

## Value Cocreation in International Sports Tourism: A Qualitative Study of a Regional Revitalizing Marathon Event in Japan

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Drawing on the concept of value cocreation, this study investigated in depth the interactions among different categories of actors (event organizers, event stakeholders, international participants) in an international sports tourism context. Qualitative data were gathered during a period of 18 months covering two consecutive annual editions of Tohoku Food Marathon & Festival. Data collection included several rounds of interviews and onsite surveys, which involved participant observations both as a marathon runner and as a supporting member of the event organizers. Data analysis proceeded with a three-step coding process done by using NVivo 12. The results showed how actors can contribute to their own and each other's value creation through their own activities and interactions with other actors. Categories of value cocreation activities were identified to show what actors actually do when they cocreate value. Moreover, a three-phase value cocreation process model was developed to capture the temporal variations in value formation and value cocreation activities.

Keywords: value cocreation, international sports tourism, regional revitalization, marathon, qualitative study

### 1. Introduction

#### (1) Research background

Sports tourism plays an increasingly important role in providing a strategic toolkit for places to develop, convey, and sustain their destination image. Among various types of sports tourism activities, traveling to participate in sports events has attracted significant attention from practitioners and academia (Getz & Page, 2016). Starting with the New York City Marathon in 1970, a marathon has evolved from elite competition to mass participation as well as a form of active sports tourism that has international appeal. In addition, traveling from overseas to Japan to run marathons is an emerging sports tourism phenomenon and many destinations across Japan have been aiming to capitalize on this opportunity by promoting their city marathons as an important element of tourism destination competitiveness. As the number of marathons continues to grow, heightened competition forces city authorities or event organizers to expand their participant base internationally and

provide unique value for their participants. Different motives and behavior patterns between domestic and international participants (Funk & Bruun, 2007), along with the multiplicity of actors involved in a marathon, call for the need to investigate international sports tourism with a holistic approach that acknowledges the different perspectives held and different roles played by different categories of actors.

#### (2) Value

Since the term "value" is widely used in daily conversations and discussed in various academic disciplines, a review of how scholars have approached the concept of value is warranted.

First, value can refer to strongly held personal beliefs about what is valuable, important, or acceptable. For example, honesty and diligence may be values held by someone as important in the way he or she behaves (Tappolet & Rossi, 2016). Second, value can also be understood as an individual's subjective perception of the benefits of doing or owning something. In this line of interpretation,

economists express value with the term “utility” that allows comparing different products or services in a choice situation with limited resources. Similarly, marketing research defines value as “customer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on the perceptions of what is received and what is given” (Zeithaml, 1988).

The above discussions show that value can be conceptualized as “values held by someone” (personal values) or “values of something as perceived by someone” (perceived value). Both conceptualizations are inter-related and have implications for tourism research.

Adopting a subjective perspective of customer perceived value, Leclercq et al. (2016) summarized the concept of value by how and when value is cocreated. Value-in-exchange conceptualizes value as the customer’s subjective assessment of the perceived benefits and costs associated with purchasing a product or service (Zeithaml, 1988). Value-in-use focuses on the active role of the customer as value cocreator, who consumes the offer by using a product or service, through which value is evaluated and assigned by the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Extending the sources of value generation to the social and spatial context, Vargo and Lusch (2008) introduced the concept of value-in-context. Since value is “always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary” (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 7), value depends on how it is cocreated within a social context. Further extending the scope of value cocreation, value-in-experience conceptualizes value as perceived by an individual over the entire course of the customer experience (Holbrook, 2006). Tourists may contribute to value cocreation in some or the overall tourism experience, through their participation and interaction in onsite activities and subjective experience (Campos et al., 2018). This viewpoint encompasses value-in-exchange, value-in-use, and value-in-context, as well as direct and indirect interactions carried out during the value cocreation process (Leclercq et al., 2016).

### (3) Value cocreation

Value cocreation means joint creation of value by

the company and the customer, i.e. both client and suppliers create value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In its simplest form, value cocreation suggests that the value of a product is not created solely by the producer during the manufacturing process, but is created jointly with the customers in the consumption process. For example, the value of LEGO bricks is not created in the factory by the manufacturers. It is the customers who evaluate the value of LEGO bricks by applying their creativity and skill to build finished works with those toy bricks. While the product forms the basis for customers to create value, it is the customer who decides how to use the product, and how useful it could be.

From its initial development phases, the concept of value cocreation has been adopted by tourism scholars. The trend can be explained by at least two features of tourism studies. First, the inclusionary perspective of value cocreation fits well with the multiple-actor nature of tourism. Value cocreation is not limited to interactions between companies and customers, but also involves stakeholders such as suppliers, public organizations, and other business partners. Secondly, the experiential approach of value cocreation fits well with the tourist experience perspective. Value is cocreated through a series of experiences composed of a vast range of interactions. This experiential interpretation is in line with the assertion that “tourism is an industry that sells experience” (Campos et al., 2018, p. 369).

In this research, value cocreation is defined as “a process during which actors exchange resources and jointly create value on an engagement platform” (Leclercq et al., 2016). The definition extends the company-customer dichotomy of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) to include any individual, organization, or networks of individuals and organizations as value cocreating actors. Regarding the treatment of value, this research takes an inclusive viewpoint that admits the different perspectives of actors and their interactions within the event/social context to be considered in the value cocreation process. From a customer/tourist perspective, value

is treated as customer perceived value cocreated throughout the overall experience. From an organization/destination perspective, value is assessed based on what the organization or destination aims to achieve. Both perspectives of tourist and destination take the underlying personal, social, and event contexts into account. Such a specification is inspired by the concept of value-in-experience and value-in-context developed in the value cocreation literature.

#### (4) Research objectives

This research aims to explore in depth the phenomenon of value cocreation in international sports tourism, specifically in the context of a mass participation marathon held in the countryside of Japan to revitalize the local economy.

The research question “how and why actors cocreate value in an international sports tourism setting?” aims to explain the phenomenon of value cocreation by investigating the interactions between event organizers, event stakeholders, and international participants involved in a mass participation marathon that has a substantial regional revitalization focus and high ratio of international participants compared with marathons of similar scope and scale in Japan. The empirical investigation involved two steps:

First, it aims to identify and categorize value cocreation practices in which different groups of actors engage.

Secondly, it aims to identify critical factors and underlying mechanisms that may contribute to a sustainable value cocreation cycle.

#### (5) Research methods

Data were gathered during a period of 18 months covering two consecutive annual editions of Tohoku Food Marathon & Festival (Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan) in 2016 and 2017. Started in 2014, Tohoku Food Marathon is an annual event that aims to connect Tohoku with the world by attracting participants from outside of Tohoku to run and stay in Tohoku. Its essence is to stage a festive marathon in which runners and non-runners alike can have fun during the event weekend.

Data collection included several rounds of

interviews and on-site surveys, which involved participant observation both as a marathon runner and as a supporting member of the event organizers. Throughout the data collection process, a number of qualitative data were collected, including interviews, SNS and blog posts, participant observations, and archival data.

Data analysis proceeded with a three-step coding process suggested by Miles et al., (2014). Coding was done by using a qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12. In particular, it was used for storing and maintaining the data, coding, linking codes and text segments, editing and refining codes, and creating analytic memos. Validity and reliability issues were mitigated by applying peer reviewing and triangulation of multiple data sources and actor perspectives. With respect to the generalizability of the current research, rich descriptions of value cocreation activities are presented for the readers to judge if the findings are transferrable to the circumstances they wish to investigate (Smith, 2018).

## 2. Value Cocreation from the Perspective of Event Organizers

### (1) Developing value propositions

In a sports event context such as marathon, a value proposition summarizes the experience a runner may expect from running the marathon. In preparing and promoting Tohoku Food Marathon, members of the event organizers worked together to construct appealing value propositions directed at event stakeholders and participants. The main components of its value compositions were found to be destination resources, social issues, and international elements.

### (2) Communicating value propositions

The aim of communicating value propositions is to get those potential actors involved in Tohoku Food Marathon either as event stakeholders or participants. Event stakeholders such as corporate sponsors and vendors constitute of a smaller number of individuals than the group of participants. However, potentially they can provide more resources to the event organizers. Therefore, event organizers communicated

with corporate sponsors and vendors on a face-to-face basis. Volunteers and domestic and international participants were approached by utilizing marketing channels including owned media, earned media, and international partnerships.

(3) Directing value cocreation

The event organizers are in essence creating a stage for actors to perform and interact with each other. Moreover, the stage for value cocreation is characterized with a variety of elements and gimmicks to facilitate actors' participation and interaction. Rather than managing actors' interactions with a top-down managerial process, the role of event organizers is manifested in directing actors' actions and interactions by facilitating service encounters and incentivizing active participation.

### **3. Value Cocreation from the Perspective of Event Stakeholders**

(1) Enabling and enhancing value propositions

Event stakeholders consist of corporate sponsors, vendors, and volunteers. Corporate sponsors mainly provide financial support. Vendors provide contents such as food and Japanese sake to be featured in Tohoku Food Marathon and its side events. Volunteers provide vital support during the event period by contributing their time, skill, and efforts. Each of them brings in resources that are indispensable for organizing and executing the marathon. Event organizers initiated and developed value propositions that may appeal to event stakeholders. After evaluating such value propositions, event stakeholders may decide to participate and play their respective roles in enabling and enhancing value propositions by providing complementary expertise and investing additional resources.

(2) Providing sports tourism elements

One of the purposes for stakeholders to associate themselves with a sports event is to interact with the event's participants by providing services to them. Similarly, in Tohoku Food Marathon, event stakeholders interact with participants through offering services to them. Corporate sponsors may operate their

own corporate booth at the venue, vendors sell and promote their products, and volunteers assist in various aspects of event operations. As they collaborate with each other in the process of interacting with participants, their products and service become one of the elements experienced by sports tourists visiting the hosting destination to run Tohoku Food Marathon. Collaborations were observed across organizational and geographical boundaries. In addition, their interactions with international participants became experiences of intercultural communications that were interpreted by the involved parties for meaning and significance. Such intercultural communications were carried out through staging side events and activities, offering food and drinks, and volunteering.

### **4. Value Cocreation from the Perspective of International Participants**

(1) Acquiring and propagating value propositions

Since information of Tohoku Food Marathon may not be readily available, information search and information sharing among potential participants played a crucial role in propagating the value propositions. Information sharing is especially relevant for international participants due to the language barrier and institutional differences between marathons in Japan and marathons in their home countries. International participants searched, received, processed, and shared information about Tohoku Food Marathon. It is in this sense that the value propositions of Tohoku Food Marathon perceived by each international participant were cocreated with event organizers and other international participants.

(2) Personalizing value propositions

Based on the perceived version of value propositions and their preferences, international participants decided whether to engage with the value propositions (whether to sign up or not), which part of the value propositions to engage with (whether to run only or also participate in side events), how to complement the value propositions (whether to combine the trip with other elements), and how to fulfill the value propositions (how to prepare for the event). Through

their interaction with each other and with the event organizers, international participants personalize the value propositions to meet their individual needs. A personalized version of the value propositions embodies one's expectations of what to experience during the trip to Tohoku Food Marathon.

#### (3) Consuming sports tourism elements

During the entire course of the Tohoku Food Marathon, international participants interacted with event stakeholders through consuming the services offered by sponsors, vendors, and volunteers. International participants consumed the service offerings as they engaged in sports tourism activities. Interactions between international participants and event stakeholders were characterized by their different cultural backgrounds; therefore, interactions with event stakeholders became experiences of intercultural communications that required interpretation for meaning and significance. Such intercultural communications were carried out through participating in side events and activities, trying food and drinks, and responding to hospitality and enthusiasm.

#### (4) Sharing and reinterpreting sports tourism experience

International participants shared their experiences of running the Tohoku Food Marathon. From a temporal perspective, sharing was carried out from when international participants arrived at Tohoku to when they were back in their home countries. From a spatial perspective, international participants who shared a moment together in Tohoku first exchanged feedback with each other at the venue, then they may extend the sharing to online spaces such as social networking sites.

After they finished their trip and went back to their home countries, some of them recollected the experience of running Tohoku Food Marathon while others did not. Various incidences may facilitate or trigger the act. Such opportunities of recollecting experiences allowed international participants to relive memorable experiences obtained from engaging in international sports tourism. While some interactions were simply recollections of parts of the

past memories, some interactions strengthened or complemented past memories.

## 5. The Mechanism of Value Cocreation

This chapter presents a holistic framework for value cocreation through an analysis across actor categories and temporal phases. A synthesis of findings from chapters 2 to 4 led to a holistic view of value cocreation across actor roles. When developing value propositions, the event organizers played the role of an event producer, who incorporated destination resources, social issues, and international elements into the value propositions. To convince potential event stakeholders, the event organizers played the role of an event marketer when communicating the value propositions to potential event stakeholders.

International participants acquired and propagated value propositions in their information delivery network. A typology based on available information and power of influence was developed to identify an international participant's role in information delivery. An influencer who has rich information and high power of influence is regarded crucial in delivering information to a wider audience, especially to those who have no access to relevant information.

During the event period of Tohoku Food Marathon, event organizers played the role of an event director in directing the whole process of value cocreation. The role was manifested in directing actors' actions and interactions by facilitating service encounters and incentivizing their active participation. Between the event stakeholders and international participants, interactions were intercultural communications for both parties, and were carried out mainly through side events and activities, food and drinks, and hospitality and enthusiasm. Side events and activities enriched their interactions in terms of extended time and space. Food and drinks functioned as value transmitting vehicles that transcended language barriers. Similarly, the mutual hospitality and enthusiasm embodied in volunteering and responding to the cheering crowds were not constrained by a language barrier, rather the emotional interactions were often beautified by

imagination and positive interpretation.

The cross-actor discussions conducted in the previous section revealed that an actor may play different roles and engage in different value cocreation practices in different phases. Accordingly, the research takes a step further to focus on the temporal dimension and present value cocreation in a cycle process characterized by three phases, which roughly correspond to phases of pre-event, during-event, and post-event.

During the pre-event phase, value-in-expectation was cocreated through virtual interactions between event stakeholders and international participants. Such interactions are labelled as “virtual” because international participants have not traveled to Japan, and therefore no tangible linkages such as face-to-face communications may be established at this phase. Instead, international participants relied mostly on word-of-mouth (search on the Internet) and word-of-mouth (information shared by other international participants) to familiarize themselves with Tohoku (the destination) and Tohoku Food Marathon (the event). Since the value being cocreated in this phase was based on each actor’s expectation of what may be experienced during the event period, the research defined such value as value-in-expectation.

During the event period, value-in-experience was cocreated through onsite interactions between event stakeholders and international participants. Such interactions were facilitated by event organizers’ directing efforts, and were carried out through a series of service offerings and consumptions. Interactions were performed onsite during the event period, when event stakeholders and international participants physically shared a common space and time. Since the value being cocreated in this phase was based on each actor’s actual experience unfolded during the event period, the research classified such value as value-in-experience. Such a specification allows the findings to be positioned within the broader stream of literature on the perceived value of a destination experience (Prebensen et al., 2012).

During the post-event phase, value-in-retrospect

was cocreated through offsite interactions between event stakeholders and international participants. Such interactions were partially facilitated by event organizers’ directing efforts, and were carried out through ongoing relationships between event stakeholders and international participants. Since the value being cocreated in this phase was based on each actor’s recollection of past experience, or reunions with people, objects, or incidences of Tohoku after the event was over, the research defined such value as value-in-retrospect to signify its nature of pondering about something in the past.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter synthesizes findings from the previous chapters to propose a viable approach toward a sustainable value cocreation cycle. In order for a recurring event to achieve a self-fulfilling value cocreation cycle, information delivery gap, expectation-experience gap, and ongoing relationship gap need to be mediated in the pre-travel, during-travel, and post-travel phases.

The study contributes to research in value cocreation by providing empirical evidence from an international sports tourism setting. It also contributes to tourism and sports tourism literature in identifying destination-specific value cocreation practices by extending the C2C (customer-to-customer) interactions (Rihova et al., 2018, Shipway & Jones, 2008) to include the interactions between international participants and event stakeholders at a sports tourism destination. Moreover, rather than adopting the traditional host-guest dichotomy, the research introduces event stakeholders as an independent category of actors in value cocreation to explain their specific roles in directly interacting with participants through service offerings of sports tourism elements.

The results are expected to help service providers in implementing a platform that motivates actors to become more engaged in value cocreation. One of the limitations of this research is that domestic (Japanese) participants were not included as one of the main actors and might appear underrepresented.



Nevertheless, results of this study are expected to provide a basis for multiple case studies to present a more complete analysis of value cocreation in sports tourism, or event tourism in general. Finally, the three-phase value cocreation process model, as proposed in this study, may be applied or tested empirically in a variety of value cocreation circumstances, including art and music festivals. ■

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## 国際スポーツツーリズムにおける価値共創 —地域振興型イベントとしてのマラソン大会の質的分析—

陳 慶光

スポーツは場所に魅力的なイメージを与え、観光客や企業、住民を惹き付ける素材として地域に恩恵をもたらす可能性に満ちている。本論文は、地域活性化イベントとして特色のある東北風土マラソンについて、主催者とステークホルダー、訪日外国人参加者の3種のアクターの視点から、各アクターの相互作用によって作り出される価値と、その価値共創メカニズムを解明した。

まず、先行研究における価値の概念整理をもとに、本論文は社会背景やメディアなどに影響される文脈価値と、商品・サービスの利用や観光行動から生まれる経験価値に注目した。そして、文脈を考慮したアクター間の相互作用を経験と捉えて、価値を解釈した。分析データは、大会やその企画会議などでの参与観察とインタビューで収集した、日・中・英の3言語のテキストである。手法は質的分析であり、3種のアクターが発したテキストを各章に振り分けて、①テキストのコード化による分類と、②コードのカテゴリー化による抽象化を繰り返すことで、データ全体の中でのコードとカテゴリーを最適化し、さらに③カテゴリー間の関連性の考察により、アクター間の相互作用を解明した。また、2名の研究者からコーディング結果のフィードバックを得て修正を重ね、信頼性を確保した。

分析の結果、主催者は震災復興や特産品などからなる価値提案を企画、伝達してステークホルダーと訪日参加者に期待価値を醸成し、両者による価値共創を円滑化させる演出やサポートも実施した。ステークホルダーと訪日参加者はサービスの提供と消費という相互の接触を通して、応援や食べ物を媒介とした異文化交流自体を意味付けし、それぞれが経験価値を持つものと解釈できた。この相互作用を通して、訪日外国人参加者は東北全体に対する被災地としてのイメージを払拭し、よりローカルな場所イメージを獲得した。大会後にもステークホルダーと訪日外国人参加者は継続的に相互作用しつつ、東北に関連する人や物事をトリガーに当時の経験を想起することによって「振返り価値」を生じさせたことが明らかとなった。

従来の経営学分野の価値共創研究では、企業活動や医療現場での特定のアクターの視点から、企業対消費者、ホスト対ゲストという二元的な枠組みで能力やサポートなどの協働性の管理が研究されてきた。対して、本論文は3種のアクターによる価値共創モデルを考案することにより、先行研究で指摘された経験価値に加えて期待価値と「振返り価値」を見出した。さらに、ステークホルダーと訪日外国人参加者が認識した価値が満足度や経験価値の想起につながり、場所イメージの形でイベントの持続性に寄与することを解明した。

キーワード：価値共創、国際スポーツツーリズム、地域振興、マラソン、質的研究