



Post-Pandemic Tourism Recovery: A Thematic Analysis of Destination Management Strategies

Pandemi Sonrası Turizmde Toparlanma: Destinasyon Yönetimi Stratejilerine Yönelik Tematik Bir Analiz

Pankaj SHARMA¹, Nitin VYAS²

¹Lovely Professional University, School of Hotel Management and Tourism, Punjab, India

²Himachal Pradesh University, Institute of Vocational Studies, India

ORCID:

P.S.: 0000-0001-7773-2582

N.V.: 0000-0002-2584-5689

Corresponding Author:

Pankaj SHARMA

Email:

ps.bta5@gmail.com

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Abstract

COVID-19 dealt modern tourism its sharpest shock on record. International arrivals fell by roughly 74 per cent in 2020 — about a quarter of what they had been — and receipts dropped by an estimated US\$1.3 trillion. Recovery, when it came, was fast in aggregate but deeply uneven: by 2024 arrivals had returned to 99 per cent of pre-pandemic levels (1.4 billion trips, US\$1.6 trillion in receipts), yet the trajectories behind that headline diverged widely across regions and types of destination. This paper asks what destination management organisations actually did to recover, and why some strategies worked in some places and not others. Drawing on 38 peer-reviewed articles, 17 grey-literature sources from UN Tourism, the OECD, and other international and national bodies, and 13 destination cases, it applies Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis to recovery practice documented between 2020 and 2025. Eight interrelated themes emerge: crisis governance and DMO communication; resilience operationalisation; the domestic-tourism pivot; health and safety certification regimes; digital and contactless transformation; the sustainable and regenerative reset; workforce precarity and skills shortages; and public-private partnerships and stakeholder co-creation. The pattern that runs through the evidence is not that any single measure drove recovery, but that destinations recovered by combining measures timed to the moment, and fitted to their own governance capacity, economic structure, and pre-pandemic position. The paper offers one of the first integrative syntheses of pandemic-era destination management, a practical framework for DMOs facing future shocks, and a map of where the research still falls short on questions of sustainability, equity, and labour.

Keywords: Post-Pandemic Recovery; Destination Management; Tourism Resilience; Thematic Analysis; COVID-19; Sustainable Tourism; DMO Strategy; Crisis Management

Özet

COVID-19, modern turizm sektörüne kayıtlara geçen en sert darbeyi vurmuştur. 2020 yılında uluslararası ziyaretçi sayıları yaklaşık %74 oranında (önceki seviyelerin yaklaşık dörtte birine) düşmüş ve turizm gelirleri tahminen 1,3 trilyon ABD doları azalmıştır. Toparlanma süreci genel toplamda hızlı olsa da bölgeler ve destinasyonlar arasında büyük farklılıklar göstermiştir: 2024 yılına gelindiğinde ziyaretçi sayıları pandemi öncesi seviyelerin %99'una (1,4

milyar seyahat, 1,6 trilyon ABD doları gelir) ulaşmış olsa da bu genel tablonun ardındaki seyir, bölgelere ve destinasyonlara göre önemli ölçüde farklılık göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, destinasyon yönetim örgütlerinin (DYÖ) toparlanma sürecinde fiilen neler yaptıklarını ve bazı stratejilerin neden belirli yerlerde başarılı olurken diğerlerinde sonuç vermediğini ele almaktadır. 38 hakemli makale, UN Tourism (Dünya Turizm Örgütü), OECD ile diğer ulusal ve uluslararası kuruluşlara ait 17 gri literatür kaynağı ve 13 destinasyon vakasına dayanan bu çalışma; 2020 ile 2025 yılları arasında belgelenen iyileşme/toparlanma uygulamalarına Braun ve Clarke'ın reflektif tematik analizini uygulamaktadır. Analiz sonucunda birbiriyle ilişkili sekiz tema ortaya çıkmıştır: kriz yönetimi ve DYÖ iletişimi; dayanıklılığın hayata geçirilmesi; iç turizme yönelme; sağlık ve güvenlik sertifikasyon sistemleri; dijital ve temassız dönüşüm; sürdürülebilir ve yenileyici (rejeneratif) yeniden yapılanma; iş gücü güvencesizliği ve beceri açıkları; ile kamu-özel sektör ortaklıkları ve paydaşlarla ortak değer yaratma. Kanıtlarda öne çıkan genel eğilim, herhangi bir tekil önlemin toparlanmayı tek başına sağlamadığı; aksine destinasyonların doğru zamanda uygulanan ve kendi yönetim kapasitelerine, ekonomik yapılarına ve pandemi öncesindeki konumlarına uygun önlemleri birleştirerek toparlandığıdır. Çalışma; pandemi dönemindeki destinasyon yönetimine ilişkin ilk bütüncül sentezlerden birini, gelecekteki şoklarla karşılaşacak Destinasyon Yönetim Örgütleri (DMO'lar) için pratik bir çerçeveyi ve sürdürülebilirlik, adalet ile iş gücü konularında araştırmaların halen yetersiz kaldığı alanların bir haritasını sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pandemi Sonrası Toparlanma; Destinasyon Yönetimi; Turizmde Dayanıklılık; Tematik Analiz; COVID-19; Sürdürülebilir Turizm; DMO Stratejisi; Kriz Yönetimi

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic broke the global tourism system in a way nothing before it had. Arrivals in 2020 fell about 74 per cent against 2019 — the steepest decline ever recorded — leaving roughly a billion fewer international trips than the year before. UNWTO (2021) put the receipts lost at around US\$1.3 trillion, more than eleven times the hit of the 2009 financial crisis. But the economic headline was only part of the story. The shock laid bare structural weaknesses that had been easy to ignore in good years: an over-dependence on long-haul source markets, the fragility of tourism labour, and the limited capacity of most destination management organisations (DMOs) to adapt when demand and supply collapsed at once (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2021; Sigala, 2020).

Global averages, though, flatten enormous variation. The damage — and the recovery — played out very differently depending on where a destination sat, what kind of tourism it sold, and which segment it served. Asia-Pacific was slowest to rebound, still about 13 per cent below 2019 arrivals in 2024, while over the same period the Middle East ran 32 per cent ahead of its pre-pandemic level (UN Tourism, 2025). Small island developing states (SIDS) were the most exposed of all, since many Caribbean and Indian Ocean economies lean on tourism for a large share of GDP (UNCTAD, 2020; Sheller, 2021). Economic stimulus helped recovery, but its effect depended on a country's underlying resilience (Okafor, Khalid, & Gopalan, 2022). The divergence is itself the point of departure for this paper: recovery was never one thing, and no single playbook applied everywhere.

The recovery also had distinct phases. Through early 2020 to the end of 2021, most destinations were in containment mode — closing borders, imposing health protocols, and propping up battered industries with emergency support. From late 2021 the posture changed. Leading destinations stopped simply trying to win volume back and started reshaping how tourism was delivered. Promotion shifted toward health-certified, experiential, and sustainable positioning (Månsson & Eksell, 2024; Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun, 2023); technology adoption that might have taken a decade compressed into a couple of years (Gretzel et al., 2020; Rathjens, Gunden, Zhang, Jain, & Law, 2025); a wave of workforce attrition forced a rethink of labour models (Baum, Mooney, Robinson, & Solnet, 2020; Ladkin et al., 2023); and community engagement, long treated as peripheral, moved closer to the centre of recovery planning (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Robina-Ramírez, Sánchez-Oro Sánchez, Jiménez-Naranjo, & Castro-Serrano, 2022).

Through all of this, DMOs — national tourism authorities, regional boards, municipal convention bureaus — held a central position. Individual operators dealt with their own commercial survival; DMOs were the actors with the reach to reposition a whole destination and to referee competing claims about where the sector should go next (Wan, Li, Lau, & Dioko, 2022). What they chose mattered: which markets got the investment, how a destination was re-presented to the world, whether recovery reached communities equitably, and whether tourism evolved or simply snapped back to its pre-crisis shape (Brouder, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). And yet, for all the literature that has accumulated since 2020, little of it pulls these recovery strategies together systematically.

The existing work tends to sit in three camps. One measures the scale of the impact (Škare, Soriano, & Porada-Rochóń, 2021); another theorises resilience (Prayag, 2020, 2023); a third tracks how travel intentions shifted during the crisis (Gursoy, Can, Williams, & Ekinici, 2021). Research that reads recovery strategies across many destinations, draws out shared patterns, and asks why a strategy succeeds in one setting but stalls in another remains comparatively rare (Mensah & Boakye, 2023; Sharma, Thomas, & Paul, 2021). Three gaps follow, which Section 2.4 develops in detail: a synthesis gap (few cross-destination comparisons of recovery strategies), a contextual gap (limited theorisation of how geography, governance capacity, and economic structure shape strategy outcomes), and a scope gap (a focus on marketing communication at the expense of workforce, infrastructure, sustainability, and stakeholder governance). The study addresses these gaps through four research questions:

- RQ1. Which destination management strategies were deployed in global tourism recovery between January 2020 and December 2025?
- RQ2. In what ways do these strategies cluster into themes?
- RQ3. In what ways do specific strategies facilitate or constrain their use in a context?
- RQ4. What lessons carry across destinations?

The analysis is rooted in three concepts. Destination management organisations (DMOs) are public or quasi-public bodies — national tourism authorities, regional boards, municipal bureaus — responsible for coordinating a destination's positioning and governance. Destination resilience, following Hall et al. (2018), is understood as the multi-level capacity of a destination to absorb a shock, adapt its institutions and practices, and, where necessary, transform. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) is a qualitative synthesis method that treats the researcher as an active participant in building patterns of meaning from a corpus of evidence, rather than a neutral extractor of pre-existing categories.

The contribution is fourfold. Empirically, the paper offers an integrative thematic synthesis of post-pandemic recovery strategies. Earlier reviews have mapped crisis-management research as a whole (Berebekova et al., 2021; Wut et al., 2021) or examined single domains such as contactless technology (Rathjens et al., 2025) and tourism work (Ladkin et al., 2023). To the best of the author's knowledge, this study is among the first to combine peer-reviewed, grey-literature, and destination-case evidence across the full range of destination management strategies. Theoretically, it pushes destination-resilience scholarship past abstraction by anchoring it in what destinations actually did, and it repositions the DMO as an actor of crisis governance. Methodologically, it documents its analytic record and verification search so that the synthesis can be checked and repeated. Practically, it gives DMOs an evidence-based framework and phase-based recommendations they can use to stress-test their own plans. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the analysis within the resilience and crisis-management literature; Section 3 sets out the thematic method; Section 4 presents the eight themes; Section 5

turns to contextual variation and theory; and Section 6 closes with implications for practice and an agenda for future work.

2. LITERATURE CONTEXT

2.1. Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management

COVID-19 is not the first time we've seen the arrival of Resilience Thinking. It has evolved around socio-ecological systems theory (Holling, 2001) and adaptive management before being put into a tourism-specific form by Hall, Prayag, and Amore (2018), who differentiate between individual, organisational and destination resilience, and insist on the interdependency between these levels. In this perspective, resilience is not as much of a thing a destination possesses as it is an action it takes, in order to absorb a shock, reprovise itself with new institutions and practices, and will transform (Amore, Prayag, & Hall, 2018) if it has to. Preceding this, however, was the temporal scaffolding of Faulkner's (2001) tourism disaster model, expanded by Ritchie (2004) into a pre-event, a prodromal, an emergency, an intermediate, a long-term and a resolution stage, which more or less has shaped most research in tourism in relation to crisis management since (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019).

The pandemic then stretched this literature considerably. Prayag (2020) argued early on that resilience scholarship had to stop mapping concepts and start producing frameworks practitioners could use. Wut, Xu, and Wong (2021) read across three and a half decades of crisis-management research and found the field thin on three fronts: integrating resilience across levels, tracking adaptation over time, and accounting for leadership and governance through a prolonged crisis. Berbekova, Uysal, and Assaf (2021) and Jiang, Ritchie, and Verreynne (2019) added to the picture on organisational dynamic capabilities under sustained disruption, while Prayag, Muskat, and Dassanayake (2024) turned to how leadership behaviour shapes the resilience of employees and organisations alike.

Importantly, literature regarding destination resilience is greater on concept development than related to operational application. There is a risk as Prayag (2020) mentioned to develop more and more sophisticated frameworks, which practitioners are not easily able to use. Still lacking is research that addresses the linkage between resilience theory and the substantive “menu” of strategies that destinations have employed—and which ones emerge as successful with which kinds of conditions. This is the direction the present study takes.

2.2. Destination Management Organisations and Governance

DMOs are a unique and important governance interface – bridging public regulation, private commercial interests, and the communities who live in a destination. Prior to COVID-19, the literature predominantly portrayed them as marketers and were seen as engines of competitiveness. All at once, the destination was being repositioned, stakeholders were being brought together, and resources were being mobilised, making them crisis-response institutions (McCartney, Pinto, & Liu, 2021; Wan et al., 2022). DMO communication in this period can be read as a type of work, both informing, reassuring and steering policy at the same time, as is done by Månsson and Eksell (2024). Leung, Zhang and Bai (2023) documented the evolution of the Los Angeles DMO's strategy and alliances while Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun (2023) analysed the social-media repertoire of 113 DMOs for evidence of disparity and commonality in how organisations framed their messages, set their tone and engaged stakeholders.

What this literature hasn't yet done is to theorise the change systematically. Case studies describe the shift from DMO-as-marketer to DMO-as-crisis-governor but tend to not be abstracted into a framework for comparison across contexts. Månsson and Eksell (2024), Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun (2023), and Wan et al. (2022) constitute partial exceptions, but none of even these

studies satisfactorily account for variations in how some DMOs made the transition and others did not.

2.3. The COVID-19 Tourism Literature

Much of what ensued stemmed from six papers which appeared in the early 2020 release. The first rapid assessment was provided by Gössling et al. (2021), who drafted the options to move towards a more sustainable tourism. Hall, Scott, and Gössling (2020) disagreed to take lightly the easy buzz of the "pandemic-as-transformation" rhetoric, which can mask ongoing inequities. Sigala (2020) combined the three strands of consumer, business and destination, into one single research agenda. Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) argued for 'socialising tourism' for ecological and social justice. Lew, Cheer, Haywood, Brouder and Salazar (2020) envisioned what that travel may look like post-COVID. Ioannides and Gyimóthy (2020) interpreted the crisis as an opportunity to get off a trajectory of unsustainability, instead of returning to it.

Collectively, these six papers, astound for their speed and scope. The problem is that they are global theory – that is, they outline what might or should happen, not mapping what did happen in a variety of similar destinations. Much of the voluminous case literature that ensued focused on each of the destinations in isolation instead of building crosscutting patterns.

Research Gap

The critical readings above converge on three open gaps. The first is synthesis: the resilience literature needs operational grounding (Section 2.1), and case studies of individual destinations are plentiful (Yeoman, Postma, & Hartman, 2022, on New Zealand; Thaicharoen et al., 2023, on Thailand, among many), but few studies read across them to find the patterns that recur. The second is context: how a destination's geography, economic structure, and governance capacity interact with the strategies it picks is still poorly theorised. The third is breadth of focus: research on DMO recovery has leaned heavily on marketing communications, and has had much less to say about how marketing, workforce, infrastructure, sustainability, and stakeholder governance fit together into a single response. These gaps matter in practice as well as in theory: without cross-destination evidence, DMOs and tourism ministries preparing for the next shock must rely on isolated case examples that do not show which combinations of strategies worked, or under what conditions. This paper addresses all three.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Rationale

To address the three gaps set out in Section 2.4, the study uses systematic thematic analysis (TA) as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) and developed into reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in their later work (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022). Three things made TA the right tool. The questions here are about finding and making sense of patterns of meaning across a varied body of text, which is precisely what TA is for. Unlike a systematic review or meta-analysis, which aggregates effects or estimates their size, TA is built to synthesise qualitative and mixed-methods evidence — peer-reviewed and grey literature together — and to yield a conceptual framework rather than a pooled statistic. And given how heterogeneous the underlying sources are in destination, strategy, and method, TA offers a route to integrative synthesis that stays transparent and theoretically grounded.

The reflexive variant fits this project particularly well. It treats the researcher as an active participant in building themes rather than a neutral extractor of them, asks for sustained reflexive scrutiny of one's own assumptions, and allows inductive and deductive coding to coexist within a single study. Following Braun and Clarke (2021), themes here are understood as patterns of shared

meaning organised around a central idea — not topic summaries, and not tallies of how often something appears. Figure 1 sets out the six analytic phases, each of which is described below.

A note on the secondary-corpus design is warranted. This study analyses published and grey-literature sources rather than generating primary interview or survey data. This is a deliberate methodological choice, not a constraint. The research questions — which strategies were used across a wide range of destinations, how they cluster, and what contextual factors shaped their effectiveness — are macro-level questions. They are better answered by breadth of evidence across many destinations than by depth of evidence from a single primary dataset. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note, reflexive thematic analysis is applicable to secondary corpora and has a long tradition in systematic qualitative synthesis (see also Byrne, 2022). The approach is consistent with meta-synthesis and thematic evidence synthesis methods established in health and social sciences research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The primary-data gap that this design leaves open — namely, the lived experience of recovery as described by DMO practitioners and community stakeholders — is the most important direction for future empirical work, as elaborated in Section 6.4.

The synthesis was prepared with the assistance of a generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic), which was used to identify candidate sources, support coding and theme development, and draft and edit the text. The author directed the analysis, reviewed the sources and the thematic structure, and checked every cited source against its published record; responsibility for the interpretation rests with the author.

3.2. Data Sources and Inclusion Criteria

Sources fell into three categories. The first was peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2020 and December 2025 dealing with tourism recovery, destination responses to COVID-19, and related themes. These were identified through AI-assisted literature searching, using search terms of the form ('post-pandemic tourism' OR 'tourism recovery' OR 'COVID-19 tourism') AND ('resilience' OR 'crisis management' OR 'sustainable recovery'), supplemented by strategy-specific qualifiers — digital transformation, safety measures, sustainable tourism, domestic tourism, workforce, and public-private partnerships.

The second category was authoritative grey literature — from UN Tourism (formerly UNWTO), the OECD, UNCTAD, the ILO, national tourism ministries and agencies, and tourism news and trade outlets. The third was destination case evidence, drawn from peer-reviewed papers, government reports, and DMO annual publications, for thirteen destinations chosen to span geography, economy, and strategic approach: New Zealand, Iceland, Singapore, Thailand, Spain, Greece, the Maldives, Bhutan, Australia, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Costa Rica, and the Caribbean small island developing states.

To be included, a source had to be published between January 2020 and December 2025; address recovery measures, destination management responses, or a closely related theme; refer to at least one destination-level example or finding; and be available in English (with occasional use of authoritative translations). Sources were excluded if they predated 2020, assessed impact without examining recovery, could not be located in any publisher database or institutional library, or offered opinion without empirical grounding. Screening against these criteria left a corpus of 38 peer-reviewed articles and 17 grey-literature sources, including the UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer, published between January 2020 and December 2025. A further 13 methodological and theoretical works, some published before 2020, informed the analytic framework but were not part of the analysed corpus.

To verify the coverage of the corpus, a Scopus search was conducted in September 2026, limited to English-language articles and reviews published between 2020 and 2025. A focused

search, TITLE-ABS-KEY(("post-pandemic tourism" OR "tourism recovery" OR "COVID-19 tourism") AND (resilience OR "crisis management" OR "sustainable recovery")), returned 99 records, and a broader search combining pandemic, tourism, and recovery terms with strategy-specific terms (e.g., destination management, domestic tourism, contactless, certification, workforce, public–private partnership, governance, and scenario planning) returned 630 records. All 38 peer-reviewed articles in the corpus are indexed in Scopus; 16 of them were retrieved by the two searches, as many corpus articles use strategy-specific terminology not captured by the search terms. Screening the titles of the 100 most-cited records from the broader search identified no study suggesting a theme outside the eight reported in Section 4.

3.3. Analytical Procedure: Six Phases

The analysis was carried out in six phases following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021) with Byrne's (2022) worked example used as a guide as to the procedure. Figure 1 provides the overall overview of the sequence, while each phase is described in detail with regards to its operations, paying attention to reflexive considerations as they developed.

3.3.1. Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

First this was done for substance, that is, for the context of the destination, the strategies described, the evidence offered and the theory invoked; second this was done for what occurred, the language, concepts, and analytical claims that emerged across the sources. For each source a brief analytic summary was created on the main argument the source raised, where it was directed and what was accented. These summaries were used as reference for coding.

3.3.2. Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

A block-level/line-by-line descriptive coding process was used in the first coding round to capture both the relationship between the different kinds of statements (strategies, consequences, and conditions) and the nature of the theory or theoretical claims being advanced. Material from the coded documents were entered into a spreadsheet, including source ID, source type (Peer reviewed or grey literature/case study), source location/actor, main code, secondary code, analytic paraphrase, and theme. Alongside the surface, or semantic coding (explicit content), latent coding (implicit content and assumptions) was done, following the advocacy by Braun and Clarke (2006) that the thematic analysis should focus on both surface coding and latent coding. The process resulted in a single set of codebook entries, which include domestic voucher scheme; health certification; border-closure decision; wage subsidy; sustainability rebrand; staff retention crisis; digital pivot; community consultation; public–private-partnership coordination; and scenario planning. Coding was an iterative process not linear; each new code brought the analysis back through the previous sources to verify that a like idea had not been overlooked.

3.3.3. Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Codes were then gathered into candidate themes, working inductively and deductively at the same time. Inductively, codes that shared a central organising idea were grouped together. Deductively, resilience theory (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2020) and Faulkner's (2001) phase-based crisis-management model acted as sensitising lenses shaping where theme boundaries might fall without dictating them. The phase produced twelve candidate themes: crisis governance; DMO communication; the operationalisation of resilience theory; scenario planning; the domestic-tourism pivot; health/safety certification; vaccine-passport regimes; digital transformation; contactless service; the sustainable reset; workforce precarity; and public–private partnerships.

3.3.4. Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

The twelve candidates were tested at two levels, as Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend. At the first, the coded extracts within each theme were re-read for internal coherence. At the second, each theme was held up against the whole corpus to see whether it captured a pattern that genuinely recurred across sources and destinations. Four merges followed. Crisis governance and DMO communication collapsed into one, since both expressed the same underlying idea of the DMO as a crisis actor. Scenario planning folded into resilience operationalisation as a component of it. Vaccine-passport regimes became a time-limited sub-element of health and safety certification. And contactless service joined digital transformation, both being facets of pandemic-accelerated digitalisation. Eight themes remained.

3.3.5. Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

For each of the 8 remaining themes that survived, a formal definition was given which defined its main organising idea, the boundary from the other themes, the codes used and the exemplar destinations as well as the theory underpinning its interpretation. Names are concised for clarity. For example, 'sustainable reset' was preserved, but broadened to 'the sustainable and regenerative reset', in order to incorporate both incremental sustainability (Costa Rica) and the more profound regenerative reset (New Zealand's Tourism Industry Transformation Plan).

3.3.6. Phase 6: Producing the Report

In the final phase, the themes were written up with destination examples, theoretical interpretation, and policy-relevant discussion woven in. Each theme in Section 4 carries a definition and its theoretical grounding, supporting evidence from the literature, at least two destination cases, and a closing discussion of the tensions or limits that cut across it. Table 1 summarises the eight themes; Figures 1 and 2 show the analytic process and the thematic structure respectively.

Figure 1. Six-Phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021)

Applied to 52 peer-reviewed sources, 13 destination cases, and grey literature



Figure 1. Six-Phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process Applied in This Study, With Intermediate Outputs Shown for Each Phase. Sources, Codes, and Theme Decisions Were Recorded in a Coding Workbook

3.4. Quality Considerations and Reflexive Practice

Two safeguards governed the analysis. The first was triangulation — each theme was checked across source types (peer-reviewed, grey literature, destination cases) and across regions, so that no theme rested on a single region or a single kind of source. The second was critical reflection on the temptation to treat recovery as simply a return to pre-pandemic conditions, a framing the literature itself disputes (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020); Section 5.5 returns to that tension.

These practices address Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative trustworthiness. Credibility is supported by drawing on highly cited, recent work and by triangulating across sources. Transferability is supported by stating the inclusion criteria openly and by selecting destinations across a range of locations and economic conditions, so that readers can judge what applies to their own setting. Confirmability rests on the documented move from twelve candidate themes to eight.

The analytic record is held in a coding workbook comprising a source register, the 63-code codebook, coded extracts recorded as analytic paraphrases, a theme-development log documenting the four mergers, and the final theme definitions; it is available from the corresponding author on request. The analysis was conducted by a single author with AI assistance; the implications of this design are discussed in Section 6.4.

4. THEMATIC FINDINGS

The corpus yielded eight interrelated themes of post-pandemic destination management. They were not sequential stages so much as concurrent strands, all live at once but each more prominent at particular moments in the recovery. Table 1 summarises the eight and their exemplar destinations; Figure 2 shows how they relate and roughly when each came to the fore.

Table 1. Eight Thematic Clusters of Post-Pandemic Destination Management Strategies

Theme	Description	Illustrative destinations
1. Crisis governance & DMO communication	Coordinated public-sector response, transparent communication, and DMO repositioning as crisis-management actors	New Zealand, Singapore, Greece
2. Resilience operationalisation	Translation of resilience theory into operational planning, scenario thinking, and adaptive capacity building	New Zealand, Australia, Maldives
3. Domestic-tourism pivot	Strategic emphasis on domestic markets through campaigns, vouchers, and product reorientation	New Zealand, Iceland, Singapore, Spain, Australia, Japan
4. Health & safety certification regimes	Destination-level health protocols, certification schemes, and trust-building communication	Singapore, Thailand, Greece, Costa Rica, UAE
5. Digital & contactless transformation	Acceleration of digital infrastructure, contactless services, and smart destination platforms	Singapore, UAE, Spain, Japan
6. Sustainable & regenerative reset	Repositioning around sustainability, high-value/low-volume models, and regenerative tourism	Bhutan, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Iceland
7. Workforce precarity & skills shortages	Responses to mass attrition, wage support, reskilling, and structural labour challenges	Australia, Singapore, Caribbean
8. Public-private partnerships & co-creation	Integrated stakeholder coalitions and co-creation of recovery strategy	Maldives, UAE, Spain, Costa Rica

Figure 2. Eight Thematic Clusters of Post-Pandemic Destination Management Strategies (2020–2026)

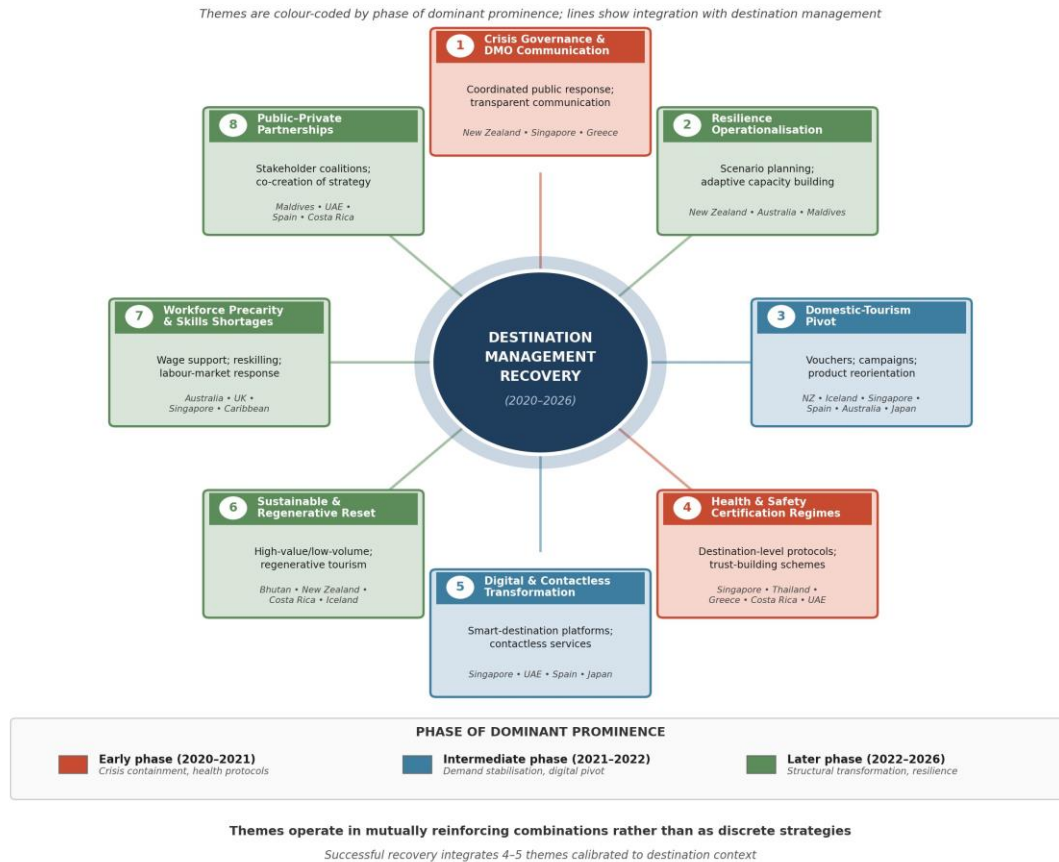


Figure 2. Eight Thematic Clusters of Post-Pandemic Destination Management Strategies, With Illustrative Destinations and Typical Temporal Sequencing During Recovery. Successful Recoveries Combined Multiple Themes in Mutually Reinforcing Configurations Rather than Deploying Themes in Isolation.

4.1. Theme 1: Crisis Governance and DMO Communication

The first theme is about DMOs and tourism ministries acting as crisis governors — a role many were institutionally unready for. Månsson and Eksell (2024) describe pandemic-era DMO communication as 'communication work', a single practice that reassured travellers and shaped policy in the same gesture. Taecharungroj and Pattaratanakun (2023), reading the social-media output of 113 DMOs, found framing that ranged from dry safety notices to hopeful stories about what came next. Wan et al. (2022) show how Macao's DMO rebuilt its governance to allow cross-sector coordination, and McCartney et al. (2021), drawing on Macao's lockdown and reopening, develop a resilience and recovery model and show that short-term recovery measures can create new destination vulnerabilities.

New Zealand is among the best-documented cases of integrated crisis governance. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment coordinated with Tourism New Zealand and the regional tourism organisations on a response built from the NZ\$400 million Tourism Recovery Package (2020) and a follow-on Tourism Communities: Support, Recovery and Re-set Plan (2021, NZ\$200 million). The package bundled wage subsidies, business support, and regional infrastructure investment, and seeded a Tourism Industry Transformation Plan grounded in regenerative principles. Yeoman, Postma, and Hartman (2022) trace the foresight behind these choices, arguing that scenario thinking let policymakers picture four very different futures —

which they named 'Crazy Rich Asians', 'Contagion', 'This Side of Paradise', and 'The Colony' — each implying a different recovery.

Singapore makes the same point about governance capacity from a different angle. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) launched the S\$320 million SingapoRediscovered Vouchers scheme to support domestic tourism, carried public-health messaging through the SG Clean certification scheme, and launched CruiseSafe, described by the STB as the first such certification anywhere (STB, 2021). Pulling this off meant coordinating across ministries — an extension of Singapore's whole-of-government habit in a crisis. Greece followed a similar coordinated route: in July 2020, the Tourism Ministry and the Greek National Tourism Organisation launched the 'Destination Greece Health First' campaign, which informed international visitors about the health protocols applied across the country (GTP Headlines, 2020).

4.2. Theme 2: Resilience Operationalisation

Resilience had long been a concept; the pandemic forced it into practice. Sharma et al. (2021) offered an early revival framework linking government, industry, and consumers. Mensah and Boakye (2023) examining Ghana, proposed a three-step recovery model built around the reinvention of domestic tourism. And Gu, Onggo, Kunc, and Bayer (2022), using a system dynamics model of the Maldives, found that a travel bubble was the most effective of four tested strategies for restoring tourists' intention to travel.

Australia's THRIVE 2030 strategy is resilience made operational, marrying it to a growth target — a A\$230 billion visitor economy by 2030 — and three guiding themes of collaboration, modernisation, and diversification (Austrade, 2022). It built on earlier interventions, the A\$76 million Bushfire Recovery Tourism Package of January 2020 and the roughly A\$88.8 billion JobKeeper programme, an economy-wide wage subsidy that helped keep tourism and hospitality workers employed through long border closures. The Maldives ran the same logic through its three-stage 'React, Rethink, Recover' approach, with the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC) launching 'Rediscover Maldives — Sunny Side of Life' as part of a phased plan that helped rebuild international arrivals.

4.3. Theme 3: The Domestic-Tourism Pivot

The most uniform of the early-recovery moves was the turn inward to domestic markets. With borders shut and inbound demand gone, home markets were, for a stretch of 2020–2022, the only demand many destinations had left. Volgger, Taplin, and Aebli (2021) in a randomised experiment with 666 Australians, compared how communication messages, hygiene measures, discounts, and cancellation policies affected domestic booking intentions. Arbulú, Razumova, Rey-Maqueira, and Sastre (2021), modelling the Spanish case, found the limits of the move: domestic demand could soften the blow of lost international visitors but never structurally replace them.

The destination cases show how versatile the move could be. New Zealand's 'Do Something New' campaign, launched in 2020, sought to redirect domestic tourism spending (worth NZ\$23.7 billion before the pandemic), and part of the roughly NZ\$9 billion New Zealanders had spent each year on overseas travel, toward local experiences (Kea New Zealand, 2020). Iceland gave every adult resident an ISK 5,000 digital travel gift (Ferðagjöf) to spend on domestic tourism in 2020 and again in 2021 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023). Singapore's 'SingapoRediscovered Vouchers' handed residents credit to spend on local tourism (STB, 2021). Across these cases the pivot did three things at once: it salvaged revenue immediately, it pushed visitors toward places they would not normally go, and it carried a quiet equity cost — domestic visitors tend to spend less per trip than international ones.

4.4. Theme 4: Health and Safety Certification Regimes

This theme concerns destination-level certification schemes designed to rebuild traveller trust. Their rationale rests on the link between health-related measures and travel intentions. Gursoy, Can, Williams, and Ekinici (2021), using five surveys of 4,223 US residents conducted between February and May 2021, found that in February and March 2021, early in the vaccine rollout, vaccination intention had a significant negative effect on travel intention, as people willing to be vaccinated postponed travel; by April and May 2021, as the number of vaccinated people rose, this negative effect disappeared and overall travel intentions increased. The authors attribute this pattern to perceived health risk and travel anxiety, and recommend that destinations communicate current risk levels and the safety precautions they have in place. Destination certification schemes can be read as attempts to supply this health assurance at destination level. Eichelberger, Heigl, Peters, and Pikkemaat (2021), drawing on 19 interviews, found that the pandemic prompted more responsible behaviour among tourists, both on site and in their travel choices, and Robina-Ramírez et al. (2022) fold health protocols into a wider sustainable post-disaster governance model.

Singapore's SG Clean, paired with the CruiseSafe scheme, gave travellers a government-backed signal that protocols were being met (STB, 2021). Thailand combined its SHA+ certification with the Phuket Sandbox to vouch, at destination level, for vaccination, hygiene, and rapid response to any case that surfaced. Launched on 1 July 2021 as a vaccinated-traveller pilot, the Sandbox drew more than 14,000 arrivals and brought in over 829 million baht in its first month (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2021), all while holding the COVID-19 positivity rate among arrivals very low through its early months (Thaicharoen et al., 2023). The vaccinated-traveller design of the Sandbox is consistent with this link between health assurance and willingness to travel. Greece's Health First set destination-level standards, and Costa Rica wrote seventeen sub-sector protocols to phase its reopening (OECD, 2022).

4.5. Theme 5: Digital and Contactless Transformation

Tourism had been digitising for a decade at a walking pace; the pandemic made it run (Gretzel et al., 2020). Hao and Chon (2022) document the rise of contactless service in hospitality and its links to trust, satisfaction, and questions of equity. Rathjens et al. (2025), reviewing 44 studies, note that the use of contactless technologies in hospitality and tourism grew rapidly after the pandemic began, and identify ten main categories of such technology. Chang, Cheah, Lim, Morrison, and Kennell (2022) ask whether unmanned smart hotels were a passing fix or a lasting shift, and conclude their staying power hinges on whether broader smart-destination infrastructure backs them up. Bulchand-Gidumal (2022), building a smart-destination framework for island recovery, shows that the same digital layer can serve two ends at once — supporting health protocols and improving the visitor experience.

Singapore's Tcube (Tourism Technology Transformation Cube), launched by the STB in 2021, gave tourism businesses a one-stop platform of data services, digital tools, and pilot programmes to accelerate their digital transformation (TTG Asia, 2021). Expo 2020 Dubai — held from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 after a pandemic postponement, and run with a virtual layer alongside the physical event — served as a combined physical-digital platform, logging more than 24 million visits in six months and giving the UAE's recovery a lift (Bureau International des Expositions, 2022). In Spain, a Smart Tourism Destination model, funded in part by EU recovery instruments, built out municipal and regional digital infrastructure. In every case, digital transformation worked less as a strategy in itself than as the enabling layer beneath the others — certification, sustainable destination management, stakeholder coordination.

4.6. Theme 6: The Sustainable and Regenerative Reset

A strand of the literature argued that recovery should be a fork, not a return — a chance to push tourism toward something more sustainable or regenerative rather than back onto its old track (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Brouder, 2020). The record is messier than the aspiration. Plenty of destinations talked the language of sustainability, but the pressure to get visitor numbers back up kept pulling against any real transformation.

Bhutan is the sharpest example of a genuine reset. The country closed its borders in March 2020 and did not reopen until 23 September 2022. It then scrapped the Minimum Daily Package Rate and raised the Sustainable Development Fee from US\$65 to US\$200 per night, reinforcing its high-value, low-volume model (CNN, 2022). From 1 September 2023, the government granted a 50 per cent discount on this fee, bringing it to US\$100 per night for US-dollar-paying tourists until 31 August 2027, to support the tourism sector (Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, 2023). Sheller (2021) sounds the necessary caution: sustainability narratives can mask structural inequity, nowhere more so than in the Caribbean, where recovery is bound up with climate vulnerability and a continued reliance on extractive tourism.

4.7. Theme 7: Workforce Precarity and Skills Shortages

The pandemic exposed how precarious tourism employment already was, then made it worse. Baum, Mooney, Robinson, and Solnet (2020) read the hit to the hospitality workforce as both a fresh crisis and an intensification of long-standing precarity. Ladkin et al. (2023) widen the lens through a critical review of research on tourism work, surfacing structural problems in wages, conditions, and career progression that the pandemic aggravated rather than created. ILO analysis shows labour and skills shortages continuing to constrain tourism's recovery, with gaps in roles ranging from restaurant managers and fast-food workers to seasonal staff (International Labour Organization, 2025).

Responses varied. Australia's JobKeeper kept workers tied to their employers through wage support and headed off a mass exodus; the worry about future shortages is one reason THRIVE 2030 leans on workforce productivity and skills investment (Austrade, 2022). In Singapore, the STB, SkillsFuture Singapore, and Workforce Singapore raised training support to 90 per cent of course fees so that tourism firms could reskill workers during the downturn (STB, 2020). The Caribbean fared worst: large numbers of tourism jobs vanished, and the fiscal room to keep paying wages until demand returned simply was not there (UNCTAD, 2020; Sheller, 2021). The common thread is that workforce precarity acted as a ceiling on recovery. A destination could write the most ambitious plan it liked, but delivering it still depended on skilled, motivated workers — the very people the crisis had driven away.

4.8. Theme 8: Public–Private Partnerships and Stakeholder Co-creation

The eighth theme is about who was in the room — public agencies, private operators, and communities — when recovery was planned and delivered. Wan et al. (2022) examine collaborative recovery in Macao, where government-business partnership paid off but also generated friction wherever interests collided. Robina-Ramírez et al. (2022) build a governance model that writes both community and commercial actors explicitly into the frame.

The Maldives offers a well-documented example of government–business coordination. The MMPRC, the Ministry of Tourism, resort operators, and the airlines together hammered out protocols, marketing, and capacity expansion that helped rebuild international arrivals (Visit Maldives, 2023). The UAE shows the same coordination at a federal scale, across the national government, Dubai's tourism boards, Emirates and Etihad, and the Expo 2020 organising

committee. In Costa Rica, the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) ran a five-year recovery plan with private tourism associations and community-based networks alongside it (OECD, 2022). The recurring lesson is about timing: the coalitions that delivered were the ones already in place before the pandemic and ready to move, not the ones improvised once it hit.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Integrated Patterns Across Themes

The eight themes did not run on separate tracks. The destinations that recovered well tended to combine them in configurations where each reinforced the others. Singapore is the clearest illustration: crisis governance through cross-ministry coordination (Theme 1), the domestic pivot via SingapoRediscovered Vouchers (Theme 3), health certification through SG Clean and CruiseSafe (Theme 4), digital transformation through Tcube (Theme 5), and public-private partnership (Theme 8), all in one coherent package. The Maldives leaned on Themes 1, 2, 4, and 8; New Zealand on 1, 2, 3, and 6. The eight should therefore be read not as a menu of mutually exclusive strategies but as analytic distinctions whose various combinations describe how any given destination actually responded.

Timing mattered as much as combination. In most of the cases reviewed, crisis governance (Theme 1) and health and safety (Theme 4) dominated the opening phase of 2020–2021; the domestic pivot (Theme 3) and digital transformation (Theme 5) took over through the medium term of 2021–2022; and resilience operationalisation (Theme 2), the sustainable reset (Theme 6), workforce (Theme 7), and partnerships (Theme 8) came to the fore later, across 2022–2025. Bhutan is the obvious exception, pivoting to Theme 6 unusually early in its recovery window.

5.2. Contextual Variation and Recovery Trajectories

Recovery was context driven all of the way with good support for the children making good progress. UN Tourism (2025) projects a reversion to 99 per cent of the pre-pandemic level in 2024 – 1.4 billion arrivals and US\$1.6 trillion in visitor receipts – however, in the background of this figure lie as many as they reveal. The Middle East's arrivals were 32 per cent up compared with 2019; Africa's arrivals were 7 per cent up; Europe's arrivals were 1 per cent up; and the Americas were down 3 per cent, and Asia-Pacific was down 13 per cent. These sub-regions saw the largest growth: North Africa (+22 per cent on 2019), Central America (+17 per cent) and the Caribbean (+9 per cent); and the top-performing countries included El Salvador (+81 per cent on 2019), Saudi Arabia (+69 per cent), Ethiopia (+40 per cent) and Morocco (+35 per cent) (UN Tourism, 2025).

Much of this distribution seems to be explained by three context dimensions. Governance capacity was the primary one, the speed of border decision-making, the extent of cross-sectoral collaboration in ministries, the development of public-private institutions. The destinations that had established stakeholder coalitions and governance arrangements were more flexible than those that were setting up these coalitions as they worked. Economics came second – the destinations that had to rely on far afield source markets, the limited number of products and a fiscal margin to incentivize wage payments set the limit of what could be attempted, and destinations with a more diversified mix of products and far-reaching source markets recovered more quickly than destinations with only one or narrow products and limited markets. The pre-pandemic positioning ranked third – with pre-existing investments in digital infrastructure, sustainability frameworks, and workforce development, largely predisposing a destination to mobilise and sustain their recovery.

Theoretical Implications

Three theoretical implications follow. First, the evidence confirms that destination resilience is multi-level and multi-dimensional (Hall et al., 2018). Recovery appeared stronger where individual, organisational, and destination-level capacities were aligned. The cases in Section 4 show the consequences when they were not. The analysis also shows recovery strategies shifting over time, with different themes leading at different stages — carrying Faulkner's (2001) and Ritchie's (2004) phase-based models forward into the COVID-19 context. And it shows DMOs acting through recovery not as marketing shops but as institutional actors of crisis governance, which means the DMO-as-marketer frame that ran through the pre-pandemic literature needs substantial revision (Taecharungroj & Pattaratanakun, 2023; Wan et al., 2022; Månsson & Eksell, 2024).

5.3. Practical Implications

For DMO leaders, tourism ministries, and destination planners, the eight-theme framework suggests four operational priorities. First, build the governance architecture before a crisis arrives. This means establishing standing inter-ministerial coordination protocols — formalised agreements, not ad hoc arrangements — pre-agreed communication workflows with media and trade partners, and publicly visible crisis-response mandates for DMOs that clarify their authority to act. New Zealand's whole-of-government approach and Singapore's cross-ministry coordination demonstrate what is possible when these structures exist in advance. Second, make resilience operational rather than aspirational. Scenario planning — of the kind New Zealand used to imagine four radically different tourism futures — gives DMO leadership a shared vocabulary for decision-making under uncertainty. Leading indicators to monitor continuously include advance booking volumes (four to twelve weeks forward), airline seat capacity on key routes, and real-time sentiment from social media and trade partners. Waiting for a crisis to assemble this intelligence architecture is too late. Third, strengthen the domestic base as a structural cushion. The policy instruments differ: demand-stimulation tools (vouchers, targeted campaigns) activate existing domestic interest quickly, while supply-side reorientation — developing new products for underserved domestic segments and routing visitors toward less-frequented regions — builds a more durable base and distributes economic benefits more equitably. Both are needed, and their equity implications — domestic visitors typically spend less per trip than international visitors — should be tracked explicitly. Fourth, design sustainability and workforce into recovery from the outset. On workforce, the ILO's analysis of tourism labour and skills shortages (International Labour Organization, 2025) offers a practical reference for building career pathways, improving conditions, and retaining skills through a downturn. On sustainability, DMOs and funders should embed sustainability key performance indicators into funding agreements and DMO performance frameworks from the start of a recovery cycle, rather than reserving them for strategy documents that are rarely monitored.

Table 2 translates these priorities into phase-specific actions, indicators that DMOs can monitor, and illustrative evidence from the destination cases. It follows the phase logic of Faulkner (2001) and Ritchie (2004), so that each action is tied to the stage of a crisis at which it matters most.

Table 2. Practical Recommendations for Destination Managers by Crisis Phase

Crisis Phase	Priority Actions for DMOs and Tourism Ministries	Indicators to Monitor	Illustrative Evidence
Preparedness (before a crisis)	Formalise inter-ministerial and public-private coordination protocols; prepare scenario sets and a crisis communication plan; build a domestic-market product base; set up workforce training funds.	Signed coordination protocols; scenario plans reviewed each year; domestic share of tourism spending; availability of training funds.	New Zealand scenarios (Yeoman et al., 2022); Macao partnerships (Wan et al., 2022)
Response (acute phase)	Activate coordination structures; give regular, transparent information on risk levels and safety measures; introduce health certification; protect jobs through wage and training support.	Frequency and reach of official updates; number of certified businesses; employment retained in tourism.	Singapore (STB, 2020, 2021); vaccination and travel intentions (Gursoy et al., 2021)
Reopening (restart phase)	Launch domestic campaigns and vouchers that steer visitors to less-visited regions; pilot controlled-entry schemes with low-risk markets; expand contactless and digital services.	Voucher use by region; arrivals and cases under pilot schemes; digital adoption by tourism firms.	Iceland (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023); Phuket (Thaicharoen et al., 2023); Singapore's Tcube (TTG Asia, 2021)
Recovery and transformation (longer term)	Link recovery funding to sustainability indicators; use visitor fees to fund sustainability; address decent-work deficits and skills shortages; diversify source markets.	Sustainability indicators in funding agreements; spending per visitor; vacancy rates; dependence on the largest source market.	Bhutan (CNN, 2022); tourism labour shortages (International Labour Organization, 2025); stimulus and resilience (Okafor et al., 2022)

The weight given to each action should reflect the three contextual dimensions identified in Section 5.2. Destinations with strong governance capacity and diversified economies can move quickly to certification, digital investment, and domestic stimulus. Small island and other tourism-dependent destinations face tighter fiscal limits and should give priority to controlled-entry arrangements with key source markets — the strategy that performed best in the Maldives model of Gu et al. (2022) — together with coordinated public-private marketing and longer-term market diversification. Destinations with limited institutional capacity can begin with low-cost measures: stakeholder communication networks of the kind described by Månsson and Eksell (2024), structured public-private coordination (Wan et al., 2022), and a phased recovery plan (Mensah & Boakye, 2023). Across all contexts, recovery plans should name who is responsible for each action and review progress against the indicators in Table 2 at fixed intervals.

5.4. Limitations of Recovery Approaches

The evidence also exposes where recovery fell short. By fixating on absorbing international arrivals rather than rethinking what tourism economies are for, many destinations let the transformative opening that Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) and Ioannides and Gyimóthy (2020) had identified slip past. The sustainability gains that came almost for free during the demand collapse

did not necessarily survive the rebound (Osorio et al., 2023). Workforce precarity went largely unaddressed in most places (Baum et al., 2020; Ladkin et al., 2023). And the pandemic widened existing inequities: uneven access to vaccines, certification, and digital infrastructure pulled higher-income and lower-income tourism economies further apart (UNCTAD, 2020; Sheller, 2021). The 99 per cent figure for 2024 deserves a sceptical eye, then — arrivals recovering is not the same as a tourism system recovering.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Summary of Findings

This paper has read post-pandemic tourism recovery thematically, drawing on sources published between January 2020 and December 2025: 38 peer-reviewed articles, 17 grey-literature sources including the UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer, and 13 destination cases. From that corpus it identified eight interconnected themes of destination management: crisis governance and DMO communication; resilience operationalisation; the domestic-tourism pivot; health and safety certification regimes; digital and contactless transformation; the sustainable and regenerative reset; workforce precarity and skills shortages; and public-private partnerships and stakeholder co-creation.

6.2. Key Conclusions

Three conclusions stand out. Recovery did not come from isolated measures but from coordinated packages tuned to a destination's governance capacity, economic structure, and pre-pandemic position. The 99 per cent return of international arrivals by 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025), impressive as a headline, masks deep regional disparity and unfinished business on equity and workforce sustainability. And the pandemic changed what a DMO is — from a marketing agency into an institutional actor of crisis governance — with consequences for both research and practice.

6.3. Contributions

This study makes four contributions. First, it extends destination resilience theory by showing how multi-level capacities (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2023) translate into concrete bundles of recovery strategies, and it carries phase-based crisis-management models (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004) into a prolonged, global health crisis in which different themes led at different stages. Second, it reconceptualises the role of the DMO: the evidence positions DMOs as institutional actors of crisis governance rather than as marketing agencies, which calls for revising the DMO-as-marketer view that dominated pre-pandemic research. Third, it offers an empirical and methodological contribution. It is among the first syntheses to combine peer-reviewed studies, grey literature, and thirteen destination cases within one thematic analysis, and its documented analytic record and verification search provide a transparent template for evidence synthesis on future tourism shocks. Fourth, it makes a practical contribution: the eight-theme framework and the phase-based recommendations in Table 2 give DMOs, tourism ministries, and funders a tool to audit recovery plans, set priorities that fit their own context, and prepare for the next crisis. Together, these contributions move the literature from describing what the pandemic did to tourism towards explaining which combinations of destination management strategies appeared to support recovery, and under what conditions.

6.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Five methodological limitations qualify the scope of this study's conclusions. First, the analysis was conducted by a single author. Reflexive thematic analysis does not treat inter-coder agreement as a validity criterion; instead, it positions the analyst as an active participant in building meaning rather than a neutral extractor of it (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). Even so,

peer debriefing or review by a second analyst would have strengthened the process and is recommended for future extensions of this synthesis. Second, source identification, coding, and drafting were supported by a generative AI tool. Although every cited source was checked against its published record, AI assistance may shape which sources are found and how they are summarised, and independent replication would strengthen confidence in the thematic structure. Third, the corpus was confined to English-language sources, with limited use of authoritative translations. This may under-represent recovery strategies documented primarily in other languages, particularly in the Asia-Pacific and Latin American contexts. Fourth, the evidence comes from published accounts rather than primary interviews with the practitioners who made the decisions. The analysis therefore captures recovery as reported, not as lived, and inherits the reporting and publication biases of its sources. Future work should complement this synthesis with structured interviews with DMO leaders and tourism ministry officials across the thirteen destination cases. Fifth, the thirteen case destinations were chosen purposively for geographic, economic, and strategic diversity. This design supports breadth of coverage but does not support claims of statistical representativeness.

Four directions for future work suggest themselves. Longitudinal studies could test whether the shifts seen between 2020 and 2025 prove durable or fade as the memory of the crisis recedes. Comparative work could ask why similar strategies produced different outcomes in different settings. Equity-focused research could trace how recovery's benefits were shared out among destinations, communities, and workers. And further study could examine how recovery plans shape readiness for the next systemic shock, whether pandemic, climate, or geopolitical. The evidence here hints that destinations already invested in governance capacity, stakeholder coalitions, and resilience operationalisation will ride out future disruptions more steadily — a proposition best tested now, while the institutional memory of this crisis is still fresh.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to identify relevant literature, support the thematic synthesis, and draft and edit the manuscript. The author reviewed and verified all content, including every cited source, and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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