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Revitalizing Domestic Tourism Amid the Pandemic: An Assessment of Tourism Economic Resilience in Japan and Thailand's Stimulus Campaigns

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented shock to the global tourism industry, including those in Japan and Thailand. In response, both the Japanese and Thai governments decided to launch large-scale domestic tourism stimulus campaigns – Go To Travel and We Travel Together, respectively – as mechanisms to support resilience. This article employs a documentary analysis of tourism agency data, government reports, academic articles, and news media. Adopting Norris et al.'s conceptual framework of resilience, the paper assesses tourism economic resilience provided by these campaigns based on three criteria: robustness, redundancy, and rapidity. In terms of robustness, both campaigns demonstrated strong financing and substantial returns for the overall tourism industry. Regarding redundancy, the campaigns were complementary and could be substituted by other similar programs such as Go To Eat and Let's Go Halves. Lastly, the fact that both governments launched the campaigns only six months after confirming their first COVID-19 cases underscores their rapidity. Despite certain challenges, these campaigns contributed to the tourism sector's resilience, as highlighted by their robustness, redundancy, and rapidity, and ultimately helped revitalize the tourism industry in both countries during the crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, Resilience, Go To Travel, We Travel Together

Introduction

How did the tourism sector in popular destinations like Japan and Thailand survive during the COVID-19 pandemic? When the pandemic broke out, travel restrictions were imposed, resulting in a sharp decline in the number of tourist arrivals. Japan had seen a steady annual increase in inbound arrivals since 2011, reaching a peak of around 31.9 million in 2019. However, the figure plummeted to 4.1 million in 2020, marking a decline of nearly 87% (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2025). Similar to Japan, Thailand faced a drastic drop in tourist arrivals from 39.9 million in

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2019 to 6.7 million in 2020, a decline of 83% (Bank of Thailand, 2025). Data also show that due to continued border restrictions, both countries experienced record-low tourist arrivals in 2021 – While Japan welcomed only 0.25 million visitors, Thailand received 0.43 million, representing an unprecedented decline in their tourism industry.

Regarding the economic downturn, Japan saw an economic loss of 22 billion U.S. dollars to its tourism sector, with the hotel, restaurant, and wholesale industries being the most affected (Oga & Kagawa, 2025). In Thailand, where tourism contributed to 20% of the country's GDP, the tourism revenue dropped significantly from 90 billion U.S. dollars in 2019 to 24 billion U.S. dollars in 2020 (Thaicharoen et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge to the tourism and hospitality sectors, which were among the most severely affected (Torres & Augusto, 2021). It dealt a huge blow to both countries' national economies.

To minimize the impact and sustain the valuable tourism industry, the Japanese and Thai governments responded by launching large-scale domestic tourism stimulus campaigns – Go To Travel and We Travel Together, respectively. This paper aims to assess tourism economic resilience in Japan and Thailand, as supported by these campaigns. A documentary analysis of tourism agency data, government reports, academic articles, and news media is employed to study the campaigns. The paper begins with a description of both campaigns, followed by a review of the concept of resilience. It then assesses the campaigns through the lens of tourism economic resilience, drawing on Norris et al.'s framework.

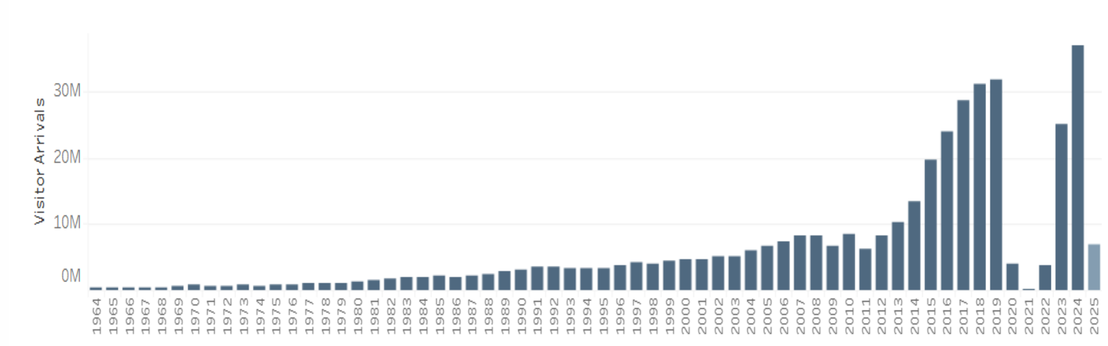

Figure 1 Trends in the Visitor Arrivals to Japan
Source: Japan National Tourism Organization

Government Policies and Tourism Industry

Typically, government-sponsored policies are used to mitigate economic downturns and stabilize the broader national economy in times of crisis. During the late-2000s global economic crisis, global tourism was severely affected, as travel demand declined and travelers looked for ways to economize (Papatheodorou et al., 2010). Examining the case of Cyprus, Boukas and Ziakas (2013) found that the government implemented immediate response measures including the introduction of a social tourism plan aimed at local travelers to boost inbound tourism on the island. Likewise, the Thai government launched an economic-stimulus package, which included a 1-billion-baht tourism promotion program in response to the economic crisis (Chandoevwit, 2010). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions were imposed, the tourism industry was uniquely vulnerable and therefore required special attention from governments. In this regard, governments were compelled to implement certain measures to revive the industry. These responses included fiscal policy and interest rate cuts (Okafor et al., 2022), consumption-stimulus and public utility support measures (Kamjampa & Phosing, 2022), and domestic tourism stimulus campaigns (Yagasaki, 2021; Dekhlee et al., 2022).

Empirical studies show that the exposure of global tourism industry is not limited to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as it can also be affected by other events such as the 9/11 incident in 2001, the SARS outbreak in 2003, the global economic crisis in 2009, and the MERS outbreak in 2015 (Gössling et al., 2020). However, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, these events did not lead to a long-term decline in international tourism. Since the scale and severity of COVID-19's impact on the global tourism industry is unprecedented, the study of domestic tourism stimulus campaigns has become particularly significant. This is in line with Papatheodorou et al. (2010)'s forecast of tourism trends, suggesting that domestic tourism is likely to boom in times of crisis.

Even in the post-Covid-19 situation, when travel restrictions are no longer imposed, the domestic tourism trend can still be sustained. Kousuratand and Mungmuang (2023) contend that government policies can help reach a "new normal" in tourism by leveraging technological applications, promoting wellness-focused travel, extending the stimulus campaign's duration, and providing additional discounts to encourage domestic travel demand. Another crucial perspective is sustainable tourism which can be achieved through convenient travel options, enhanced tourist experiences, and the development of tourist attractions (Chompoopanya et al., 2024). Together, these suggest that domestic tourism stimulus policies contribute to not only immediate recovery but also longer-term, post-crisis tourism resilience.

Japan's Go To Travel

A study by Yagasaki (2021) finds that despite the risk of infection, 60-70% of the Japanese people still intended to travel domestically, implying the huge demand of domestic tourism amid the pandemic crisis. In the wake of the pandemic, the Go To Travel campaign was first implemented by the Japanese government in July 2020 to revitalize the domestic tourism sector. The campaign provided to residents of Japan, thereby encouraging domestic travel. It offered a discount of up to 35% on travel expenses, including accommodation and transportation, along with coupons worth an additional 15% to be used for other travel-related purchases, which would be issued by the travel agents or hotels. The maximum discount was 20,000 Japanese yen per person per night for overnight stays, and 10,000 Japanese yen per person for day trips. This subsidy shows that the sector focus was on accommodation, transportation, and local spending. All residents of Japan, including both Japanese citizens and foreigners, were eligible to participate in the campaign. The program was implemented nationwide. Initially, Tokyo was excluded from the campaign due to a rise in COVID-19 cases. However, Tokyo was included starting October 1. The entire campaign was later suspended in December due to a resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

Thailand’s We Travel Together

Similar to Japan, the Thai government implemented the We Travel Together initiative, which has already been successfully carried out over five phases. The program was designed “to stimulate consumer spending through domestic tourism, enhance liquidity for hotel operators and related businesses, support job creation, and contribute to the overall economic recovery of the country” (MGR Online, 2020). Launched in July 2020, the initiative provided several key subsidies: a 40% discount on accommodation, 600 baht per night in e-vouchers delivered via the “Pao Tang” mobile application, and a 40% airfare subsidy (up to 2,000 baht). Like Japan, the sector focus was on accommodation, transportation, and local spending. However, restaurants were also included, as the e-vouchers via the “Pao Tang” application could be used for dining. In terms of eligibility, only Thai citizens aged 18 or above were eligible for the campaign. Unlike Japan’s nationwide Go To Travel campaign, the Thai project primarily encouraged people to travel outside of their home provinces. Due to its success in promoting domestic travel, the program was extended through five phases.

Table 1 Comparison of Japan’s Go To Travel and Thailand’s We Travel Together

	Go To Travel	We Travel Together
Government subsidy	Discounts and coupons	Hotel discounts, e-vouchers, and airfare subsidies
Subsidy breakdown	35% off travel costs + 15% local coupons	40% hotel discount + 600-baht vouchers + 40% airfare subsidy
Platform	Centralized via travel agencies	Centralized via the “Pao Tang” application
Eligibility	All residents of Japan (including foreigners living in Japan)	Thai citizens only (aged 18 or above)
Phasing	Suspended in December 2020	Continued through 5 phases

Source: The authors

The Concept of Resilience

Resilience is originally a term rooted in physics, describing the ability of an elastic object to absorb disturbances and return to its original state. The concept was first applied to ecological systems by Holling (1973), emphasizing the ability of ecosystems to withstand and recover from environmental changes. Since then, resilience has been adopted across various fields. There are terms like ecological resilience (Holling, 1973), community resilience (Norris et al., 2008), and economic resilience (Martin, 2012; Lee et al., 2020). Despite their varied focuses, they all center on the capacity to recover when faced with shocks. With the launch of large-scale domestic tourism stimulus campaigns – Japan's Go To Travel and Thailand's We Travel Together, it is evident that the Japanese and Thai governments aimed to revive domestic tourism and hence enhance resilience in response to the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It should be noted that disruptions to the tourism sector directly impact economic stability, particularly in countries like Japan and Thailand where tourism contributes significantly to GDP. In this sense, tourism recovery inherently supports economic recovery. By reviving domestic tourism, the launch of the two campaigns thereby reflects this emphasis on economic resilience. Rose (2004) defines economic resilience as "the inherent and adaptive responses to disasters that enable individuals and communities to avoid some potential losses." When applied to tourism, the concept refers to "the capacity of the tourism industry to recover to its original or better state in time when faced with economic fluctuations, natural disasters, government decisions, and other factors" (Sun et al., 2024). Beyond macroeconomic indicators, tourism recovery also means the revitalization of key sectors such as accommodation, transportation, and local businesses. This is what Sun et al. refer to as tourism economic resilience.

To evaluate the tourism economic resilience provided by the stimulus campaigns, this paper adopts a conceptual framework based on the concept of resilience as discussed by Norris et al. (2008). Although their work primarily focuses on community resilience, their emphasis on resources is also relevant to the economic dimension, which highlights the distribution of resources. According to them, resilience emerges from a set of adaptive capacities: robustness, redundancy, and rapidity. This framework is a streamlined version of the original "4R" model introduced by Bruneau et al. (2003), which includes robustness, redundancy, rapidity, and resourcefulness. To enhance clarity and parsimony, Norris et al. combine resourcefulness with rapidity. For this reason, this paper adopts Norris et al.'s streamlined framework.

Resilience Assessment

This section assesses how the campaigns contributed to tourism sector resilience, using Norris et al.’s conceptual framework including: robustness, redundancy, and rapidity.

1. Robustness

Norris et al. (2008) define robustness as “resource strength in combination with a low probability of resource deterioration”. The robustness of tourism economic resilience in both Japan’s Go To Travel and Thailand’s We Travel Together campaigns is reflected in the strong policy responses delivered through the Go To Travel and We Travel Together campaigns. These campaigns had strong financing, positive economic returns, and capability to sustain domestic tourism activity while mitigating economic shocks.

In Japan, the government allocated 3.35 trillion yen to the Go To Travel campaign to stimulate domestic tourism. With discounts on transportation, accommodation, and coupons for local purchases, the campaign successfully attracted many Japanese residents to participate. It is reported that the participation was notably high, with the program being used for 87.81 million overnight stays. Data suggest that from August to November 2020, more than half of all hotel guests benefited from the program (The Japan Tourism Agency, 2021). By mid-October, the campaign had generated approximately 3.4 trillion yen in profit for the tourism industry (Kim et al., 2022). Such funding and returns serve as clear indicators of the robustness of the campaign launched by the Japanese government amid the crisis.

In the case of Thailand, the We Travel Together initiative successfully encouraged high public participation in domestic travel. Associate Professor Dr. Sittdaj Pongkijvorasin noted that during its first two phases, the initiative helped raise hotel revenues by 37% and increased the number of travelers by 40%. (Bangkok Biz News, 2021). Moreover, the initiative’s robustness was reflected in its strong financing from the government and the relatively high economic return it generated. Minister of Tourism and Sports Sorawong Thienthong pointed out that throughout five phases, the government spent a total of 24.02 billion baht on the initiative, directly generating an economic value of 58.62 billion baht (Thairath Online, 2025). In contrast to the Japanese scheme, which ended in December 2020 – only five months after its first launch in July – the Thai program extended through five phases, demonstrating its robustness in terms of continuity and stability. In July 2025, the Thai government announced “Half-Half Travel Thailand” (*Thiao Thai Khon La Khrueng*), which marks the sixth phase of the initiative. As of July 11, a total of 1,585,208 people had successfully registered for the program. Among them, 91,008 had already booked accommodations, with 408,992 benefits still remaining (TAT News Thai, n.d.). This shows the continued high level of public interest in Thailand’s domestic tourism stimulus campaign.

Taken together, these figures suggest that the tourism sectors in both countries displayed robustness – not in the campaigns themselves, but in their capability to resist economic losses. While Japan's campaign benefited from a substantial amount of government funding and prompt economic returns, Thailand's initiative illustrated greater continuity and resilience over time.

2. Redundancy

Redundancy refers to "the extent to which elements are substitutable in the event of disruption or degradation" (Norris et al., 2008). In this context, tourism economic resilience in Japan and Thailand was enhanced through complementary policy designed to maintain economic continuity amid the pandemic.

In Japan, the Go To Travel campaign could be complementary with the Go To Eat campaign, which was also part of the broader Go-To program. The Go To Eat campaign, as its name suggests, offered subsidies for dining out through discounts and pointed-based incentives. In this regard, travelers could enjoy benefits from both stimulus programs, using Go To Travel for accommodation and transportation while taking advantage of Go To Eat for meals during their trip. Although Go To Travel was suspended in December 2020 due to a rapid rise in COVID-19 infections, Go To Eat continued. By offering dining discounts up to 25%, Go To Eat incentivized both locals and travelers to eat at local restaurants, thereby helping to revive the food and beverage service sector, despite the halt of its complementary program. Therefore, this substitution effect illustrates Japan's redundancy-based resilience.

Likewise, Thailand's We Travel Together could be used alongside the "Let's Go Halves" (*Khon La Khrueng*) co-payment scheme. Launched in October 2020, the initiative aimed to revitalize grassroots economy by suppoing small businesses such as street vendors in boosting their sales and income. Under the scheme, the Thai government subsidized 50% of daily expenses at participating local shops (up to 3,000 baht in the first phase). According to the Ministry of Finance (2020), the 30-billion baht scheme was expected to ease the financial burden on the public by raising their purchasing power, resulting in a total economic circulation of approximately 60 billion baht that also reached small-scale entrepreneurs. By introducing a complimentary economic stimulus program, the Thai government enhanced tourism economic resilience through redundancy – ensuring that if one campaign were disrupted, the other one could serve as a substitute to sustain economic activity, especially in the tourism sector. However, unlike the case of Japan where the stimulus program was halted, Thailand's We Travel Together has proved to be sustainable, as reflected in its continuity over five phases.

3. Rapidity

According to Norris et al. (2008), rapidity is defined as "the capacity to achieve goals in a timely manner to contain losses and avoid disruption." In the context of tourism, rapidity takes on how quickly measures are taken to reduce losses and accelerate recovery in the tourism sector.

Both the Japanese and Thai governments responded relatively fast to the tourism shock. Actually, emerging market and developing economies that rely on the tourism sector are especially vulnerable to broader economic shocks caused by crises such as COVID-19. Hence, for a country like Thailand, a swift response is crucial in sustaining its tourism sector. After confirming their first cases in January 2020, both Japan and Thailand initially implemented travel restrictions, underscoring their prioritization of public health. These restrictions severely impacted the tourism sector since the number of inbound tourists significantly plummeted, as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, just 6 months later, both goverments launched their domestic tourism stimulus initiatives around the same time in July 2020. According to World Travel & Tourism Council (2019), tourism recovery post nearly two dozen natural disasters took around 16 months on average. The fact that Japan and Thailand launched stimulus campaigns just 6 months after confirming their first COVID-19 cases clearly demonstrates both countries' faster response compared to the typical recovery timeline, and more importantly, highlights their resilience in terms of rapidity.

More broadly, the timely responses not only reflect the governments' commitment to boosting domestic tourism but also preventing further economic downturn. As mentioned earlier, while Japan's Go To Travel campaign made 3.4 trillion yen in profit, the Thai initiative successfully injected 58.62 billion baht into the country's tourism industry. Despite its limited duration, the Japanese campaign still stands out for its swift implementation in response to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2 Summary of the Resilience Assessment

	Go To Travel	We Travel Together
Robustness	Strong financing and substantial economic returns, despite limited duration	Strong financing and substantial economic returns with continuity
Redundancy	Complementary with Go To Eat	Complementary with Let's Go Halves
Rapidity	Launched only 6 months after the first confirmed COVID-19 cases	Launched only 6 months after the first confirmed COVID-19 cases

Source: The authors

Conclusion

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited inbound travelers and thereby triggered tourism shocks, the Japanese and Thai governments launched campaigns – Go To Travel and We Travel Together, respectively – to stimulate domestic tourism. This paper suggests that these campaigns contributed to tourism economic resilience by demonstrating robustness, redundancy, and rapidity. In terms of robustness, both campaigns were supported by strong financing and generated substantial economic returns. By offering benefits and discounts on transportation and accommodation for those who travelled domestically, the campaigns attracted high levels of participation, thereby revitalizing the tourism sector. Although the Thai initiative appears more resilient due to its sustained implementation across five phases, the Japanese campaign is nonetheless robust, as it could stimulate tourism demand and inject high revenue into the tourism sector within a short period. Concerning redundancy, both campaigns could be complementary with other stimulus programs. While Japan's Go To Travel could be used alongside Go To Eat, which encouraged dining out, Thailand's We Travel Together complemented the co-payment scheme Let's Go Halves. This ensured continuity in the government's stimulus efforts in case one policy was disrupted, particularly in times of crisis. Last but not least, both governments exhibited rapidity by launching the campaigns quickly in response to the economic shock caused by COVID-19. Given that the average recovery time following global crises is approximately 16 months, the fact that both governments managed to respond within 6 months after confirming their first COVID-19 cases shows a much faster response than the global trend.

Still, despite a certain level of resilience, both stimulus campaigns faced challenges. In Japan, the suspension of the campaign was due to public concerns over a trade-off between COVID-19 prevention and economic revival. Even before its launch, The Japan Times reported that the campaign was controversial and faced public criticism (Johnston, 2020). In Thailand, the initiative faced issues related to fraud and misuse, such as fake bookings without real check-ins and inflated prices to exploit subsidies. This resulted in economic losses of over 100 million baht (Dekhlee et al., 2022). Although these issues raise questions about accountability in times of crisis, it is undeniable that both campaigns helped save the tourism industry in Japan and Thailand. Particularly in Thailand, the continuity of We Travel Together not only reflects public confidence in the initiative but also demonstrates policy learning and adjustment that could help prevent further fraud by drawing on lessons from previous phases.

Practically, this paper presents policy lessons from Japan and Thailand on how governments can manage tourism shocks through stimulus campaigns. Theoretically, it offers an analytical template for assessing tourism economic resilience using three criteria: robustness, redundancy, and rapidity. This framework can be applied to assess similar policy responses in other contexts impacted by crises. Regarding limitations, this paper examines only two cases: Japan and Thailand. Including additional case studies could enhance the generalizability of the proposed conceptual framework for assessing tourism economic resilience. Moreover, interviews with stakeholders and experts involved in the campaigns could provide valuable insights for future research.

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