



# Redefining Japan's Tourism: Post-COVID Challenges and Cultural Dynamics

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## Abstract

The global tourism landscape has undergone considerable transformation owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has altered its dynamics and created new challenges. Previously, travel was linked to well-being, fostering social connections, and a sense of belonging. However, the pandemic has caused substantial disruptions, leading to job losses and changes in travel behavior. Japan, which was already grappling with overtourism pre-pandemic, faced challenges such as strained infrastructure and environmental impact. Post-pandemic challenges include issues regarding tourist etiquette and labor shortages within the industry. Japan's deeply rooted mask-wearing culture, driven by social responsibility, may lead to social stigma if norms are ignored, thus affecting tourism. Owing to an aging population and unattractive job profiles, the industry faces labor shortages, which lead to difficulties in recruiting during peak seasons. Therefore, understanding these challenges is crucial for the recovery and revival of tourism in Japan. Strategies must align with evolving societal values and sustainable practices to address behavioral norms and labor shortages. Using tweet-derived data, this study revealed an unexpected increase in discussions regarding mask use, highlighting Japan's societal emphasis on harmony and consideration of others. This study highlights the challenges faced by tourists and industry professionals, particularly regarding foreign visitors' comprehension of Japanese cultural norms. The results emphasize the critical factors affecting post-pandemic tourism in Japan, with the aim of exploring cultural influences on sustainable tourism in subsequent research. This endeavor aligns with the vision of the United Nations World Tourism Organization to reconstruct the industry and ensure equitable benefits for all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** post-pandemic tourism, sociopsychological impact, labor shortage, cultural norms, sustainable development

## **1. Introduction**

Before the COVID-19, research on the relationship between tourism and subjective well-being suggest that tourism experiences positively affect overall well-being and life satisfaction. Tourism provides opportunities for social interaction and forming new relationships, and interaction with locals and fellow travelers can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness, which are vital determinants of subjective well-being. Uysal et al. (2016) find that tourism experiences and activities significantly affect tourists' overall life satisfaction and residents' well-being. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) (2023), travel and tourism, including its direct, indirect, and induced impacts, accounts for one in five new jobs created worldwide during 2014–2019, and 10.3% of all jobs (334 million) and 10.4% of global GDP (USD 10 trillion) in 2019. According to the Japan Tourism Agency (2021), travel consumption by foreigners visiting Japan rose to JPY 4,813.5 billion in 2019, indicating the significant contribution of travel and tourism in Japan. However, the COVID-19 severely impacted the global tourism industry during 2020–2022. Governments across countries imposed travel restrictions, including border closures and quarantines, to control the spread of the virus. Declining demand for tourism services led to widespread job cuts in the industry. Moreover, the pandemic changed travel behavior, with many people choosing to travel domestically or making trips closer to home.

As of 2023, economic activity has gradually returned to pre-COVID-19 levels. However, to stabilize tourism, its determinants and issues must be identified. The Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization, Z. Pololikashvili, commented, “This crisis is an opportunity to rethink the tourism sector and its contribution to the people and planet; an opportunity to build back better towards a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism sector that ensure the benefits of tourism are enjoyed widely and fairly” (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). Therefore, this study comprehensively analyzes the obstacles hampering tourism recovery in Japan.

Before the COVID-19, several issues plagued tourism activities in Japan. Overtourism, in which the number of visitors exceeds the carrying capacity of a destination, is one such issue. Milano et al. (2019, p. 354) define overcrowding as “the excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas...which have caused permanent changes to their [the local citizens'] lifestyles, denied access to amenities and damaged their general well-being.” Many popular tourist destinations in Japan face overtourism, which strains the infrastructure and causes overcrowding, environmental degradation, and conflict between tourists and residents. Before the pandemic, overtourism plagued Japan in the following ways: First, it caused overcrowding, traffic congestion, and long waiting times at popular tourist attractions, thus straining the infrastructure at such places, such as transportation networks and public facilities. Second, it significantly affected the lives of people living near popular tourist destinations, for instance, by increasing living costs and concerns about the local culture and way of life. In Kyoto, the number of hotels has increased significantly owing to overtourism, and the phenomenon of underground soaring has emerged. These effects have raised concerns about the sustainability of Japan's tourism and have prompted the government to address the issue of overtourism.

The COVID-19 has had a significant impact on people's values and behavioral patterns. This study assumes that the challenges faced by the tourism industry post-COVID-19 are an amalgamation of the challenges faced during pre-COVID-19 period and new challenges. Accordingly, this study examines the factors that hamper post-COVID-19 tourism in Japan.

New factors are influenced by the country's socio-economic environment, as well as arising from its historically formed culture. Socio-economic factors consider the impact of a shortage of labor in the tourism industry. On the other hand, the culture of mask-wearing in Japan is considered as derived from cultural practices. Specifically, it is highlighted that historically, the wearing of masks has continued to be a cultural aspect, especially in post-COVID-19 societies. This 'cooperativeness' as a cultural factor can be a major constraint in the tourism sector. This study examines these new barriers to tourism. Specifically, it uses data obtained from social media and examines them quantitatively. As a result, this study will contribute to ongoing discussions and efforts aimed at reviving Japan's tourism industry after a novel coronavirus pandemic.

## **2. Factors hampering post-COVID-19 tourism activities**

Yamagata et al. (2020) focus on preventive behaviors against COVID-19 and exclusionary attitudes toward foreigners in Japan, which was hit by the pandemic at a relatively early stage. They hypothesize, "as COVID-19 infection spreads, infection prevention actions increase and rejective attitudes towards the Chinese and foreigners become stronger." They observe that the compliance rate of infection-preventive behaviors increased over time with the spread of COVID-19, and their hypothesis is confirmed. After the COVID-19 pandemic, two major issues related to tourism activities in Japan have been discussed. First, the negative remarks about tourists' bad manners at tourist destinations. On social media, many people criticize tourist behavior, such as not wearing masks and having loud conversations, even in enclosed spaces. Second, the shortage of labor not only at tourist spots but also in the tourism industry. Japan's declining population and economic recession have led to a labor shortage.

### **2.1 Mask-wearing culture in Japan**

A mask is worn mainly to prevent illness and the spread of infection. As Japan is a highly dense and populous country, infectious diseases can spread rapidly. Masks are effective in preventing infectious diseases such as the cold and flu. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (2023) advised wearing masks to prevent the infection and spreading the virus.

At present, the number of people infected with COVID-19 has dropped significantly. However, many Japanese people still wear masks, even though they are unlikely to protect themselves from contracting other infections. Wearing masks is a common practice in Japan. Japanese people wear masks not only to prevent infection but also as a consideration for others.

The use of masks appears to be motivated primarily by two factors. First, the altruistic motive to protect others' interests at the expense of one's interests. Altruistic risk reduction is favorable for society. Although pure altruism seems impossible, people often behave in a way that benefits others and burdens themselves (Batson et al., 1981; Schwartz and Howard, 1981). Second, the motivation to protect oneself from the virus, even if it is a misconception. People who believe that masks protect them from infection are more likely to wear them.

Nakayachi et al. (2020) conduct a nationwide survey to examine the six possible psychological reasons for wearing masks. Three reasons involved expectations regarding the risk of infection, and the other three involved other psychological forces. They find that people wear masks to conform to societal norms and to relieve themselves of anxiety. They also assert that sociopsychological motivations explain mask use. Mask-wearing culture is deeply ingrained in Japanese society and has been a common practice for many years.

The author assumes that sociopsychological motivations in Japan have two backgrounds: social responsibility and Japanese culture. There is a growing perception that wearing a mask is an act of social responsibility, as it protects not only one's health but also that of others. Consequently, people who do not wear masks experience social stigma. Japanese culture promotes mask-wearing to suppress infections such as colds and hay fever. Therefore, not wearing a mask can be considered as irresponsible and a lack of consideration for others. Social harmony and consideration for others are emphasized in Japan, and wearing a mask in public spaces is viewed as being considerate of others.

Therefore, not wearing a mask when required may be criticized. This also applies to tourists since not wearing a mask may make it seem that tourists are ignorant of this background. Consequently, tourism activities are hampered.

## **2.2 Labor shortages in the tourism industry**

Fujiyama (2023) indicates that the accommodation, food, and beverage service sectors are experiencing a shortage of personnel, even though tourism demand in Japan remains below pre-COVID levels. The author explains that workers who left these service sectors because of the pandemic have not returned. There are several reasons for the labor shortage in Japan's tourism industry. First, Japan, and many other countries, have aging societies and declining populations. The decline in the number of young people has created labor shortages. As the tourism industry encompasses seasonal work, many people must be recruited in a short time. Therefore, labor shortages are a serious concern. Second, the focus on work style reform has increased in Japan in recent years. There is a growing demand for shorter working hours and improvements in the work environment. Consequently, there is demand for shorter working hours and better treatment in the tourism industry, and applications for job openings are decreasing. Finally, jobs in the tourism industry are unattractive to young people. Jobs in this industry involve substantial labor during busy seasons; however, salaries and benefits are low and working conditions are harsh. Additionally, job openings for part-time workers are greater than those for full-time employees, reducing the number of jobseekers. Improvements are required in relation to job profiles, work styles, and work environments in the tourism industry.

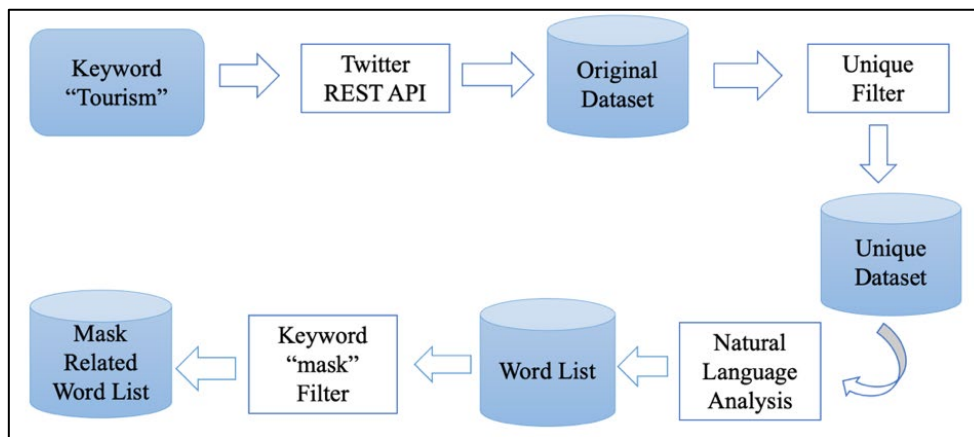
## **3. Quantitative evaluation**

### **3.1 Data collection method**

An extraction system written in Python was used. Figure 1 presents an overview of the experimental data flow. First, tweets with the keyword "tourism" were extracted using Twitter REST API. As some tweets were automatically posted repeatedly, a filter was included to remove duplicate tweets. Additionally, a morphological analysis was performed through natural language analysis using Mecab, and nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs were extracted as parts of speech. Finally, a filter was included for the keyword "mask" to extract the mask-related word list.

Consequently, 61,896 tweets were obtained (tweeted between January 1, 2022, and April 18, 2023). Figure 1 shows the number of newly infected people and total number of tweets each month in 2022 and 2023.

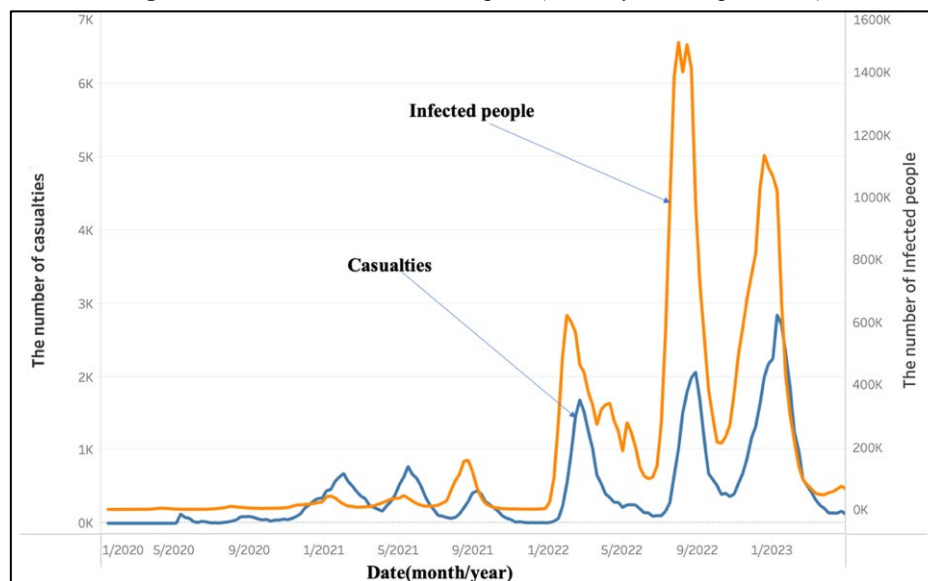
Figure 1: Overview of the experiment



### 3.2 Trend of tourism-related keywords

Figure 2 shows the trends in the number of casualties and infected people due to COVID-19 from January 2020 to April 2023, based on open data published by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2023). The left and right axes represent the number of casualties and number of infected people, respectively, which are graphed based on daily trends.

Figure 2. Trends in COVID-19 impact (January 2020-April 2023)

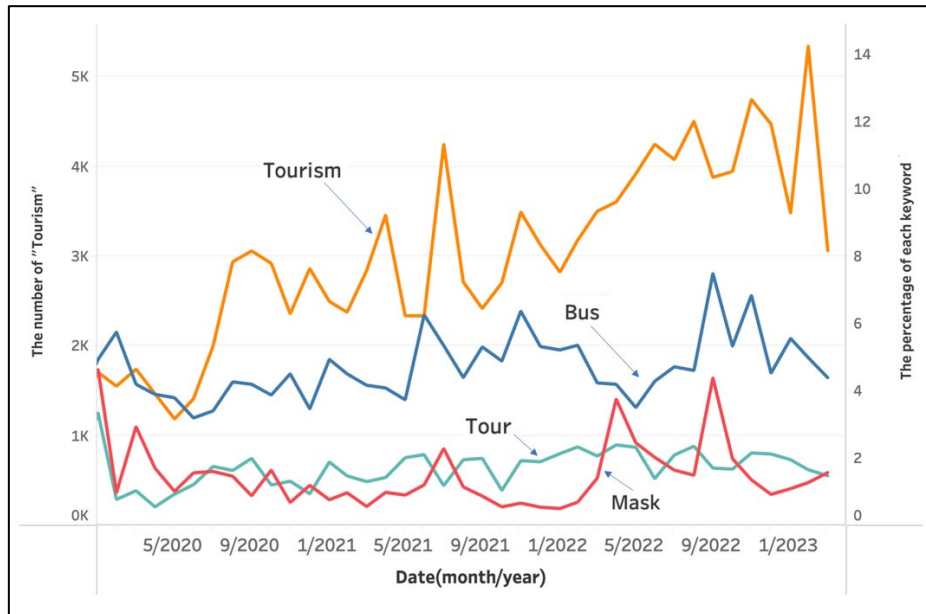


According to data published by the Cabinet Agency for Infectious Disease Crisis Management (2023), the behavioral regulations in Japan in response to this situation are as follows. The “Coronavirus Infectious Disease Emergency Declaration” that the government has maintained since 2020 will impose behavioral restrictions related to tourism activities. It was implemented in prefectures nationwide only once, on April 16, 2020, and continued for one month. In 2021, it was issued three times in total, from the second to fourth, but mainly in urban areas: after the New Year in January, before holidays in April and May, and in August. Despite the large number of infected people and casualties in 2022, a “state of emergency” was not declared.

Figure 3 shows the total number of tweets, including those related to tourism, from January 2020 to April 2023. It depicts the changes in the total tweet count and percentage of tweets

containing the keywords “mask,” “tour,” and “bus.” Although there were strict activity restrictions during the initial period of COVID-19 in 2020, there was steady activity, including domestic travel, resulting in the consistent appearance of the keyword “tour.” The keywords “bus” and “mask” also showed a consistent presence, somewhat correlating with the increase in COVID-19 cases. When COVID-19 infections stabilized, it becomes a distinctive cultural practice in Japan.

Figure 3. Number of tweets with “tourism” and percentages of each keyword



### 3.3 Changes in emotions regarding mask-wearing

A survey was conducted to explore how the emotions of Japanese people regarding mask-wearing evolved from 2020 to 2023, with a specific focus on data from March. Through discussions with multiple researchers, inherent emotions embedded in tweet data were extracted.

**March 2020:** This period marked the onset of the global spread of COVID-19, which led to a rapid increase in infections worldwide. Stringent lockdown measures and social constraints were implemented, which significantly affected economic activities. The following aspects can be elucidated: First, there were concerns and critical opinions regarding delays in response, such as the inability to purchase masks. Second, critical opinions existed regarding young individuals visiting tourist destinations without wearing masks. Finally, there were negative opinions about individuals, especially tourists, arriving at remote locations such as islands, removing masks upon reaching the airport, and engaging in tourism without masks. This illustrated the diverse range of emotions surrounding the use of masks in March 2020, a period characterized by the global impact of COVID-19.

**March 2021:** Progress in vaccination contributed to some success in preventing the spread of infections; however, challenges arose with the emergence of new variants and supply shortages. The following aspects can be explained: First, there were concerns and criticisms regarding the behavior of large crowds not wearing masks during tourism and shopping activities associated with the Tokyo Olympics. Second, there were negative opinions expressing concerns about the risk of spreading infection by removing masks. Finally, there were positive opinions about

events in which masks were removed at tourist destinations, in contrast to opinions expressing concerns about the risk of spreading the infection. In March 2021, as vaccination efforts progressed, a nuanced range of opinions and sentiments emerged regarding mask-related behaviors and events, reflecting the complex dynamics during this period.

March 2022: During this period, while some countries implemented steps toward reopening their economies, others intensified their measures because of concerns about the spread of infections. With the resumption of international travel, there was increased communication comparing situations abroad. The following aspects can be interpreted: First, in certain regions of Japan's tourist destinations, there was a growing discomfort due to a significant number of tourists not wearing masks. Second, the rarity of mask-wearing in professional sports events overseas was observed. Third, opinions suggested that efforts to establish mask-wearing in Japan negatively impacted the tourism industry. In March 2022, diverse opinions and observations were made regarding the international situation and ongoing dynamics related to mask-wearing behaviors.

March 2023: Progress in vaccine administration led to a certain degree of control over the number of infections, and a new lifestyle was established. The following aspects can be deciphered: First, observations and emotions regarding the correlation between mask-wearing, vaccination, and the mortality increase rates, along with sentiments toward this situation were noted. Second, there were expressions of curiosity in situations where foreigners wore masks in tourist destinations, along with the emotions of donning masks as something least desirable. Finally, negative emotions were expressed toward the lack of mask-wearing by foreign tourists in tourist destinations and public transportation, along with a sense of crisis regarding the possibility of their actions becoming sources of infection.

Owing to COVID-19, changes in expressions including the word "mask" suggest that there are following relationships between mask-wearing and Japanese culture: First, there has been criticism of young people and tourists not wearing masks, which reflects social norms and cultural conformity. In Japan, harmony with others and manners in public places are important, which may impact emotions. Second, sentiments regarding mask-wearing are closely related to events and tourism. For example, there are conflicts of opinion over events where masks are removed, and feelings of wonder at the sight of foreigners wearing masks at tourist destinations. These findings suggest that the mask culture affects tourism and cultural events. Moreover, sentiment toward mask-wearing indicates that it is a cultural norm rather than just a means of infection control.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Japanese tourism industry is at a critical juncture in navigating the post-corona situation. The study shows that labor shortages due to the declining birth rate and ageing population and employment patterns, as well as differences in social values such as mask culture, may affect the tourism industry. Japan's deeply entrenched mask-wearing culture reflects social responsibility and consideration for others and has implications for the actual experience of tourists. Ignoring these norms can lead to social prejudice and impact tourism. Our analysis of tweet-derived data highlights Japan's emphasis on harmony and consideration. Data analysis suggests that mask wearing in Japan is closely linked to social norms, cultural conformity, events and tourism. Sentiments towards mask wearing indicate that masks are not

just a means of preventing infection, but a cultural norm. This study redefines the difficulties in tourism in Japan, not only in recovering from the coronas, but also in creating a harmonious and sustainable tourism path for both travelers and locals.

While this study sheds light on critical aspects of Japan's tourism industry, it is essential to recognize its limitations. We are considering advanced research from the following perspectives: the ubiquity of social media and the diversity of Japanese culture. First, the data used in the analysis relied on the opinions of specific demographics, which may be biased. Second, long-term trends post-COVID have not yet been analyzed, and seasonal fluctuations may not be fully considered. Third, even when traveling within Japan, cultural diversity, such as differences in tourist destinations and cultural preferences, may have different effects on individual behavior. Fourth, this study examines the influence of Japanese culture in the perspective of tourism. The impact of the pandemic will have social and environmental implications beyond tourism and could shape new travel patterns. We would like to consider this influence in future research.

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