.)

- (2) 曲は1番「(曲名)」が1番盛り上がったかな？合の手(っていうのかしら？)皆揃って、面白かったです。あれは新鮮で面白かったですね！後半、Bが私の顔を見て、私達の辺りと指でぐるっと指して、何て言ったのかは忘れたけど、内容的には「この辺、(サイトの名前)の人達？」って聞かれて、私がピースしながら、「うん、うん」ってうなづいたら、すっごく嬉しそうな顔して笑ってくれたので、嬉し過ぎて死ぬかと思いました(笑)

When it comes to songs, we got most excited with the first (title of a song), didn't we? We threw in refrains (what do we call it?) all together, so it was interesting. That was something new and interesting! In the second half, B looked at my face, drawing a circle with his finger around us, although I forgot what he said, he asked something like “Are the folks of (the name of the fan site) around here?” and I nodded “Yah, yah” with a peace sign, then he smiled happily, so I was so happy that I thought I might die LOL

In this example, the author's subjective view is evident, not only as external evaluation, such as the (repeated) choice of the word 「面白かった」 “interesting,” but also as internal evaluation, including quotation: 「この辺、(サイトの名前)の人達？」 “Are the folks of (the name of the fan site) around here?”. Therefore, what seem at first to be reports are really stories.

5.2 Why do fans tell stories?

By telling stories, they create spaces for further communication with other fans. These narrators tell their own stories to elicit others' stories. The following serves as an example. In Example (3), the author encloses her story with expressions such as:

- (3) みなさんの印象もぜひ聞かせて下さい。
Please let me listen to your impressions.

This is the “first me, then you” approach: she sets an example and asks others to follow suit (cf.

1 Examples in Japanese contain errors in spelling and grammar. They are kept intact here to show the original postings.

Tannen, 1986). In order to encourage those who shared the same experience to do the same, the author gave her own account.

Members of this BBS also narrate to reach out to other fellow fans who were not present at the concert. As in Example (4), they may preface their stories by saying:

- (4) 実際はどんなだったか、ここでお伝えしておこうと思います。
I would like to tell here what really happened.

In other words, the author regarded narrative as the most appropriate way of characterizing what happened.

5.3 How do they tell stories?

In the data I examine here, there is a structural pattern of telling stories. The authors usually begin with expressions such as 「行ってきました」“I went (to the concert),” 「お疲れ様」“it was a long time [a greeting],” and/or 「よかったですね」“It was good.” After these expressions, the authors recount what happened at the concert and evaluate with words like 「かっこいい」“(It was) cool” and 「感動した」“(I was) impressed (moved),” and signs including exclamation marks 「!」, prolonged sounds 「ー」, bracketed words like 「(笑)」“LOL,” emoticons like 「(^_^)」“: -),” stars 「☆」, musical notes 「♪」, and so on. Next, the authors end the stories with expressions such as 「また行きたい」“I’d like to go again,” 「ありがとう」“Thanks,” and/or 「最高」“It was the best.”

If you look at Example (5), which is a repetition of Example (1), you can find the pattern clearly:

- (5) (コンサートが開催された都市名) に行ってお来ました。(サイトの友達の名前) お疲れ様☆もう本当に (バンド名) のライブは幸せでした!!!運良くちょっとした階段のところにいたのでAちゃんの顔がよく見れました、(^O^)/黒のスパンコール?か何かキラキラ光るシャツをAちゃん着てました。すごく似合っていましたよ。(曲名) から始まって、もうカッコ良すぎてクラクラして何度も倒れそうになりながら、しっかりとAちゃんを目に焼き付けてきました☆私も (別の曲名) 本当に聴けてよかった!!みんなの気持ちに応えてくれたAちゃんとBさんに感謝感謝です。一日経った今でもまだまだ当分昨日の興奮状態から抜け出せそうにありません (><)

I went to (the name of the city where the concert was held). (The name of a friend from the site), it was a long time (for us to remain standing) (a star). (The name of the band)’s live performance made me really happy!!! As I was lucky enough to be on the stairs, I could see A’s face clearly (an emoticon). A was wearing a glittering shirt, a black spangled one or something. It suited her well. The live performance began with (the title of a song), and she (or her performance) was so cool I almost fainted again and again, but I still made sure to burn A’s image into my eyes (a star). I was really glad that I could listen to (the title of another song)!! I have nothing but gratitude for A and B, who responded to our every expectation. Although it’s been a day since the concert, I still can’t get over my excitement from yesterday and I won’t be able to get over it for a while (another emoticon).

In this example, the story starts with 「行ってお来ました」“I went (to the concert),” 「お疲れ様」“it was a long time [a greeting]” and 「幸せでした」“(the performance) made me happy,” then describes what happened, including 「(曲名) から始まって」“began with (the title of a song)” and 「(別の曲名) 本当に聴けてよかった」“I was really glad that I could listen to (the title of another song),” provides evaluation with words like 「カッコよ過ぎ」“so cool” and signs like stars

「☆」, exclamation marks 「!」 and emoticons such as 「、(^O^)/」, and finishes with 「感謝感謝」 “I have nothing but gratitude.”

Another way of telling stories uses “copy-and-paste” quotation, which electronic media is mechanically equipped with. These quotations are explicitly marked as such with an angle bracket (>) at the beginning of each line of texts. In Example (6), a section of Example (2) is quoted in this way:

- (6) > 後半、Bが私の顔を見て、(略)死ぬかと思いました (笑)
 そう言っていたんだ。聞き取れませんでした。
 Bの問いに対して曖昧にうなずいてしまった。残念！
 >In the second half, B looked at my face ... I thought I might die LOL
 He said so. I could not hear it.
 I nodded to B’s question vaguely. Too bad!

In this example, after the quotation the author adds his own experience.

In the next posting, this example was again quoted in the same fashion. Here, Example (6) as a whole was quoted by another contributor:

- (7) >> 後半、Bが私の顔を見て、(略) 嬉し過ぎて死ぬかと思いました (笑)
 > そう言っていたんだ。聞き取れませんでした。
 > Bの問いに対して曖昧にうなずいてしまった。残念！
 (バンド名) ファンかつ (サイト名) を見させていただいている一人としてもBのそのセリフはうれしいですね。(サイト名) のグループは僕としてもいい人たちだなーと思いますし。ファンの代表みたいなものですからねー。
 >>In the second half, B looked at my face ... I thought I might die LOL
 >He said so. I could not hear it.
 >I nodded to B’s question vaguely. Too bad!
 As a fan of (the name of the band) and the one who is allowed to visit (the name of the fan site), I’m delighted with B’s words. I think the group of (the name of the fan site) consists of nice folks. They are like representatives of the fans.

Here the writer quotes Example (6), in which a section of Example (2) is doubly quoted, and then he adds his comments.

As shown in these examples, “copy-and-paste” quotation enables the next contributor to embed the previous posting, which was produced by someone else. This tactic, perhaps a very distinctive function enabled in CMC, allows the author of a posting to specify exactly what is being targeted for a comment.

5.4 Interactions in a chat room

Now I would like to show some interactions in a chat room of the same web site. When frequent visitors enter a chat room around the time of live concerts, they start their communication by talking about so-called live reports. In Example (8), SS had already read the “live report” written by TA, who just joined the conversation. Here, the first utterance of SS to TA was “I like TA’s live report!”:

- (8) SS> TA さん、私 TA さんのライブレポ好きですよ！
 TA> SS ! お久しぶりです！ え？レポってあの変態っぽいのですか？
 SS> TA, I like TA’s live report!

TA> SS! Long time no see! Well, is it an abnormal one?

In Example (9), when SS entered the room, KH, the Webmaster of the fan site, expressed his gratitude to SS for contributing a “report” which he had already read, by saying “Thanks for (posting) your report”:

- (9) KH> レポどうもです。
SS> つたないレポですみません。
KH> Thanks for (posting) your report.
SS> I am sorry that it is poorly written.

Seeing the interaction in the chat room as well as on the BBS I have shown so far, we can say that those who regularly visit this site not only write their own narratives but also read and comment on each other’s narratives on-line. I argue that recounting their own narratives encourages others to participate in the dialogue, and appreciating others’ narratives and giving their own versions of a common experience contributes to the re/production of a rapport and diminishes the distance between the BBS users, hence creating a sense of community.

5.5 What kind of relationships do they build?

Johnstone (1990: 5) calls a group of people who share and jointly tell stories “a community of speakers.” Ochs and Capps (2001: 57) suggest, “people build communities through the co-authoring of narrative.” It is possible to say that those who share narratives in CMC construct an on-line community. This fan site is a community of practice because the on-line communication provides the contributors, quoting Moore (2006: 627), “with the opportunity to articulate their mutual status as members of a community who not only share social events, but also share their perception of what is ‘storyable’ as community practice.”

Once it is formed, the community may be maintained and even further solidified through the constant interactions among its members. New on-line friendships are built, and this can lead to off-line relationships, an example of which can be seen in the contributors convening in person to hold parties just before and/or after the concerts.

What is perhaps unique and interesting about a community built on the foundation of CMC should be pointed out here. Even after the contributors become friends and begin to meet regularly, they often neither know nor care about each other’s real names, jobs (or schools) and other personal details: in this community only the fact that they are fans of the band counts. Considering that recent theories of identity assume not a unitary self but multiple and fragmented selves, it seems that they are communicating here and now by presenting only one aspect of their selves. It may be relevant that this community is not based on traditional relationships such as neighborhood and kinship, but has originated because of new networks such as the Internet. While the bonds of the former are harder to cut, it is rather easy to untie the latter. In this sense, this community represents not a traditional, total, systematic, institutionalized and binding network, but a partial, selective, pluralistic and non-binding network, often thought to be specific to contemporary society.

5.6 How is identity indexed?

As I just mentioned, the relationships based on CMC may not be firm, but this does not necessarily mean that their sense of community is easily lost. As for me, more than 4 years have passed since the fan site was closed, but I still have a sense of community with friends from the

fan site. And this is not just my imagination. Although I have not seen many of them for a while, I still get e-mail from some of them around the time of the band's live concerts (and I still meet them at the concert). That is, a sense of community, or shared identity, can be constructed from the interactions on-line and maintained for some time.

As Wellman's (2001, cited in Herring, 2004) tripartite characterization of community as providing "sociability, support, and identity" suggests, an identity, especially a group identity, is one of the central parts of a community of practice (Job-Sluder & Barab, 2004). In this section, I would like to show how the group identity of the fan site is indexed in and around this fan site.

Herring (2004) proposes six sets of criteria for online community: that is, participation, shared culture, solidarity, conflict resolution, self-awareness of the group, and roles/governance. For our purpose here, I focus on some of those aspects relevant to the group identity of this site. First, participation is assessed on the basis of the frequency of on-line as well as off-line interactions. After a live concert, many regular participants would post a narrative, which they call live report. Some of the participants even traveled just to go to the concerts, so they would contribute more than once during a single concert tour. In addition, many regulars usually attend pre-concert meetings of the fan site, then go to the concerts together and usually occupy the front rows of the hall, and finally have dinners together and sing in a Karaoke bar until dawn. Some of them even hold parties when there is no concert. Such regular participation can be interpreted as the indication of a group identity.

Second, their shared culture is indicated through the use of group-specific abbreviations and language routines. For example, 「ライブレポート」 "live report" is almost always referred to as 「レポ」 "repo." In addition, while there are a few abbreviated ways to call the band, in this site they use only one of them, which is included in the name of the fan site. Furthermore, as I already pointed out, there is a structural pattern of telling stories on this BBS. Interestingly, this structural patterning of narrative is also observable in the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (or AA), which Swora (2001) calls a narrating community. In this AA community, the members acquire an identity as sober (or non-drinking) alcoholics through the formalized narrative structure (Cain, 1991; Swora, 2001). Similarly, by sharing not only the experience (live concert) but also the way to tell it (a pattern of telling stories), the contributors of the narratives construct an identity as the fellows of the site.

Finally, the group's self-awareness is measured in how its members refer to themselves as a group. In Example (10), which is taken from the posting about one of the band's first live performances after the debut of a single, the author's form of reference is indirect: he calls the group 「ここに来る人」 "those who visit here." He then contrasts them with those who do not visit the site by saying 「と違って」 "unlike."

- (10) ここに来る人と違って、ちょっとの興味で来た人ばかりで
unlike those who visit here, most of the audience came with a slight interest

It seems no coincidence that the reference is indirect in one of the earliest postings to this BBS: in contributing to the then newly created web site, he must have been hesitant to show a strong group identity with other visitors to this site.

Half a year later, the author of Example (11), which is a partial repetition of Example (7), literally refers to the group as 「(サイト名) のグループ」 "the group of (the name of the fan site)." Moreover, he uses positive language such as 「いい人たち」 "nice folks" and even characterizes them as being 「ファンの代表みたいなもの」 "like representatives of the fans." Nevertheless, his self-introduction 「(サイト名) を見させていただいている一人」 "the one who is allowed to visit

(the name of the fan site)” shows that he is not fully identified with the group.

(11) (サイト名) を見させていただいている一人として (略) (サイト名) のグループは僕としてもいい人たちだなーと思いますし。 ファンの代表みたいなものですからねー。

as the one who is allowed to visit (the name of the fan site) ... I think the group of (the name of the fan site) consists of nice folks. They are like representatives of the fans.

To use Wenger’s (1998) term, he is a “peripheral participant.” Actually, in the same posting he writes that he has never attended the off-line meetings so far and wants to attend one of them next time.

On the other hand, Example (12) indicates the author’s status as a full participant: the use of a group nickname shows his solidarity (or intimacy) with the group, and the use of a metaphorical expression 「軍団」 “corps” for the group implies a closely united and organized group of people with the power to influence something (in fact, in the concert the author narrates, those who had attended the pre-concert meeting asked the musicians to play a particular song as an encore, and they did play it). By the way the author references the group, the author’s identity as a member of the group is made evident.

(12) (サイトの愛称) 軍団以外からも声が飛んでいた
those who are not (the nickname of the fan site) corps called, too

His language use here seems relevant to the fact that it had been two years since the opening of this site and the fact that he was one of the regulars who visited several cities around Japan just to go to the concerts (and the meetings with friends from the site) during a single tour and he wrote “reports” for each performance. Thus the group identity seems to have developed through time and their involvement with other regulars.

As we have seen, an examination of the linguistic and ethnographic data reveals that the participants’ sense of community and shared identity.

6. Conclusion

In this study I have investigated the function of narratives in CMC: the construction of a community of practice/a group identity by sharing stories across time and place. I find that live reports are narratives recounting shared experiences, often using a structural pattern of storytelling and “copy-and-paste” quotation. As the fans regularly communicate with each other by writing, reading, and commenting on their narratives of shared experiences, they construct a community of practice, in this case, through narration. Finally, the identity of the group is indexed at least by participation, shared culture, and members’ self-awareness.

Each narrative is relatively short, but some narratives contributed by individuals present various aspects of a shared live concert. When the narratives for each concert on the same tour are assembled, the whole image of the concert tour emerges. Therefore, the individual concert narratives eventually co-construct a “comprehensive” and “composite” story of the band, recounted by the fans. This authentic, life-size story tells us a lot more than those provided in the official site run by the music office and/or the record company.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that it is the bulletin board on a web site that has made it possible for people to communicate this way. A bulletin board on a web site is not a local form of media, such as the passing of notes by high school students, but a global form of media; not a

private one-on-one form of media such as telephone and e-mail, but a public one-to-many form of media; not a closed form of media, such as a social networking service (or SNS), but an open form of media. These characteristics bring together those who share almost nothing except the fact that they are fans of a particular music group. This new media form is surely changing interpersonal relationships in our time.

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