

Change in Foreigner Acceptance in Japan before and after COVID-19

Sunkyung CHOI ^{a*}, Rajali MAHARJAN ^b, Shinya HANAOKA ^c

^a *School of Environment and Society, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tokyo, 152-8550, Japan*

^a *E-mail: choi.s.ae@m.titech.ac.jp*

^b *Japan Transport and Tourism Research Institute, Tokyo, 105-0001, Japan*

^b *E-mail: maharjan-reu@jttri.or.jp*

^c *Same as the first author; E-mail: hanaoka@ide.titech.ac.jp*

Abstract: In the era of COVID-19 pandemic, safety and security of tourists has gained more attention. Japan as disaster-prone country attempts to develop evacuation shelter planning for foreign tourists. The study examined Japanese residents' attitudes towards foreign tourists and foreign residents and also explored how the acceptance level to foreigners has changed before and after COVID-19. We observed that the acceptance level of foreign tourists and foreign residents decreased significantly after COVID-19 with t-test. Also, there was significant difference in level of life satisfaction between before and after COVID-19. The study further can be extended to explore Japanese acceptance level to foreigners and how this could affect future tourism crisis management planning.

Keywords: Tourism Crisis Management, Foreign Tourists, Acceptance Level, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the declaration of COVID-19 pandemic by WHO (WHO, 2020), life has changed in various ways. In Japan, there is a drastic drop in number of inbound tourists and number of international air passengers. The Japanese government has conducted and implemented various countermeasures to reduce the infection such as promoting working-at-home and reducing the operating hours in restaurants. The gathering of people in public places can hardly be seen and social distance can be observed both in physical and psychological form. Amid the challenges and changes in lifestyle brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, acceptance of foreigners (tourists and residents) is an important topic which has been gaining growing attention.

From disaster management perspective, foreigners are regarded as a vulnerable population in comparison to the local residents in the society, therefore require special care, attention and positioning in the national and regional disaster management planning. In such circumstances, the perception of residents or inhabitants towards these vulnerable population is an important topic of discussion. On the contrary, the disaster management efforts in Japan mainly focuses on Japanese residents therefore less attention in efforts towards incorporating foreign tourists as a vulnerable group can be observed in the national disaster management plan. The Japanese national disaster management plan categorizes vulnerable population as elderly, children, disabled, foreigners and so on. However, the positioning of foreign tourists and foreign residents in the Japanese disaster management planning is unclear.

Given Japan's high disaster vulnerability and high foreign tourist volume, the level of

* Corresponding author.

acceptance of foreigners can have significant implications for national and regional disaster management planning. Therefore, understanding the level of acceptance of foreigners by the local residents plays an important role in enabling development of comprehensive disaster management plan by national and regional authorities. COVID-19 pandemic has shown varying impacts on economic, environmental and social aspects. This topic however has received limited attention both among academics and practitioners till date. As such, using the case of COVID-19 pandemic this study aims to understand and identify the change in acceptance level of foreigners in Japan before and after COVID-19 pandemic affected Japan.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 summarizes the research background and hypothesis development. Section 3 presents data collection and methodology, followed by results in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper with summary of findings and their policy implications.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In countries with high tourist volume and high disaster vulnerability, acceptance of foreign tourists during evacuation is a significant topic when it comes to disaster management. Henry and Kawasaki (2014) argues that the support required by foreign tourist after a disaster strikes may be different from Japan's assumptions which regard foreigners as a homogeneous group. Similarly, Leelawat et al. (2017) examined the evacuation process for Thai citizens after the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes through semi-structured interviews with relevant organization in Japan. It emphasized the importance of information provision and providing guidelines for foreign tourists to prepare information related to weather, transportation, and evacuation rule targeting foreigners in the destination country. Arce et al., (2017) examined the risk awareness and intended tsunami evacuation behavior of foreign tourists through interviews and questionnaires in Kamakura city in Japan. The study confirmed that international tourists have confusion regarding evacuate direction, transportation mode to be used and location of the evacuation areas in the region suggesting a need for developing a comprehensive evacuation planning for foreign tourist. Although relevant studies in tourism crisis management have attempted to understand the evacuation process and risk perception of foreign tourists, there are no studies focusing on perception of residents in the destination on the needs and importance of evacuation planning for foreigners.

Zhang (2018) examined the level of acceptance of Japanese toward foreign residents focusing on Chinese and Korean nationalities. The study found that Japanese with higher satisfaction with lives tend to have higher level of acceptance toward foreign residents. Long (2008) investigated how Japanese attitudes toward Chinese and American are different and how status of foreigners has affected the attitudes. Recently, there are studies on perception towards tourism and foreign tourists with regards to over tourism and sustainable tourism development (Martín Martín *et al.* 2018; San Martín *et al.*, 2018b; Meimand, *et al.* 2017). González (2019) explored positive and negative economic, sociocultural, environmental effects on residents' perception and examined community satisfaction to measure impact of tourism. The study examined how residents perceive foreign tourists and foreign residents in their community. On the impact of COVID-19 on acceptance of foreigners by the residents, the results of a survey conducted by Yamagata *et al.* (2020) indicated that as the spread of COVID-19 pandemic increased, tendencies towards infection preventive behaviors increased, and exclusionary attitudes toward foreigners became stronger in Japan. Similarly, the avoidance response against unfamiliar people, including Japanese strangers increased. Although some studies have examined the level of acceptance of Japanese towards foreigners,

there has been no study focusing on the changes in daily life, satisfaction with life, and social contact with foreigners and its ultimate impact on attitude towards foreigners brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature.

3. DATA COLLECTION

This study uses online survey as a method to collect data using a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions developed by the authors. The online survey was conducted from January 22th to January 25th, 2021 in Japan through a professional survey company with Japanese respondents. The survey questionnaire was prepared in Japanese to ensure ease of understanding by the respondents. A total of 600 respondents representing 45 prefectures of Japan with diversity in terms of gender, age, marital status, income, family structure, occupation, place of residence, housing structure, education level, familiarity with foreigners in their daily life and their English proficiency level responded the survey questionnaire. Majority of the respondents (60% in total) are from Hokkaido, Saitama, Chiba, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Aichi, Kyoto, Osaka and Hyogo prefectures with the highest percentage of respondents coming from Tokyo. In terms of gender 54.8% of the respondents were male and 45.2% were female. The respondent’s age distribution is fairly uniform which included almost 20% respondents in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s each.

The survey questionnaire mainly focused on understanding if there is any difference in acceptance level of foreigners before and after COVID-19 pandemic with additional questions to evaluate the daily changes brought about by the pandemic, impacts of pandemic on different attributes such as income, use of public transportation, travel and leisure activities, satisfaction with the quality of their life, and demographics.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Demographics

A total of 600 respondents with diversity in terms of gender, age, marital status, income, family structure, occupation, place of residence, housing structure, education level, familiarity with foreigners in their daily life and their English proficiency level responded the survey questionnaire. Among a total of 600 respondents, 54.8% are male and 45.2% are female. For the age distribution, 23.8% of the respondents are in their 20’s, 17.7% are in their 30’s, 18.2% are in 40’s, 20.7% are in 50’s and 19.7% are in 60’s. 60.7% of respondents are married and 39.3% of them are unmarried. The survey also asked the number of members living together. We found that 18.3% of the respondents are living alone, 16.5% living with one other person, 23% living with 2 people, 20.8% living with 3 people, 14.7% living with 4 people, and remaining 6.7% are living with 5 or more people. The annual income of the respondents is illustrated in Figure 1. It can be observed that the highest proportion of the respondent’s income is less than 2 million yen per annum.

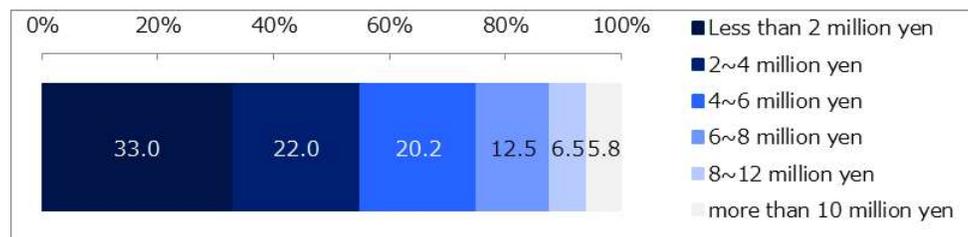


Figure 1. Annual income of the respondents

Regarding occupation, nearly half of the respondents are company employees, 5.8% are students, 12.8% are housewife/househusband followed by public servant (4.3%), self-employed (11.5%), unemployed (10.8%) and remaining others. On education dimension of demographic, 47.8% of the respondents completed their education till university level, 23.8% completed high school, 6.7% completed graduate or more, and remaining 21.7% completed varying levels like middle school, vocational school, technical school etc.

In order to understand the respondents' level of familiarity with foreigners, firstly we asked their English language proficiency in terms of speaking, listening, reading and secondly, we asked respondents some questions to understand their closeness/relationship with foreigners in daily life. To evaluate respondent's English language proficiency, we set the 5 levels evaluation metric. The five levels include no proficiency, beginner-level, intermediate-level, high-level, and native-level. On average, nearly 30% of respondents replied that they cannot speak, listen, read or write in English, nearly 45%, 15%, 5.5%, and 1.2% replied they are in the beginner, intermediate, high, and native level English language proficiency. To understand respondent's closeness/relationship with foreigners, we asked if they have foreigner partner, relative, close friend, colleague or acquaintance etc. Majority of the respondents (62%) said they have no relations to foreigners, 16.7% and 15% have foreigner work colleague and close friend respectively as in Figure 2. Only 6.2% have foreigner relative, 2% are married to foreigners and remaining acquaintances

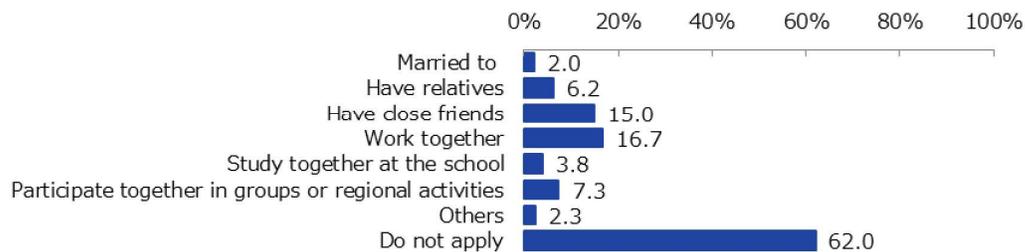


Figure 2. Relationship to foreigners

4.2 Acceptance level

To understand the level of acceptance of the foreign residents and foreign tourists in the Japanese community, we asked the respondents "How much do you agree on accepting foreign residents and foreign tourists in your community?". Also, to explore if there is any impact of COVID-19 on the respondent's level of acceptance of foreign residents and tourists, we asked for their answers focusing on before and after the pandemic. Figure 3 shows the level of agreement demonstrated by the respondents on accepting foreign residents in their community. Similarly, Figure 4 shows the level of agreement on accepting foreign tourists.

On the level of agreement to accept foreign residents before COVID-19 pandemic, from Figure X we can observe that majority of the respondents neither agree nor disagree on accepting foreign residents. A significant proportion of the respondents agree on accepting foreign residents in their community (40.3%) and some 13.5% of the respondents disagree. Based on the change in responses, COVID-19 pandemic seems to have a substantial impact on the respondent's level of agreement. When asked about their level of agreement on acceptance of foreign residents after the pandemic the agreement level decreased to 31.2%, a drop of approximately 9%. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who disagree rose to 21.5% with an increase of 8%.

Similar observation can be made from Figure X. On the level of agreement to accept foreign

tourists before COVID-19 pandemic, from Figure X we can observe that majority of the respondents neither agree nor disagree on accepting foreign tourists. A significant proportion of the respondents agree on accepting foreign tourists in their community (40.9%) and some 14.6% of the respondents disagree. Based on the change in responses, COVID-19 pandemic seems to also have a substantial impact on the respondent's level of agreement. When asked about their level of agreement on acceptance of foreign tourists after the pandemic the agreement level decreased to 30.5%, a drop of approximately 10%. On the other hand, the proportion of respondents who disagree rose to 24.5% with an increase of approximately 10%.

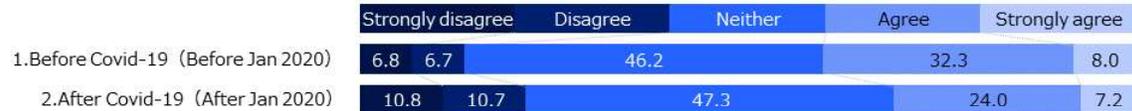


Figure 3. Level of agreement on accepting foreign residents

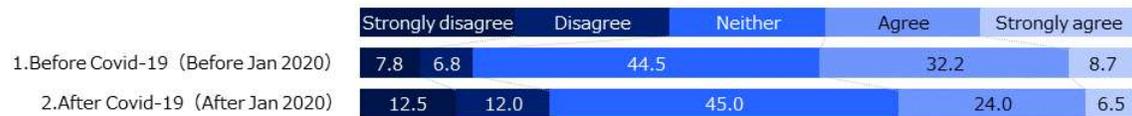


Figure 4. Level of agreement on accepting foreign tourists

Table 1. Statistical description of acceptance of foreigners

	Category	Samples	Mean	SD
Acceptance on foreign residents	Before	600	3.28	0.952
	After	600	3.06	1.032
Acceptance on foreign tourists	Before	600	3.27	0.989
	After	600	3.00	1.059

Table 2. Differences in acceptance of foreigners before and after COVID-19

	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Acceptance on foreign residents	0.220	0.763	7.060	0.000**
Acceptance on foreign tourists	0.270	0.875	7.561	0.000**

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

4.3 Change in daily life

With the aim of understanding the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives we asked the respondents “What changes have you observed in your daily life when compared to before COVID-19 and after COVID-19?” on seven different attributes with the option of open-answer. The result of the responses is shown in Figure 5. From Figure 5, we can observe that while 58.2% of the respondent's individual income did not change, 32.5% of the respondent's individual income decreased. Some 3.8% saw an increase in their income. Similar observation can be made for the household income as well. For around 30% of the respondents started telework or work from home while proportion of the respondents

observed no change. The use of public transportation, travel and leisure activities, and meeting with friends and acquaintances decreased substantially. More than 50% of the respondents observed increase in stress level as a daily impact of the pandemic.

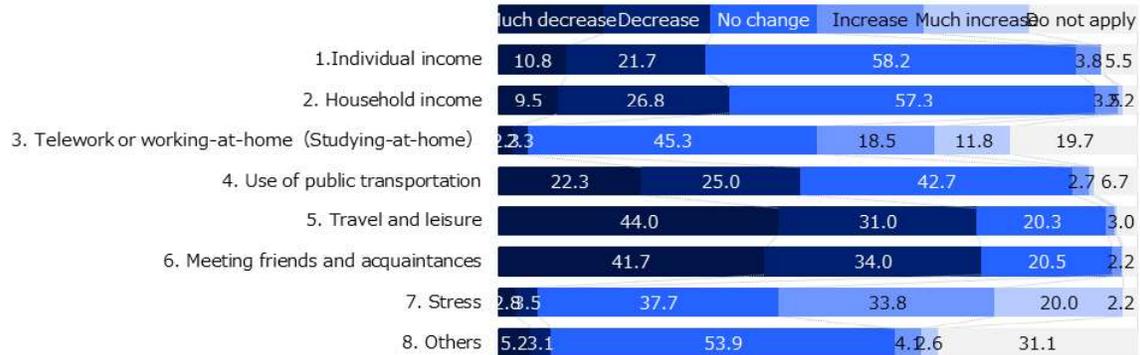


Figure 5. Change in daily life due to COVID-19 pandemic

Furthermore, we asked the respondents how often do they encounter foreigners in their daily life with before and after the pandemic to evaluate if there are any changes. As shown in Figure 6, encounter with foreigners everyday and 4-5 times a week decreased to a certain extent after the pandemic.

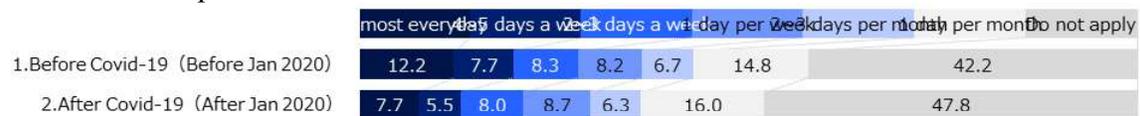


Figure 6. Encounter with foreigners in daily life

This study uses descriptive statistical methods to calculate the average and standard deviation for the answers of each question. We have used an independent t-test to analyze the results of the survey. The t-test results show that all the questions included in the questionnaire reached levels of significance that were necessary for discrimination.

Table 3. Statistical description of encountering foreigners in daily life

	Category	Samples	Mean	SD
Encountering foreigners in daily life	Before	600	5.03	2.212
	After	600	5.40	2.012

Table 4. Differences in acceptance of foreigners before and after COVID-19

	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Encountering foreigners in daily life	-0.372	1.124	-8.103	0.000**

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01.

4.4 SWLS (Satisfaction with life scale)

The satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) assesses satisfaction with people's lives as a whole by allowing respondents to integrate and weigh specific life domains such as health, finances in whatever way they choose in five domains using seven scales. We used SWLS to assess respondent's satisfaction with life before and after the pandemic. Figure 7 and 8 shows the respondent's SWLS before and after the pandemic respectively.

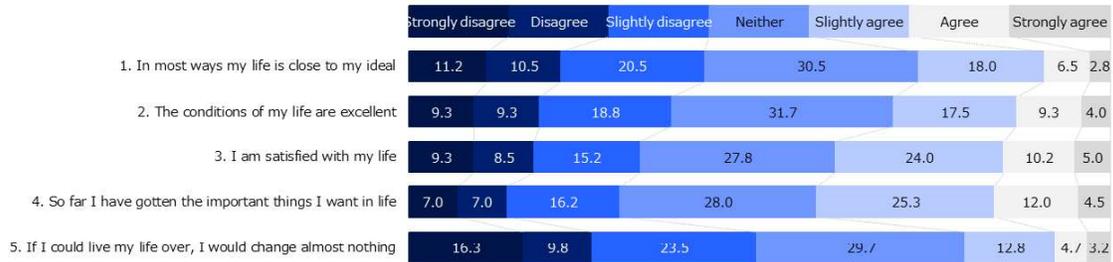


Figure 7. Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) before COVID-19 pandemic



Figure 8. Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS) after COVID-19 pandemic

Table 5. Statistical description of SWLS

	Category	Samples	Mean	SD
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	Before	600	3.65	1.484
	After	600	3.52	1.491
The conditions of my life are excellent.	Before	600	3.83	1.511
	After	600	3.66	1.544
I am satisfied with my life.	Before	600	3.99	1.560
	After	600	3.79	1.590
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	Before	600	4.12	1.483
	After	600	3.95	1.511
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	Before	600	3.40	1.528
	After	600	3.32	1.569

Table 6. Difference in SWLS before and after COVID-19

	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	0.122	0.957	3.115	0.002**
The conditions of my life are excellent.	0.163	0.986	4.059	0.000**
I am satisfied with my life.	0.200	0.963	5.085	0.000**
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	0.170	0.952	4.375	0.000**
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	0.072	0.895	1.961	0.050

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

5. CONCLUSION

The declaration of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has brought numerous changes in our daily life. For example, daily life and working style in Japan has met new era under the pandemic to keep social distances and secure to society. In perspective of tourism studies, the drastic drop in international air passengers as well as inbound tourists in Japan and also in the worldwide phenomenon is quite noticeable. The Japanese government has planned countermeasures and policies to secure safety of foreign tourists as one of the most important national tourism policies. One of the new issues in tourism crisis management is to study how the acceptance of foreigners (tourists and residents) has been changed during the pandemic or not. This is especially important topic which may build the theoretical background for planning evacuation shelter planning considering presence of foreigners (tourists and residents). We conducted the online-based survey for 600 samples in Japan to observe the acceptance level of foreign tourists and foreign residents, changes in life due to COVID-19 and life satisfaction level. It is concluded that the acceptance level decreased significantly after COVID-19 with t-test. Also, there was significant difference in level of life satisfaction between before and after COVID-19. The study further can be extended to explore Japanese acceptance level to foreigners and how this could affect future tourism crisis management planning.

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