

# Can a Training Course Foster Value Co-Creation in Rural Tourism? An Exploratory Study of a Local Community Initiative

Fabio Corona<sup>1,\*</sup>, and Giuseppe Melis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy

\* Corresponding author: fabio.corona96@unica.it

## Abstract

This study investigates whether a structured training course can serve as a platform for value co-creation in the context of rural tourism development. Grounded in the DART model of value co-creation and the concept of sense of community, the research examines changes in participants' perceptions of collaboration, value co-creation perceptions and sense of community. Adopting a simple pre-post design, the study revealed a significant decrease in perceived collaboration and a moderate but not significant improvement in perceived dialogue. These findings suggest that training initiatives can enhance awareness of co-creation mechanisms but can also reveal existing relational and structural limits within local communities. The study contributes to the limited literature on educational platforms for value co-creation in rural tourism contexts and offers practical insights for strengthening cooperation among local stakeholders in tourism development.

*Keywords: value co-creation platform, sense of community, rural tourism, training*

## 1. Framing of the research

Value co-creation is a foundational concept in tourism and service marketing, initially understood as an interaction between firms and customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and later expanded to a broader perspective, considering Actor-to-Actor (A2A) relationships (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). One of the main models of value co-creation is represented by the DART model (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), which defines value co-creation through the dimensions of Dialogue, Accessibility, Risk assessment, and Transparency, defining the ways that firms should adopt to interact with customers. These dimensions particularly represent the interactive nature of the value co-creation process (Taghizadeh et al., 2016). While co-creation in tourism has traditionally focused on tourists and businesses, recent research has highlighted the importance of other stakeholders, like residents and local communities (Ribeiro et al., 2023; John & Supramaniam, 2024). Some studies highlighted how value co-creation processes can occur between residents and tourists and are influenced by the perception of potential economic and social benefits for the community (Lin et al., 2017). Moreover, Chen and colleagues (2020) highlighted that residents-tourists value co-creation is associated with residents' well-being (Chen et al., 2020). In general terms, residents' participation (and more broadly local community participation) represents an important element in determining the success of tourism initiatives, and the success of value co-creation processes (Presenza et al., 2013; Del Chiappa et al., 2018). A notable concept that is associated to both civic and political participation, as well as to community involvement is

the sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talò, 2018), which is a psychological construct referring to individuals' perception of community quality and belonging. It represents a concept that has been understudied in tourism literature. Cai and colleagues (2024) demonstrated that there is a relationship between residents' sense of community and their well-being, thus representing an important resource. So, the involvement of local communities in tourism initiatives and their capacity to co-create value represents an important challenge for tourism literature. In this light, platforms for value co-creation can be considered critical tools. Although often digital, such platforms can also be physical and context-based, where actors can interact directly and with a collaborative attitude (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). In rural settings with limited digital infrastructure, physical platforms—such as structured training—may offer more effective opportunities for interaction and learning how to collaborate and co-create value. Also, a structured training dedicated to local community members can help them gain useful knowledge and skills, thereby making it easier for them to overcome limitations related to insufficient competencies that can represent an obstacle to community participation (Tosun, 2000). Based on these premises, this study explores whether a local training course can act as a value co-creation platform by stimulating learning, cooperation, and shared purpose among participants. The following research questions guided the study:

**RQ1:** Can a training course in a rural context be considered a value co-creation platform?

**RQ2:** What are its short-term effects in terms of perceived collaboration and value co-creation?

## 2. Methodology

This study adopted a simple pre-post design with a mixed-method approach. The independent variable was participation in the training course described above. The course was implemented as a part of a broader tourism development project carried out in the town. Its main objective was to give residents and local stakeholders the knowledge and skills needed to support local tourism initiatives and to promote an understanding of entrepreneurial and collaborative dynamics. It was held from March 21 to May 17, 2025, with weekend sessions scheduled on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Each session lasted three hours and was characterized by the combination of a theoretical part with practical group activities, for a total of 36 training hours. Each session was led by professionals—including university professors, technical experts, and entrepreneurs—following a learning-by-doing approach and adopting an interactive methodology that encouraged active collaboration and critical thinking, by also considering real-world examples of tourism projects. The course concluded with a group project in which each participant collaborated to design and present a guided tour showcasing elements of their town. Three outcome variables were measured before and after the course: (1) participants' perception of value co-creation, especially in their relationships with local operators and other stakeholders; (2) their sense of community; and (3) their perceived potential for collaboration within the local context. A custom questionnaire was developed to assess these variables. No socio-demographic data was collected to guarantee anonymity, as the small sample and close-knit community made participants easily identifiable. The questionnaire included Italian-adapted items from the DART model scale (Taghizadeh et al., 2016) and the Sense of Community Scale (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Four custom items assessed participants' willingness to collaborate in local initiatives, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. An open-ended section allowed participants to share additional reflections and ideas related to the project. To integrate the questionnaire measures, also participatory observation was employed. A researcher attended all course sessions, annotating group interactions and behavioral changes throughout the program. These qualitative notes were used to enrich and contextualize the quantitative findings. The initial sample included 17 participants; however, only 11 completed both the

pre- and post-course questionnaires. All participants were current or aspiring entrepreneurs with an interest in developing tourism-related activities. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a Mann-Whitney U test to compare pre- and post-intervention responses. This non-parametric test was chosen due to the small sample size, the non-normal distribution of the data, and due to the inability to match individual pre- and post-responses anonymously. For these reasons, an independent samples test was considered as more suitable (Siegel & Castellan, 1988).

### 3. Results

Results showed no statistically significant differences across most outcome dimensions. However, two exceptions emerged. First, a significant decrease was found in the perception of collaboration within the community ( $U = 51$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r^{14} = -0.45$ ). In other words, participants perceived fewer opportunities for collaboration after the course. Observational data support this finding, highlighting concerns expressed by some participants regarding limited engagement from other attendees and community members more broadly, and suggesting a greater awareness of structural and relational barriers within the local context. The second exception concerned the Dialogue dimension of the DART model. Although the observed difference was not statistically significant ( $U = 52.5$ ,  $p = .054$ ), the effect size was moderate and positive ( $r = 0.44$ ), indicating a slight improvement in participants' perception of dialogue. Observational notes confirm this trend, showing increased active participation and openness during the seminars. For the remaining DART dimensions, no significant changes were found. Regarding sense of community, overall perceptions were positive. However, the "Influence" sub-dimension showed the lowest scores, suggesting that, while participants felt a sense of belonging and emotional connection to the community, they perceive a low capacity to influence other actors and to be influenced. This was further supported by observational data, with some participants expressing concern that other important local actors (e.g., local administration) scarcely participated in the course and the project, even knowing that it existed. Moreover, one participant expressed this in the open-ended box section: *"Especially in rural contexts like this, it's crucial the participation of local actors — municipal administrators, associations and operators such as restaurateurs, bar owners, and shopkeepers — because they can truly benefit from these training opportunities. After all, there's always something new to learn"*. This reflection highlights a perceived "disconnection" between community members and different stakeholders, consequently mining the chance to (positively) influence themselves.

### 4. Discussion and Implications

Although statistical evidence was limited, the study can offer some valuable insights. From a theoretical perspective, it presents a case study of a training course in a small rural tourism context—an area still underexplored in the literature. Given the scarcity of research on the role of education in empowering residents and communities to support sustainable tourism development, these findings contribute to addressing this gap. The study highlights participants' reactions and perceptions, offering insights into how training initiatives like the one presented can influence community perceptions, value co-creation perceptions and cooperation perceptions. The results and the participants' feedback suggest that initiatives like the one presented can function as value co-creation platforms. Specifically, they offer participants an opportunity to understand and practice value co-creation processes. In this case, the course culminated in a collaboratively developed tourism product, created by participants using shared resources (e.g. historical and environmental places of the town) and cooperation, demonstrating how—apart from the measured perceptions—such a platform can foster genuine co-creation. This is particularly relevant in contexts where common digital

---

<sup>14</sup> Here,  $r$  refers to the rank-biserial correlation coefficient, considered as the effect size of the test

co-creation platforms are less applicable. This study contributes to rethinking training as a tangible, analogic platform for value co-creation—especially in rural areas where digital infrastructures are often lacking. Unlike virtual platforms, in-person training enables embodied dialogue, direct peer interaction, and situated learning. Such analogic platforms not only convey knowledge but also generate the relational conditions necessary for co-creation: mutual trust, shared purpose, and local agency. In this regard, training initiatives act as systemic interfaces that activate latent resources within the community. From a practical standpoint, the initiative serves as a replicable model for similar rural destinations. It provides a model that can be adapted by policymakers or tourism professionals aiming to foster local engagement. Considering the importance of local entrepreneurs within a systemic approach to territorial marketing, and the key role of residents in value co-creation (Golinelli et al., 2006; Ribeiro et al., 2023; John & Supramaniam, 2024), offering structured opportunities for learning and collaboration emerges as a crucial strategy.

## **5. Limitations and Future Research**

This study presents several limitations, primarily related to the research design adopted. The absence of a control group prevents establishing a causal link between participation in the course and the observed outcomes. Additionally, the small sample size limits the statistical power of the findings, reducing their generalizability and making it difficult to draw broad conclusions. It is important to note that this short paper represents a preliminary account within a broader research project. The same participant group will be monitored over time to assess longer-term changes, both in the dimensions already explored and through the inclusion of additional indicators (e.g. economic indicators) to evaluate the overall impact of the initiative more comprehensively. Future studies can adopt more rigorous and robust research designs, such as randomized controlled trials or mixed method approaches to strengthen the validity of the findings and to explore actual relationships between the considered variables. Moreover, subsequent research could explore alternative impact variables, while maintaining the same teaching and engagement framework. Finally, future research could compare similar contexts, distinguishing between those exposed to training interventions like the one presented and those not exposed, to try and assess differential impacts on value co-creation capacity, sense of community and collaboration willingness.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by the European Union and the Municipality of Villanova Monteleone, within the framework of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Mission 1, Component 3, Investment 2.1 “Attractiveness of Historic Villages”.

## References

- Cai, R., Chi, C. G. Q., & Del Chiappa, G. D. (2024). How sense of community and social environment influence residents' subjective well-being? Moderating role of trust. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 1–26.
- Chen, Y., Cottam, E., & Lin, Z. (2020). The effect of resident-tourist value co-creation on residents' well-being. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 44, 30–37.
- Del Chiappa, G., Atzeni, M., & Ghasemi, V. (2018). Community-based collaborative tourism planning in islands: A cluster analysis in the context of Costa Smeralda. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 8, 41–48.
- Golinelli, C. M., Trunfio, M., & Liguori, M. (2006). Governo e marketing del territorio. *Sinergie, Rapporti di ricerca*, 23, 17–44.
- John, S. P., & Supramaniam, S. (2024). Value co-creation research in tourism and hospitality management: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 58, 96–114.
- Lin, Z., Chen, Y., & Filieri, R. (2017). Resident-tourist value co-creation: The role of residents' perceived tourism impacts and life satisfaction. *Tourism Management*, 61, 436–442.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6–23.
- Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creating unique value with customers. *Strategy & Leadership*, 32(3), 4–9.
- Prezenta, A., Del Chiappa, G., & Sheehan, L. (2013). Residents' engagement and local tourism governance in maturing beach destinations: Evidence from an Italian case study. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 2(1), 22–30.
- Ramaswamy, V., & Ozcan, K. (2018). What is co-creation? An interactional creation framework and its implications for value creation. *Journal of Business Research*, 84, 196–205.
- Ribeiro, T. D. L. S. A., Costa, B. K., Ferreira, M. P., & De Lamônica Freire, O. B. (2023). Value co-creation in tourism and hospitality: A systematic literature review. *European Management Journal*, 41(6), 985–999.
- Siegel, S. and Castellan Jr., N.J. (1988). *Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd Edition, McGrawHill, New York.
- Taghizadeh, S. K., Jayaraman, K., Ismail, I., & Rahman, S. A. (2016). Scale development and validation for DART model of value co-creation process on innovation strategy. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 31(1), 24–35.
- Talò, C. (2018). Community-based determinants of community engagement: A meta-analysis research. *Social Indicators Research*, 140(2), 571–596.
- Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. *Tourism Management*, 21(6), 613–633.
- Vargo, S. L., & Lusch, R. F. (2011). It's All B2B and Beyond: Toward a Systems Perspective of the Market. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40, 181–187.