

# Motivation of International Students through a Photo Contest

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要旨：令和2年12月、徳島大学ギャラリー新蔵で写真コンテスト展示会「徳島から未来へ 留学生の思い2020」を開催した。このコンテストの目的は、コロナ禍の状況の下、徳島大学の外国人留学生や外国人研究者がどのようなことを経験し、どのように対応してきたかを発信することであり、写真と共に写真の説明文を展示している。写真の説明文を分析したところ、「生活制限」、「楽しみ」、「自信」、「希望」の4カテゴリーに分けられた。また、留学生からのニーズをもとに、今後の国際交流活動を検討していく。

キーワード：写真コンテスト、留学生、新型コロナ禍

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has made a serious impact on the higher education. The campus life is undergoing major changes, including switching to online lessons, restricting face-to-face communication, and limiting social activities. At the higher academic institutions, all kinds of interactions including extracurricular activities and international exchange activities were cancelled. Situation at Tokushima University (TU) is not different from the other universities. Regular activities for international exchanges such as Japanese Culture and Industry Study trips, multicultural exchange events, Japanese Culture Events all have been abolished for this year. As an alternative, a Photo Contest was conducted during November – December 2020.

Photo contest is a relatively simple and easy tool for promoting exchange and promoting opinion sharing and motivation. Some institutions in Japan, such as Nippon Photography Institute or Tokyo International Exchange Center have been using photo contests regularly to attract involvement of students, including international students in some cases in the past. Since the Covid-19 outbreak started in 2020, photo contest, because of its nature, becomes even more popular kind of activity among educational institutions such as Kagawa University, Miyagi Gakuin Women's University.

The Photo Contest "From Tokushima to the Future: My Lifestyle 2020" was hold by the International Office-TU with the aim to show what the international students and foreign researchers of Tokushima University have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they have responded to this situation in terms of daily life and campus life. The photos were being submitted during the period

November 16-30, 2020 and the public Exhibition was held daily from December 15-23, 2020 (9:00 to 17:00) at Gallery Shinkura-TU. The visitors had free access to the exhibited works and were asked to select a photo that they like the most, then to vote for it by either online or paper voting. The call for photo submission was announced on the websites of TU and International Office. In addition, the Exhibition was announced by the Tokushima newspaper.



Figure 1. Gallery Exhibition

This paper aims to analyze the messages underlying the photo descriptions submitted by the international students who participated in the Photo Contest, which may convey their situation, feeling, response and expectation along with their photos. This could help to understand the needs and to design more suitable international exchange activities for the future.

## 2. Method

Data collection was conducted qualitatively at TU from the following sources: (1) descriptions of the works that were submitted by international student-applicants; (2)

Voting form opened to the public during the Gallery Exhibition, both online and paper-based; (3) Feedback forms of the participants.



Figure 2. Announcement on the local newspaper

(Source: Tokushima Shinbun Dec. 22, 2020).

The data collected from photo descriptions were coded into 17 codes under four major categories: enjoyment (scenery, flowers, fall, Tokushima, campus), self-confidence (self-reliance, fighting spirit, positive vision, new hobby), motivation (study motivation, research motivation, inspiration for achievement), restriction (Awa Odori, travel, meeting friends, daily life). Analysis was performed using QDA Miner Lite V2.0.8 software (Provalis Research).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participation and involvements

The target of this contest was all international students and researchers who are enrolled at TU at the time of November 2020. There were 11 participants making a participation rate at 5.7% (11/192). The participants were from 9 countries, which make the country participation rate of 47.8% (11/23). By enrollment type, 18% (2/11) were students in preparatory course, 9% (1/11) were undergraduate students, 72.7% (8/11) were graduate students. By the language of photo description submitted, 18% (2/11) of participants were submitted in Japanese, while 82% (9/11) were submitted in English. Regarding the public voting by exhibition visitors, there were totally 28 votes, including 24 by QR code and 4 by paper form. The most favorite work got 6 votes.

#### 3.2. Implied messages via the photo descriptions

Table 1. Coding the photo descriptions

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
<b>Enjoyment</b>				
● Scenery	10	15.6%	7	63.6%
● Flowers	3	4.7%	2	18.2%
● Fall	2	3.1%	2	18.2%
● Tokushima	6	9.4%	4	36.4%
● Campus	4	6.3%	2	18.2%
<b>Self-confidence</b>				
● Self-reliance	3	4.7%	2	18.2%
● Fighting spirit	4	6.3%	4	36.4%
● Positive vision	9	14.1%	7	63.6%
● New hobby	1	1.6%	1	9.1%
<b>Motivation</b>				
● Study motivation	3	4.7%	2	18.2%
● Research motivation	4	6.3%	4	36.4%
● Inspiration for achievement	2	3.1%	2	18.2%
<b>Restriction</b>				
● Awa Odori	1	1.6%	1	9.1%
● Travel	2	3.1%	2	18.2%
● Meeting friends	1	1.6%	1	9.1%
● Daily life	9	14.1%	8	72.7%

Restrictions to the daily life or academic life due to the impacts of the Covid-19 have been specified through the description messages. Majority (72.7%) of participants has conveyed that their daily life is somehow restricted. Some messages implied about the restrictions in travelling and sightseeing, restriction in exchange and meeting people, or even restriction in going out during lockdown. Some participants even stated that they miss the Awa Odori, among the other events of Tokushima. The following message is clearly showing some contradictory feeling:

*“But the Covid-19 changes everything.*

*Like a frog in the flower,*

*I cannot move but stay within a beauty.”*

(Participant H.)

Regardless of the restricted situation, most of the participants had found some sources for enjoyment and enrichment of their daily life. Most of the participants shared their enjoyment and a time for relax with the landscapes of Tokushima such as a sunset scene from the laboratory windows, flower garden in the Tokushima Central park, or leaves changing color inside the campus. Some participants even realized that there might be a time to slow down, take rest and change:

*“In a summer evening before sunset, a flock of thousand birds fly around and sing so loudly prior to landing and sitting on the branches of trees.*

*In frosty winter, birds migrate to somewhere. It is time for trees to take a rest.”*

(Participant M.)

Many of the participants conveyed some kinds of positive vision that the unfavored situation could eventually ended and things could come bright again.

*“Do not be sad, we will prepare in good health to enjoy the Olympics and Awa Odori Festival next year.*

*“Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will*

rise”.

(Participant N.)

Many shared their appreciation to the beauty of Tokushima as their resident city. As life has been slow down during pandemic, there is more time to relax and see daily things in Tokushima in a new light.

*“In the flower garden of Tokushima Central Park this fall. The beauty and the scent of roses. Beautiful scenery is everywhere in Tokushima. It is the city where I can enjoy.”*

(Participant C.)

Spending time with own, new hobbies could be nurtured and maintained:

*“Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things. Gardening has been my new hobby since the time I came to Tokushima.”*

(Participant S.)

Fighting spirit was clearly seen at some works. The international students come to Japan alone facing new things and learning new things. Not only martial arts, but the international students can also learn many things from Japan from manga to traditional arts, from cooking to disaster prevention, from laboratory technique to research methodology. Fighting spirit reflects something beyond martial arts, a determination to solve the problem, while realizing difficulties and own weaknesses that one needs to overcome:

*“There is a saying A Samurai never runs away. That encourages me to deal with difficult task in my life.”*

(Participant B.)

During the pandemic, international students realize their own knowledge and skill on disaster prevention. Besides their academic workouts, becoming independent, becoming able struggle alone is a part of self-development process. Finding oneself and relying on oneself is important step:

*“You need to learn to live during natural disasters, accidents, or wars. When it occurs, you need the power to live as an individual and to connect with the community.”*

(Participant Z.)

Motivation for study is one of the strong messages emphasized by the participants. From their very arrival to Japan, Japanese language study seems to be the biggest challenge to them, among the other things. International are aware of keeping a high level of self-motivation for study:

*“The time in Japan so far has been spent mostly by*

*studying the language and still seemingly not making any progress. The things that do not come easy are the ones worth fighting for - right? Let's hope I get it in the end!”*

(Participant J.)

Motivation for study a new thing without procrastination was well expressed by the message below:

*“Autumn green leaves turn yellow, red and orange before falling. It would remind me not to wait for the perfect moment to start something.”*

(Participant B.)

For the graduate students, spending long time doing experiment is a tedious work. Maintaining a high level of motivation is necessary for achieving research results. This message specified a tip how to see negative results as a future positive signal:

*“One thing I have learned from facing with many failed experiments is that how big a smile can brighten up when getting positive results. Learning from mistakes and making a smile a larger and wider for next time.”*

For keeping motivation for research, graduate students may look at the achievements of world leading scientists for inspiration.

*“After I saw my interview was published with many other worldwide top-tier scientists including the Nobel Prize winners, I got super inspired by what I am doing and started seeing the big pictures.”*

(Participant B.)

There were similar messages which the participants in this contest, regardless of their background. There is some life constrains during the pandemic, but international students could enjoy themselves, while building independence and self-confidence for new challenges, as well as keeping a high motivation and inspiration for study and research.

### 3.3. Direct messages via questionnaire

At the end of the contest, participants filled a form about if there is any change in their lifestyle, motivation for sending photos, message by the photos, and suggestions for future events. The results are described as below:

*How did your life/ study change by Covid-19 pandemic?*

Individual reactions to change are different level here. Some participants mentioned about a total change of lifestyle, especially long hours of online class may result bad in general health and eyes. For graduate

students, who supposed to stay longer doing experiments in the lab, some students reported not so much change, except switching lab meetings to online, and avoid doing experiments together. Many (3) participants claimed about they had to cancel attending offline conferences. They must stay home more, but still can to supermarket during weekend as usual. Undergraduate students are change to study at home instead of library. No hanging out but stay home. Some claimed that they are unable to visit friends' home and cannot make party. (2)

*What is the worst impact of Covid-19 pandemic to you?*  
Most of the participants mentioned about limitation of traveling as the worst impact, as it forced them to cancel their travel plan. Some planned to go sightseeing around Japan (4) on occasion or on graduation, other planned to go back home abroad (1). Some student mentioned about inability to find part-time job nor to keep the same number of hours of work. Other claim about social distancing which may affect mental health or make people over-precautious. Some stated that no impact for herself, but the loss of livelihood of her family in her own country was the worst. Surprisingly, some participant mentioned that not much impact of Covid-19 because her lifestyle remained the same.

*What is your message to people by your photos?*  
Most of the voices here have one thing in common: telling people or telling themselves to be patient and wait this situation to be over. One needs to believe that everything will be fine and to remain positive, to calm down, to be happy even alone, to keep a strong state of mind as the most powerful tool to fight problem. Moreover, the message to people is to relax, do not overthink, do not worry. Specifically, many voices conveyed some advice for people to spend this rare opportunity to enjoy unnoticed nature's beauty (3) of Tokushima.

*Your suggestion for future events.*  
The participants expect to enjoy the events that are simple but fun. Busy with studies and experiments, some stated that they probably will not be able to participate in any time-taking event which needs long preparation. All participants stated that they particularly liked photo contest because of its simplicity, not time-consuming yet a powerful tool for expressing underlying feelings. As hobbies and preferences varied widely by individual, all agreed that during Covid-19, the events should be designed to go online.

Table 2. Suggestion for future events

	Type of event
1	Speech contest (2)
2	Essay contest
3	Poetry (haiku) lecture, contest

4	Photo contest again
5	Painting exercise (on some pre-drawing)
6	Drawing (illustration)
7	Lesson about Japanese culture and practice
8	Discussion forum
9	Any kind of online exchange

### 3.4. Limitations and challenges

In terms of getting participants' involvement, the participation rate among international students was 5%. It may need to think about how to involve more participants representative enough for generalization in the future events. It could be interesting if more facts could be clarified from the results such as how factors such as the duration of stay in Japan, Japanese proficiency, country of citizenship, gender, scholarship status and more could influence the responses.

Moreover, as the voting was only opened for visitors who came directly to the Exhibition, especially under influence of Covid-19 restrictions, the number of votes seemed very limited. In the future, it could be considered to involve not only international students but all students and university staff. Online exhibition and voting also could be considered. For increasing participation rate, extending the submission deadlines, offering more incentives, or involving outside sponsors, and holding it as an annual event also could be considered.

## 4. Discussion

Comparison between the implied messages by the photo descriptions and messages by replying to a questionnaire has shown some consistency. However, while the descriptions of photos reflect more feelings like an artwork, the direct messages have given more informative details. Figure 3 suggests a hypothetical model for impact of pandemic on the motivation of students. Restrictions in work, travel, socializing caused some change in motivation, but the negative impacts are going to be neutralized by internal self-adaptation such as creating new hobbies, self-adjustment, or external factors such as public supports and remote events.

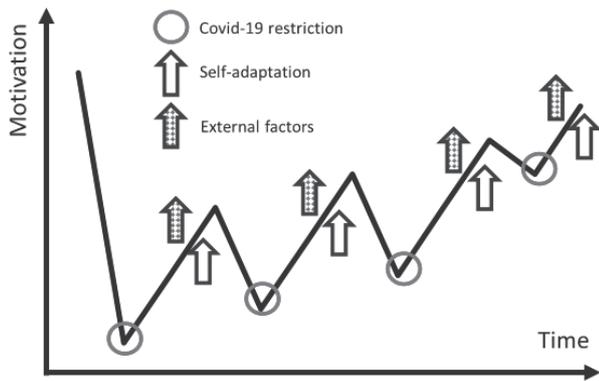


Figure 3. Model for impact of pandemic

The results of this photo contest have shown that photo contest or similar kind of activity could be an effective approach to attract the involvement of international students during the pandemic situation when it is not possible to conduct the traditional face-to-face exchanges events.

Before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, many institutions and universities have used photo contests as a form of exchange activities. For example, at the Tokyo International Exchange Center, sponsored by JASSO and Tokyo Academic Park hold photo contest on regular basis, with a goal to deepen exchanges between international students, Japanese students, and staff working at Tokyo Academic Park. These contests have attracted a high number of applicants as well as a high number of votes by visitors to the Exhibition, at the same time votes via Facebook's Like number. In another case, Nippon Photography Institute organizes photo contests on a regular basis to attract potential future students by giving scholarship to the winners, who were selected by a board of judges. Iwate International Student Exchange Promotion Council also holds regular photo exhibitions for international students who enrolled in universities in Iwate prefecture. The contests in Iwate aim at showing the best visual images of Iwate prefecture as seen by the international students to the public. These contests are being also supported by local companies. Since several years including this year, Kagawa University holds a photo contest via Instagram for all students and university staff. As it targeted more participants, the number of works applied were higher, although all photos must be taken inside the campus.

While there are many things to be learned from the photo contests organized by other institutions, the Photo Contest "From Tokushima to the Future: My Lifestyle 2020" has shown some positive aspects such as being compact, simple yet attractive to participants and Gallery visitors. In future, to improve the effectiveness and dissemination of the Photo contest, it could target the whole student contingent, university faculty and staff, as well as to consider online gallery and to diversify the awards. The themes and

dissemination strategy of photos may need to be refined for better communicating the image of TU.

Regarding the future cultural exchange activities during pandemic, besides photo contest, the participants suggested and expected that more events could be provided to them. The international students who arrived during 2020 are lacking opportunities to be in touch with Japanese culture, local culture, exchange events among many other things. Activities such as online courses on drawing manga, origami, Ikebana, calligraphy etc. could be considered. Online contests either in Japanese or English, such as speech contest, Haiku contest, karaoke contest, drama contest, manga drawing contest etc. could be considered among the alternatives.

### Acknowledgement

This Photo Contest was supported by the Gallery Shinkura Information Dissemination Project, Tokushima University.

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