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Reputation and image recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake: A long journey with high hopes

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Introduction

Tourism is considered one of the more important industries in the world, contributing economically to many countries' development (Huang et al., 2008). The Japanese government has actively promoted inbound tourism since the launch of the 'Visit Japan' campaign in 2003, by implementing various policies, such as relaxing tourist visas, building a tourist-friendly environment, implementing a tax-free policy and so on. As a result, 28,691,073 international tourists visited Japan in 2017, compared to 5,211,725 in 2003 (JNTO, 2018a, 2018b). Undoubtedly, the booming tourism market brought a significant economic impact to Japan. According to data from the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA, 2017), the economic impact of tourism in 2015 amounted to 25.5 trillion Japanese yen (approximately USD 234 billion), and tourism accounted for four million jobs or 6.7% of nationwide employment (JTA, 2017).

However, the tourism industry is also more fragmented and vulnerable to crises and disasters (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004), and the industry often finds it difficult to rebound quickly from crises and disasters that have damaged the image of a destination (Cassedy, 1992).

Although the number of international tourists to Japan has continually increased since 2003, the industry was greatly affected by the worldwide financial crisis in 2009 and the Great East Japan Earthquake (also called the 3.11 Earthquake and Tohoku Earthquake) in 2011 (see Figure 4.1).

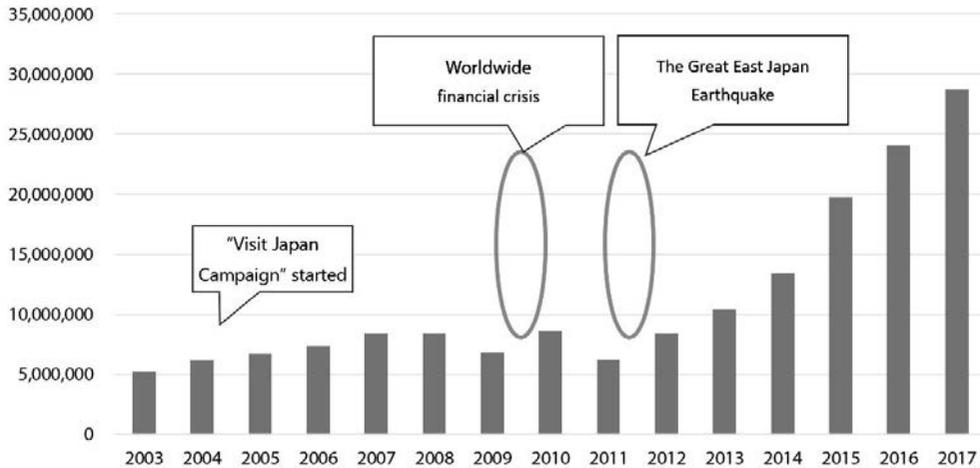


Figure 4.1: Changes in international tourist arrivals since the beginning of the ‘Visit Japan’ campaign. Source: JNTO, 2018b.

Tourism is difficult to develop in places that are perceived as dangerous (Huang et al., 2008), because destination image plays a critical role in tourists’ decision-making process and destination selection (Rittichainuwat, 2011). It is unlikely that tourists will visit places they believe are unsafe. Destination image is defined as “the perception of a person or a group of people regarding a place” (Baloglu et al., 2014: 1058), and it is formed by an individual’s beliefs, ideas and general impressions about a given destination (Crompton, 1979; Baloglu et al., 2014). Destination image can be negatively affected by the mass media’s exaggerated news reports after a disaster, which often furthers the belief that the entire destination has been damaged (Henderson, 1999; Huang and Min, 2002; Rittichainuwat, 2011). Japan, especially the Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima prefectures, which were severely affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, suffered because of the perception that the country was at a high risk of natural disasters and because of rumours regarding uncontrolled nuclear accidents. However, seven years after the *annus horribilis*, the tourism industry in Japan has completely rebounded, and local tourism—even in the disaster areas—has been greatly restored after the recent catastrophe.

Using data from white papers published by the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) and from official websites, this chapter describes the Japanese government's efforts to effect image and reputation recovery in the tourism industry, as well as the reconstruction of Tohoku after the Great East Japan Earthquake. In contrast with efforts in response to other disasters and crises in the world—for example, the outbreak of hand-foot-and-mouth disease in southwest England, the September 11 terror attacks in New York City, the Sumatra-Andaman earthquake in the Indian Ocean and the Wenchuan earthquake in southwest China)—the Japanese government aimed to develop its own 'road' to reconstructing the tourism market (JTA, 2012a). In Japan, the relationship between 'tourism' and 'reconstruction' is inseparable, because tourism, to some extent, is believed one of the more effective methods of reconstruction (JTA, 2012a). This chapter first reviews the key strategies employed in the tourism market to attract both domestic and international tourists after the earthquake, and it then discusses Japanese-style tourism recovery with a specific focus on the relationship between tourism and reconstruction. Lastly, the chapter considers the implications of Japan's strategies for image and reputation recovery after the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Background: Sequence of events of the earthquake in Japan

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred at 14:46 Japan Standard Time (JST) on 11 March 2011. The earthquake triggered giant tsunami waves and caused extensive and severe structural damage in north-eastern Japan. The magnitude 9.0 earthquake and powerful tsunami resulted in the deaths of 15,894 people, while 6152 people were injured and 2558 people were listed as missing (Reconstruction Agency, nd). Moreover, the tsunami also caused nuclear accidents, primarily the level-seven meltdowns at the three reactors of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The total economic loss was estimated at over 16 trillion Japanese yen (approximately USD 160 billion) (Cabinet Office, 2011). The earthquake and the subsequent harmful rumours devastated the tourism industry in Japan, especially in the Tohoku area, including Miyagi Prefecture, Iwate Prefecture and Fukushima Prefecture (see Figure 4.2).