Digital Tourism In ASEAN During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The tourism industry's landscape has been heavily impacted by the development of digitalization. This scope has specifically affected how the utilization of technology has somewhat influenced the existence of a digitally driven market, to which those industries must adapt in these new environments. Ever since its implementation through online travel agencies, which has further exacerbated the trend toward entirely new virtual experiences, along with various digital marketing efforts. As such, the advantages of digital tourism resonate in economic development, enhanced branding, and increased resistance against future pandemics such as COVID-19, as shown in the article through several case studies. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are slowly striving to expand and rejuvenate their tourism sector through the pathway of digital tourism. This article perceptively showcases how the importance of digitalization is transforming global tourism industries in Southeast Asia. Through digital tourism, a plausible way has been paved for governments to approach new markets and reach new levels of competitiveness, thereby elevating their status to attract travelers. This path is also harnessed by businesses at all kinds of levels, as it inclusively provides possibilities to access the digital world. Therefore, under the adoption of digital tourism strategies, nations can address not only immediate challenges but also position themselves to gradually transition towards sustainable tourism growth in the post-pandemic era.
Key Word: Digital Tourism, ASEAN, Covid 19

Abstrak

Industri pariwisata telah sangat dipengaruhi oleh perkembangan digitalisasi. Lingkup ini secara khusus mempengaruhi bagaimana pemanfaatan teknologi telah memengaruhi keberadaan pasar yang didorong secara digital, yang harus disesuaikan oleh industri-industri tersebut di lingkungan baru ini. Sejak diterapkannya melalui agen perjalanan online, yang telah memperparah tren menuju pengalaman virtual yang benar-benar baru, bersama dengan berbagai upaya pemasaran digital. Oleh karena itu, keuntungan pariwisata digital tercermin dalam pengembangan ekonomi, branding yang

ditingkatkan, dan peningkatan ketahanan terhadap pandemi masa depan seperti COVID-19, seperti yang ditunjukkan dalam artikel melalui beberapa studi kasus. Negara-negara seperti Indonesia, Malaysia, dan Thailand sedang berusaha untuk memperluas dan memperbarui sektor pariwisata mereka melalui jalur pariwisata digital. Artikel ini secara cerdas memperlihatkan bagaimana pentingnya digitalisasi dalam mengubah industri pariwisata global di Asia Tenggara. Melalui pariwisata digital, jalan yang mungkin telah dibuka bagi pemerintah untuk mendekati pasar baru dan mencapai tingkat daya saing yang baru, sehingga meningkatkan status mereka untuk menarik wisatawan. Jalur ini juga dimanfaatkan oleh bisnis pada semua jenis level, karena secara inklusif memberikan kemungkinan untuk mengakses dunia digital. Oleh karena itu, di bawah adopsi strategi pariwisata digital, negara-negara dapat mengatasi tidak hanya tantangan-tantangan yang langsung, tetapi juga memposisikan diri mereka untuk secara bertahap beralih menuju pertumbuhan pariwisata yang berkelanjutan di era pasca pandemi.
Kata Kunci: Pariwisata Digital, ASEAN, Covid 19

A. Background: Digital Tourism as A Strategy to Boost Tourism

Digitalization of all sectors in economic activities also affects the tourism industry. Further, this is also being reemphasized by business transformation that demands all economic sector to keep up with technology advance in order to remain relevant and competitive. Therefore, in tourism industry, there is a rising strategy to adopt digital tourism or e-tourism to cope with the market demand of digitalization. A lot has changed since the 1990s, and in tourism industry itself, the major breakthrough of digitalization is arranging your trips or tickets through internet instead of having to do it in-person with a travel agency.[1] This change is inevitable and is known as ***online travel agencies*** (OTA). This is the turning point of how digitalization immersed with tourism sector.

With the rising start-ups and online companies in tourism sector, such as SkyScanner, Airbnb, and TripAdvisor, to name a few, the digital transformation of tourism does not only stop in the booking or arranging

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[1] Hans Gelter, *Digital Tourism: An Analysis of Digital Trends in Tourism and Customer Digital Mobile Behaviour*, 2017, Interreg Nord, p.19.

your trip.[2] Promoting and selling your tourism destination is no longer conducted in travel fairs, but now through social media integration, engaging influencers to reach wider audience. This ***electronic word-of-mouth*** (e-WOM) strategy substituted the traditional way of promoting certain destinations and has proven to be more effective and cost-efficient.[3] Further with the help of search engine operations, many contents can be directed to a certain target of audience, meaning your marketing strategy will be on target most of the time. This is how digital marketing of tourism change the competitiveness of each travel destination. If you cannot adapt to the digital transformation, your destination will be left behind on its outreach exposure.

Taking the steps further beyond booking and marketing of tourism, people nowadays can actually do the leisure experience digitally. **Virtual reality (VR)** has entered the tourism business to provide a real-life experience of going on a vacation without actually being there physically. The 360 degrees experience allow users to experience a product, such as yacht, hotel, or amusement activities digitally and immersed with the feeling of how it should be in reality.[4] Many perceive this choice of VR travelling is a solution in tourism challenges, especially during the pandemic where there is a movement restriction while at the same time the demand for leisure experience is still there.

Overall, digital tourism is not referring to any specific type of digitalization in tourism but it explains how digitalization itself changes the tourism industry. Based on the explanation above, digital tourism is present in all aspects of tourism, from the marketing of destination, facilitating travel arrangement, even now can be found in the execution of travelling itself. With the advancement of technology is not stopping anytime soon, we can expect to see more digital innovations in tourism industry and some of the advantages of adopting this strategy will be elaborated further in the next

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[2] Ibid., p.22.
[3] Ibid., p.23.
[4] Hans Gelter, p.25.

section. In the previous section, it is explained that digital tourism can offer solutions to the growing challenges in tourism industry, hence, creating advantages to the industry competitors. One research shows that digital tourism is a key factor in the development of economy through the adoption of ICT to tourism industry.[5] It then elaborates that if a country can adopt ICT to their tourism sector, that country would be able to distribute their products, increase their client bases, form tourism and trade partnerships, and give information access to tourism competitors.[6] It also reduces costs in distribution, promotion, billing, and other aspects of tourism, which allow tourism operators to gain more maximized profits. This is a key point of revitalizing economy through the innovation of digital tourism.

Another research done by IEEE Smart Cities Initiatives finds that digital tourism can build a brand of certain leisure destination through its open access to information. This aspect of information access can trigger the influx of inbound tourism coming to a certain country if that country is able to facilitate their online needs.[7] From a destination management perspective, digital experience is being more characterized by the higher degree of reproducibility, competitiveness, and fickleness.[8] In the end, we can expect that travelers will adopt a certain way of digital culture into their travelling habits and countries are expected to meet this demand. Otherwise, they will experience a decline in their destination management due to this failure of incorporating digital needs of travelers.[9]

One final advantage that we can draw on digital tourism is that the flexibility of it. OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2020 elaborate that

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[5] Ziyadin Zayabek and Blembayeva Aigerim, *Digital Tourism as A Key Factor in the Development of Economy*, 2018, Economic Annals XXI, p.40.

[6] Ibid., p.45.

[7] Chiara Di Meo, *A Digital Culture for A Smart Tourism*, 2017, IEEE Smart Cities Initiatives – Trento White Paper, p.1.

[8] Chiara Di Meo, p.3.

[9] Mobeen Ali Khan, *Tourism Revival Strategy: Gaps and Policy Actions*, 2020, Development Policy Institute, p.4.

digital transformation can form flexible solutions to tourism disruption.[10] For example, the pandemic imposes a disruption to the tourism industry with social distancing and movement restrictions. However, the adoption of digital tourism by several destinations allows them to still operate despite of these restrictions. Digital tourism also offers flexibility not only in the sense of disruptions but also in their domain of interests, forms of engagement, shaping the practice, and sharing tourism practices.[11] This flexibility brought up by digital tourism is what makes it more competitive than conventional tourism because it allows the customers to shape their experience and plans according to their domain despite the sudden disruption that may arise.

Many researches already showed that adopting digital tourism is the key to boost tourism sector. Advantages of its adoption may include cost-efficiency, digital branding, and flexibility in tourism sectors. This is why many also suggested for government to equip and develop their ICT capacity to cope with the demand of digital tourism if they want to revive their tourism sectors, especially post-pandemic period. In the next part, we will elaborate some of the examples of digital tourism adoption by several countries to boost their tourism industry.

There are some good case practices of digital tourism globally. With the most famous one is by the European Union. The **European Union** through the European Commission adopts a more sustainable, resilient digital tourism policy to its member states. This policy comprises of strategies and funding planning towards digital tourism. For example, the Commission facilitates data gathering and sharing between its member states to upgrade digital tourism statistics and facilitate tourism

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[10] OECD, *Preparing Tourism Business for the Digital Future*, 2020, OECD iLibrary (Online), <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f528d444-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f528d444-en>, accessed on 13 September 2022.
[11] Susanne Marx, Sandra Flynn, and Mika Kylänen, *Digital Transformation in Tourism: Modes for Continuing Professional Development in A Virtual Community of Practice*, 2021, Project Leadership and Society, Vol.2, p.8-9.

entrepreneurs.[12] The policy also maps out plan to close the existing digital tourism implementation gap in Europe through the launch of Tourism Satellite Account.[13] The EU records that through implementing digital tourism, it can boost the economy of small and medium enterprises, contribute to the green economy, and enable social and regional cohesion.

Another example is from **Australia** where the government have taken up digital opportunities and investment in digital tourism. The Australian government also provides digital tools for SMEs and other actors in tourism and revitalize their digital platform to facilitate digital tourists. In result, the number of tourism start-ups is increasing significantly, especially in Queensland region.[14] Further, it is also recorded in from the adoption of digital tools for SMEs, their operation was able to boost revenue by 27 per cent compared to before.[15] In addition, the digitalization of tourism enabled Australia to have non-conventional tourist destinations, cooperating digitally with the Pacific destinations to diversify and complement tourists' experience.[16]

Japan also implements similar digital transformation policies to their tourism sector. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) launched a tourism package highlighting technology immersion in Japanese society called "Japan – A Technological Tour."[17] This tour allows tourists to experience the technological aspects of Japan and draws other categories of tourists, such as gamer enthusiasts or digital nomads. Further, PM Suga also announced that Japan would establish a digital agency to serve as the

[12] The European Commission, *Support to Tourism Ecosystem: Towards a More Sustainable, Resilient and Digital Tourism*, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/b3_tourism.pdf>, accessed on 13 September 2022.

[13] Ibid.

[14] OECD, *Preparing Tourism Business for the Digital Future*, 2020, OECD iLibrary (Online), <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f528d444-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f528d444-en>, accessed on 13 September 2022.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Pacific Trade Invest, *Tourism*, 2021, PTI (Online), <https://pacifictradeinvest.com/en/services/tourism/>, accessed on 13 September 2022.

[17] Japan National Tourism Organization, *Japan – A Technological Tour*, 2020, JNTO (Online), <https://www.japan.travel/en/au/experience/culture/japan-a-technological-tour/>, accessed on 12 September 2022.

control tower of digital transformation in the public and private sector. One of the success came from Jinya, the infamous hot spring that was hit hard by pandemic. After undergoing digital transformation, it is now able to get back on its feet and provide services to customers. Jinya integrates digital transformation with *omotenashi*, which means good hospitality in Japanese culture.[18] This is a proof where digital transformation can also be incorporated with local tourism culture to create a whole new different experience for customers.

The EU, Australia, and Japan can be the success story of digital tourism. We can see that if the government is able to adopt digital transformation, it can open new opportunities for tourism business to strive under this new condition. When the majority of leisure destinations already underwent a certain kind of digital transformation to some extent, the next part will focus on the region of Southeast Asia, where most of the income is generated through the tourism industry.

B.   Method

The research method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. Data was taken through literature study. literature study on digital tourism initiatives in ASEAN during the Covid-19 pandemic. This literature study covers government policies, marketing strategies, and technological innovations used to improve digital tourism experiences. The steps are as follows: Search for literary sources: Researchers can search for literature sources that are relevant to the research topic, such as journals, books and online documents. Researchers can use search engines such as Google Scholar or online journal databases to search for relevant literature sources.

Reading and Analyzing Literary Sources: After finding relevant literary sources, researchers must read and analyze these literary sources.

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[18] The Government of Japan, *Digital Transformation Propels Tourism Towards the Future,* 2021, JapanGov (Online), <https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2021/01/digital_transformation_propels_tourism.html>, accessed on 13 September 2022.

Researchers can use techniques such as highlighting or taking notes to help understand the content of literary sources. Organizing Literary Sources: Researchers must organize the literary sources that have been read and analyzed. Researchers can use reference management software such as Mendeley or Zotero to help organize literature sources. Writing a Research Report: After collecting and analyzing literature sources, the researcher must write a research report that includes the findings and conclusions of the research. Research reports must be prepared clearly and systematically.

C. Result and Disscussion

C.1. ASEAN Declaration on Digital Tourism 2020

Responding to the negative impacts imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic to ASEAN's creative economy sector, particularly the tourism industry, ASEAN Leaders published a document called the ASEAN Declaration on Digital Tourism during the 37th ASEAN Summit in 2020. The document serves as the focal point of ASEAN's cooperation in establishing and implementing digital tourism, which at the time, most of the member states have not adopted such strategy in their tourism policies. Reckoning the blueprint of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the importance of tourism sector to achieve AEC's goals, the Leaders also considered that incorporating digital transformation to the tourism sector will do so.[19]

One of the strategies that is laid out in the declaration is to adopt digital innovation and technology to tourism sectors with the focus on start-ups, micro, small, and medium enterprises.[20] The declaration also puts forward a commitment to enhance public-private partnerships, especially in capacity building and developing human resources in the region. In order to achieve a fully integrated technology and tourism, the declaration also calls for each member state to cooperate to attract

[19] ASEAN, *ASEAN Declaration on Digital Tourism*, 2020, p.2.
[20] Ibid., p.3.

investments in digital sector that directly support tourism.[21] Hence, with this declaration being published and agreed upon by the ASEAN Leaders, ASEAN then had a legal foundation to implement digital tourism. Furthermore, this digital tourism strategy has been put out on the ASEAN post-COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

C.2. The Importance of Digital Tourism in Southeast Asia

As highlighted before in the previous part, digital tourism is considered to be crucial to recover from COVID-19 economic setbacks according to its recovery plan. The Chairman of the ASEAN Marketing & Communications Working Groups states that technology and e-marketing in tourism sector will help stimulate tourism to and within ASEAN and make the region more popular than competing regions.[22] He also sees the need for ASEAN to refocus its tourism trajectory to digital marketing because every minute there are millions of social media post updated and it should be a leverage for ASEAN to make Southeast Asian destination more known to public. Recovering from COVID-19 in particular needs this integration even more considering many tourism destinations outside of ASEAN are implementing the similar marketing strategy in light of the easing of travel restrictions in some countries.

Furthermore, as noted by ASEAN Tourism Ministers, integrating digital tools to tourism sector will create a new driving force for economic growth and can transform the sector by making the journey more memorable and seamless.[23] This point can describe that e-marketing alone is not enough because of how competitive the tourism industry has become. However, if we can create a competitive

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Sansern Ngaorungsi, ASEAN Enhances Digital e-Marketing Efforts to Attract Tourist, 2021, Visit Southeast Asian (Online),
<https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/2021/01/digital_transformation_propels_tourism.html>, accessed on 11 September 2022.

[23] Asian Development Bank, *ASEAN Leaders Commit to Use Digital Tools to Spur Tourism*, 2020, <https://seads.adb.org/news/asean-leaders-commit-use-digital-tools-spur-tourism>, accessed on 13 September 2022.

advantage to our tourism sector, we can attract tourists because of the experience that they will get by travelling to our region. This is why it is important to integrate digitalization with local culture as shown by Japan in the previous post. Therefore, by doing so, Southeast Asian countries can gain leverage of the unique local experience with a touch of digitalization. To achieve this, we need some synchronization from respective stakeholders that will be further elaborated in the next section on study cases from ASEAN.

C.3. Case Study in ASEAN amidst the Pandemic: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

C.3.1. Indonesia

Tourism sector generates substantial contribution to Indonesia's income each year. Since the pandemic started, tourism actors experience a hit on their business, resulting in stagnant development within the tourism sector. Minister of Tourism, Sandiaga Uno, lays out the government's plan to adopt digital tourism, especially to recover from the negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. One of his policy is to have synergy between stakeholders to support this into being. For example, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy held a Food Startup Indonesia in 2021 to incubate food industry actors and create an added value to Indonesia's gastrotourism.[24] In addition, the Indonesian government has already held several similar investment incubation events to facilitate digital investment to the country. If the government can sustain these efforts, Indonesia will see USD 146 billion valuation of its digital economy, which includes tourism.

Beyond digital investment, the government also focuses on developing digital capability of MSMEs in tourism sectors.

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[24] Sandiaga Uno, *The Rise of Tourism with Digital Transformation*, 2022, EastVentures (Online), <https://east.vc/perspectives/sandiaga-uno/>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

As per the theme of Indonesia's G20 Presidency, the focus of digital transformation should be able to be accessed equally across all sectors. Therefore, the government has launched several programs, such as the Tourism Network Hub, the Tourism Village Assistance, and Digital Entrepreneurship Academy.[25] Those programs are proof that digital transformation is not only received by the tourism industry giants, but also MSMEs, such as community-managed tourism villages and local industries in Indonesia.

Another policy taken by the government of Indonesia is a result of cooperation between the Ministry of Law and Human Rights, Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia. The policy aims to facilitate the rising number of digital nomads worldwide and capitalize on the price competitiveness of Indonesia's tourism.[26] Hence, the government officiated the digital nomad visa for that reason. Supporting the digital nomads' work opportunities in Indonesia would also benefit to local communities where the nomads will reside. In addition, the government also launched the special hub for digital nomads in Bali to give them information on local long-term locations. With this initiative, the government can take advantage of digitalized working style and benefit the local communities.

Not only by the government in domestic domain, policies for digital tourism should also be executed by other stakeholders. For example, to make tourism promotion effective, Indonesia's representatives abroad have to play a supporting

[25] Yen Ocampo, *Indonesia Accelerates Digital Transformation in Its Tourism Sector*, 2022, OpenGov (Online), <https://opengovasia.com/indonesia-accelerates-digital-transformation-in-its-tourism-sector/>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[26] Nanien Yunniar, *Indonesia Ready to Welcome Digital Nomads: Tourism Minister*, 2022, AntaraNews (Online), <https://en.antaranews.com/news/238129/indonesia-ready-to-welcome-digital-nomads-tourism-minister>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

role as well. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has instructed all foreign missions of Indonesia to take up the role. We can see this from the events conducted by Indonesian Consulate-General in Mumbai to participate in the Outbound Travel Mart (OTM) to promote Indonesia's tourism through B-to-B scheme with the context of digital tourism to five super priority destinations, such as Borobudur, Lake Toba, Mandalika, Labuan Bajo, and Likupang.[27]

From Indonesia's case, we can see how government through its policy-making power adopt digitalization in tourism sector to compete in the current tourism trend. It is also important to note that digital tourism cannot be fully executed by a single actor in tourism sector. Therefore, the cooperation between relevant stakeholders, such as governmental bodies, MSMEs, foreign representatives, and private sectors, is crucial to fully transform to digital tourism.

C.3.2. Malaysia

Most of the digital tourism activities are being regulated and executed by Tourism Malaysia, the federal authority on tourism in Malaysia. Digital marketing aspect of Malaysia's tourism has been around since 2014 when Tourism Malaysia launched Visit Malaysia promotional tools on social media and web-based sites. The result of this strategy is deemed impressive accounting to 12.5 million watchers on video multimedia channel and an increase of 3.3% of tourist's arrivals in the following year.[28] Furthermore, in 2021, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia announced that the Tourism Malaysia's website is not integrated with interactive digital

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[27] KJRI Mumbai, *Outbound Travel Mart (OTM) 2022,* 2022,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGEbI7I08Qk>, accessed on 14 September 2022.
[28] Tourism Malaysia, *Tourism Malaysia Launches Integrated Digital Marketing Programme*, 2014, p.1.

brochures allowing prospective tourists to explore destinations in Malaysia virtually.[29] This is the real example of integrating virtual reality (VR) technology to enhance tourists' experience on certain destinations and it is deemed to be user-friendly and accessible. This is also an answer to the challenge of pandemic which restricts travelers to delve into their destinations directly. Furthermore, based on the research conducted to measure tourists' preference, most of them prefer destinations already showcased by celebrities in their social media,[30] which gives understanding of how crucial digital marketing of tourism is.

In a bigger picture, the Malaysian government adopted National Tourism Policy (NTP) that lays out foundation for tourism sustainability in Malaysia until 2030. One of the plans outlined is called **Smart Tourism 4.0,** which aims to capitalize technological innovations to tourism sector.[31] In a research conducted by Deloitte, Smart Tourism 4.0 can increase Malaysia's tourism-based revenues from USD 25 billion in 2018 to USD 110 billion by 2030; an increase of more than 340% if executed properly.[32] Focusing on the technological advancement of tourism business, the government also provides grants up to USD 68,000 to eligible companies to boost domestic tourism.[33]

Besides the government, public sectors in Malaysia can be seen to be actively involved in digital tourism. More than 70 travel agencies and travel providers participated in the Malaysia

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[29] Bernama, *New digital tourism site lets users interact virtually, get information on destinations in Malaysia, says minister*, 2021, MalayMail (Online), <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/04/20/new-digital-tourism-site-lets-users-interact-virtually-get-information-on-d/1968094>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[30] Gohar Inam, et.al., *Digital Tourism: A Possible Revival Strategy for Malaysian Tourism Industry after COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2020, Electronic Journal of Business and Management, p.8.

[31] Amirah Baharun, *Smart Tourism 4.0: Travel meets tech in Malaysia*, 2022, KrASIA (Online), <https://kr-asia.com/smart-tourism-4-0-travel-meets-tech-in-malaysia>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

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Digital Travel Fair that aims to reach out non-conventional tourist origins and open new tourism lanes for Malaysia.[34] Furthermore, the Digital Travel Technology Association of Malaysia (DiTTAM), an initiative by tourism private sectors in Malaysia, acts as a catalyst of digital transformation to advance the Malaysian tourism economic sector.[35] DiTTAM also contributes through collaboration with other stakeholders in tourism industry and drive digital innovation to close the digital divide in tourism industry in Malaysia.

Overall, the Malaysian government has adopted a feasible and comprehensive policy to adopt digital tourism through Smart Tourism 4.0. Furthermore, with the operational autonomy of Tourism Malaysia, it further gives authority to this body to execute tourism policies in Malaysia. Malaysia also gives a good example of how private sectors contribute to digital tourism through active participation and initiatives-making for the field. Hence, if digital marketing is well-executed, Malaysia can foresee significant development in their tourism sector, especially post-pandemic.

C.3.3. Thailand

Digital transformation in tourism is an integral strategy for boosting Thailand's tourism after the pandemic. In 2021, Thailand has reopened its border for travelers from 63 countries and used digital travel pass to ensure safety during the pandemic. The digital Thailand Pass allows the government to record travelers' track in Thailand to ensure public health safety, while at the same gives opportunity for travelers to pay a visit to

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[34] Tourism Malaysia, *Malaysia Digital Travel Fair*, 2021,
<https://www.malaysiadigitaltravelfair.com>, accessed on 14 September 2022.
[35] Digital Travel Technology Association of Malaysia, *Empowering Digital Travel*, 2021,
<https://www.dittam.org/about-us/>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

Thailand after shutting down its border for a year.[36] Travelers can also book and arrange their travel plans and record it through the application which makes the application fully integrated travel experience.

In addition, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) also has undergone several digital transformations plans for its tourism sector. During Global Tourism Forum 2022, the Deputy Governor of TAT highlights Thailand's readiness on digital tourism, pointing out several programs, such as Durian Farm Virtual Tour, Thailand Holideals, and targeting Gen Z and digital nomad travelers.[37] TAT also cooperates Singapore-based digital tourism companies to better engage potentially domestic and international travelers.[38] TAT has an elaborate strategy to not only focus on advancing digital tourism domestically, but also to create international partnerships on digital tourism with likeminded actors.

Besides TAT, the private actors of tourism sector in Thailand have an extensive role in digital tourism. The GSMA Mobile for Development addresses how small rural accommodations undergo digitalization to make them more productive.[39] With the support from private sector, these MSMEs gain more leverage in managing and improving their

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[36] John Reed, *Thailand is open – for those who conquer its digital travel pass*, 2021, Financial Times (Online), <https://www.ft.com/content/8e5a0f97-8c2e-40c3-ad43-e0f6d5fd1915>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[37] TAT Newsroom, *TAT Showcases Digital Transformation of Thai Tourism at Global Tourism Forum 2022*, 2022, <https://www.tatnews.org/2022/03/tat-showcases-digital-transformation-of-thai-tourism-at-global-tourism-forum-2022/>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[38] Steve Saxon, et.al., *Reimagining Travel: Thailand Tourism after the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2021, McKinsey&Company (Online), <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel-logistics-and-infrastructure/our-insights/reimagining-travel-thailand-tourism-after-the-covid-19-pandemic>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

[39] Nigham Shahid, *How Can Digital Tools Support Rural Tourism Enterprises in Thailand?*, 2022, Mobile for Development (Online), <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/programme/central-insights/how-can-digital-tools-support-rural-tourism-enterprises-in-thailand/>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

service to customers through digital channels. World Bank also notes that if the private sectors can incentivize interoperability in digital market and raise the availability of digital and complementary skills, Thai tourism private sectors can reap the benefit of technology incorporation to its operations.

As the most visited country in Southeast Asia, Thailand suffered a lot during the pandemic due to its heavy reliance on tourism sector. However, digital tourism serves as a rebound for Thai tourism industry. Programs beyond the marketing of tourism destinations, such as virtual tours and digital advancement can equip the industry in order to compete with the current emerging market. Furthermore, the novelty of digital tourism of Thailand is to also include international cooperation to achieve its tourism goals.

D. Conclusion

Overall, digital tourism is not a new thing in tourism development. However, its relevance was reiterated in light of the pandemic that put the tourism industry on hold for almost two years. In some countries outside ASEAN, digital tourism is adopted to cope with the challenging situation of the pandemic, as well as, preparing the tourism industry to rebound post-pandemic situation. This is why ASEAN also took a similar step and declared its support to digital tourism through the ASEAN Declaration on Digital Tourism in 2020. Some countries in ASEAN, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have adopted the policies and create some adjustments to their tourism sectors. Most of them employ digital marketing strategy to promote destinations, boost investment in digital sectors, and integrate virtual reality experience to tourism. While this is indeed very crucial for survival of tourism industry during the pandemic, however, it can be expected to still be relevant even after the pandemic since most of tourists already adjusted to the digitalized lifestyle. Therefore, digital

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tourism needs to be constantly improved and innovated to cope with the demands, especially in Southeast Asia where most of the countries rely on tourism sector and competitiveness in the region is quite intense.

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KJRI Mumbai, *Outbound Travel Mart (OTM) 2022,* 2022,<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGEbI7I08Qk>, accessed on 14 September 2022.

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