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Navigating the Endemic Era: Understanding the Carry-On Forces That Influence Business Travel Decisions

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected global trade, including business travel, despite its importance in promoting economic growth and innovation. This study investigated the factors that motivate companies and organisations to engage in business travel during the pandemic era, using data from 1948 decision-makers in the Asia Pacific region. The results showed that the significance of the trip and the demand of clients were critical influencers of business travel decisions. These findings address the research gap in explaining organisational travel decisions and behaviours and can help stakeholders in the aviation, hospitality, and tourism industries develop effective strategies to attract business travellers. Physical business travel remains crucial to many companies and organizations while understanding the factors driving business travel decisions is essential for the travel industry to thrive in the international market.

Keywords: carry-on force, endemic, business travel, physical meetings, Asia Pacific

1. Introduction

International trade is a critical component of a country's economy, contributing to faster economic growth, innovation, and efficiency improvements, leading to a better quality of life. The World Bank (2018) confirms that countries open to international trade benefit significantly from the free movement of goods and capital. This aspect is especially true in today's globalized era, where countries are closely connected politically and economically. By promoting international business travel, countries can foster global integration, leading to increased trade, enhanced productivity, and innovation. Through the transfer of knowledge and technology, businesses can access new markets and create new products or services, contributing to overall economic growth (Aslam et al., 2018). International business travel refers to individuals who travel across borders to perform their work duties, including attending conferences and events, internal meetings in other global offices, company retreats, client meetings, trade fairs, and offshore work (Business Travel Association [BTA], 2023). The primary objective of business travel is to facilitate personal interaction between businesses, enabling them to establish a solid foundation for existing or future relationships (Holma, 2012). Business travel encompasses more than just white-collar workers; various industries that employ blue-collar workers require travel for duties such as project assignments, training, equipment installation, and maintenance. Recent research by Feuer and King (2023) indicates that the demand for business travel among blue-collar workers is surpassing that of large corporations. Consequently, acknowledging and addressing the travel needs of these workers is crucial for maintaining operational efficiency and achieving business objectives.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which spanned from 2020 to 2022, had a significant impact on global trade. Countries worldwide closed their borders, making business travel almost impossible during the pandemic era.

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Consequently, travel restrictions have significantly slowed international trade. According to a report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021), global trade in goods and services declined by about 10%, while the world's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flow dropped by almost 50%.

To cope with the increasing barriers and risks associated with international travel, businesses have turned to online meeting applications, and many believe that business travel will not return to pre-pandemic levels. The Economist (2021) stated that business travel for meetings and conferences had mainly been replaced by technology. The U.S. National Technology Readiness Survey (NTRS) results showed that 50% of business trips would be permanently replaced by video conferencing, even after borders reopen (Rockbridge, 2021). However, many still believe that physical meetings are crucial, and meetings cannot be entirely replaced by technology. Research conducted by Müller and Wittmer (2023) has determined that, while there is a decreasing trend in business travel, virtual communication will not entirely replace it. This is because negotiations and conveying complex messages can be challenging to transmit effectively online. According to the results of the Chubb Survey, over 80% of business travellers believed that essential messages were missed in online meetings as they were unable to see their counterparts' body language during the meetings, and around 75% considered that their relationships with counterparts deteriorated due to the lack of physical meetings (Chubb, 2022). Although online conferencing has replaced face-to-face meetings during the pandemic, many business travellers still recognize the importance of physical trips. In the realm of business travel during the pandemic, Lin et al. (2022) proposed the concept of the "carry-on factor," which epitomises the motivations that compel companies and organisations to undertake business trips despite the pandemic's risks and hurdles. These factors serve as the stimuli for business travel, influencing companies' and organisations' assessments of the necessity and benefits of physical travel in the current landscape (Carvache-Franco et al., 2019). Essential determinants, including the specific requirements of the industry, the urgency of the trip, the importance of face-to-face meetings, the need to establish relationships with potential business partners, the limitations of technology, and the staff's preferences collectively shape decisions surrounding business travel in the pandemic era (Standaert et al., 2021). These factors underscore the intricate interplay of professional needs, interpersonal dynamics, technological constraints, and personal choices that underpin the persistence of physical travel as a strategic and operational necessity in the face of ongoing global challenges.

This study aims to empirically examine the carry-on factor (Lin et al., 2022) that influences companies' and organisations' business travel decisions during the endemic era. Most previous studies investigating tourist behaviours have primarily focused on leisure tourists, such as Rahman et al. (2021), Neuburger and Egger (2020), and Mheidat and Marzuki (2023), leaving a gap in understanding organisational business travel choices. Douglas and Weber's (2023) research suggests a correlation between employees' work values, perceptions of organisational injustice, and compliance with corporate travel policies; however, it lacks an exploration of the motivational drivers behind business travel decisions. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to address the existing research gap by conducting an empirical examination of the carry-on forces of business travel from the companies' and organisations' perspectives in the post-pandemic era, given the limited body of research in this domain. This research is crucial because it helps stakeholders in the aviation, hospitality, and tourism industries, as well as regulators, develop strategies to cope with changes in business travel decisions. Studying the carry-on force of business travel not only addresses practical implications but also advances academic understanding of decision-making in business travel at the organizational level. Most previous research studies have been conducted from the perspectives of leisure travellers and individual business travellers. This research study examines the organisational perspective on international business travel. This research enriches our understanding of organisational travel behaviour and decision-making. The research findings are valuable inputs for further studies in business-to-business travel marketing. By unravelling the complex interplay of personal, professional, and environmental influences on travel choices, it contributes to theoretical frameworks, enhancing insights into the nuanced motivations that drive business travel behaviour in dynamic and uncertain business environments.

2. Literature review

2.1. From business travel to online meeting

The disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the dynamics of business travel, prompting a shift from physical to virtual meetings due to increased inconveniences and risks associated with international travel (Karl et al., 2021). As a result, numerous companies have chosen to persist with this approach even during the endemic phase to reduce their reliance on physical business travel. According to data provided by the European Federation for Transport and Environment (T&E, 2023), more than half of worldwide companies have reduced their business travel and transitioned to virtual meetings during the pandemic period. Despite this transition, the enduring value of in-person meetings remains paramount for businesses. While videoconferences have become a popular alternative to in-person meetings, they do not always fully replicate the benefits of face-to-face interactions (Müller & Wittmer, 2023). Physical meetings offer a level of interpersonal interaction that virtual platforms cannot match, conveying essential messages of respect, value, and adaptability within diverse meeting environments (Strengers, 2014). This mode of engagement fosters deeper connections and more meaningful interactions among participants compared to virtual settings (Wong, 2021). During the endemic period, there was a notable rise in business travel, with virtual meetings losing their prominence as a substitute for work-related travel (Mcintyre, 2024). However, some companies have capitalized on the pandemic as an opportunity to reduce business travel as a strategic cost-cutting initiative. By leveraging the limitations imposed by the pandemic, these organisations have reevaluated the necessity of extensive business travel, opting to streamline their operations and expenses by embracing virtual communication platforms and minimising physical travel (Pymnts, 2024).

2.2. Business travel as a corporate buying decision

This research study focuses on companies' and organisations' decisions regarding business travel. This is because business travel is typically a decision made by companies or organisations rather than by individual staff members. The literature review began by examining theories that explain business travel decisions from the perspectives of companies and organisations. There is no existing literature that describes the factors affecting companies' and organisations' decisions on business travel, except for Lin et al. (2022). In the study by Lin et al. (2022), the theory is built on companies' and organisations' business travel decision-making, grounded in the concepts of situational characteristics (Bunn, 1993), which explains why a specific purchase decision approach would be applied to a particular corporate purchase. A decision to purchase business travel services is also considered a kind of corporate buying decision. The concepts of four situational characteristics (Bunn, 1993) include purchase importance, task uncertainty, the extensiveness of the choice set, and perceived buyer power. Despite Bunn's framework being introduced decades ago, its relevance persists in today's dynamic business environment. In a continually evolving marketplace where personalized interactions, effective negotiation strategies, and customized solutions are paramount, Bunn's model remains a valuable guide for businesses navigating complex purchasing decisions successfully (Rajala & Tidström, 2017). Bunn's (1993) theory has been widely applied to research studies on corporate purchase decisions, including those by Moon and Tikoo (2002), Alejandro et al. (2011), Paesbrugghe et al. (2018), and Dwivedi et al. (2020). Bell and Morey (1996) and Bell (1997) applied Bunn's (1993) theory to the tourism and hospitality context, examining the hotel selection criteria for corporate travel departments and developing selling strategies for travel suppliers based on a taxonomy of corporate travel department policies. Lin et al. (2022) developed a Go/No-Go theory for overseas business travel decisions based on Bunn's (1993) situational characteristics to explain companies' and organisations' decisions regarding business travel. However, the application of Bunn's (1993) theory to the context of tourism and hospitality has not been empirically tested. This research study will empirically examine the carry-on force suggested by Lin et al. (2022) and address the research gap in business travel decisions from the perspectives of companies and organisations.

2.3. Carry-on forces

The findings of Lin et al. (2022), derived from interviews with travel decision-makers from companies and organisations, offer valuable insights into the key determinants influencing business travel decisions in today's landscape. The study emphasises the substantial role of two crucial situational factors, clients' demand (CD) and trip importance (TI), in shaping the carry-on forces (COF) of companies and organisations regarding their business travel intentions and decisions. Through a nuanced exploration of these factors, the study sheds light on how companies and organisations navigate and prioritise their travel initiatives based on client needs and the perceived significance of specific trips within the broader context of their business objectives and relationships. This empirical study will utilise this conceptual framework to investigate the importance of these factors.

Client demand and trip importance are two critical factors that influence business travel decisions. Client demand underscores the significance of face-to-face interactions, highlighting the value clients place on direct engagement and physical presence in building relationships and fostering trust. On the other hand, trip importance encompasses a broader perspective, emphasising the benefits of business trips, such as the opportunity to engage with clients, close deals, differentiate oneself from competitors, and positively impact sales and profits. Both factors emphasize the pivotal role of in-person meetings in business dynamics, whether in meeting client preferences or maximizing the benefits and outcomes of business travel endeavours.

2.3.1. Client's demand

Client demand plays a crucial role in shaping business travel decisions, particularly for firms that engage with clients. Frequently, clients request in-person meetings over virtual options, prompting the decision for business travel. This preference highlights the importance clients attribute to physical presence and direct engagement when interacting with a company or its representatives. According to Bargh et al. (2002), in-person meetings with clients are crucial for building long-term relationships and developing confidence, which is essential for forming new partnerships. Thomasson and Aloisi (2021) also found that face-to-face meetings were effective for brainstorming innovative ideas. Thus, companies prioritise in-person meetings to maintain relationships with their clients and capture their attention, thereby inspiring positive collaboration and fostering personal relationships, trust, and rapport. Physical presence is also regarded as an expression of commitment, particularly in external contacts such as sales. Individual loyalty to the partner company is developed when clients see that their partner is willing to incur costs to ensure their well-being (Gustafson, 2012; Fraccastoro et al., 2020).

Furthermore, travelling to meet clients can differentiate a company from its competitors and demonstrate its credibility and responsibility towards its clients. In-person meetings set organizations apart from competitors who rely solely on digital communication (TravelPerk, 2021).

In contrast, virtual meetings are less effective as they require more time for group communication compared with face-to-face meetings (Daly, 1993). Several studies have highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions in team dynamics, as physical meetings offer opportunities for team members to share their thoughts on both professional and personal levels, which virtual platforms cannot replicate (Siemens, 2011). Warkentin et al. (1997) also found that face-to-face teams demonstrate a stronger relational link and a higher degree of cohesion, leading to better outcomes in the decision-making process. Companies prioritise in-person meetings with clients to build and maintain relationships, inspire positive collaboration, and develop personal loyalty. Lin et al. (2022) suggested two dimensions, namely, the client's insistence on a meeting in person and the industry's normality of meeting in person, to measure the client's demand. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Client demand has a significant influence on the carry-on force in business travel decisions.

2.3.2. Trip importance

A company's decision to engage in business travel can be influenced by a range of factors, including the benefits offered by the trip. Among these benefits, a pivotal aspect of business travel is the opportunity for company representatives to engage with clients, fostering personal relationships that often lead to successful deal closures. Individuals tend to opt for in-person meetings when it comes to high-value business deals because of the enhanced communication, trust-building, and clarity that face-to-face interactions offer in crucial negotiations. Research by Forbes (2019) has shown that face-to-face meetings have a higher chance of closing deals compared to virtual meetings, indicating the significance of in-person meetings to businesses. The sensory experience of being physically close during meetings, including sight, sound, smell, and touch, also adds value to face-to-face meetings (Winger, 2005).

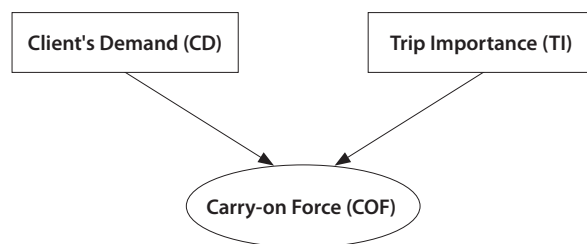
In addition to these benefits, the purpose and urgency of the trip, particularly in terms of sales and profits, can significantly influence a company's decision to travel for business. Belenkiy and Riker (2012) found that business travel plays an essential role in trade promotion, and an increasing number of international travellers have a positive relationship with commodity exports from the US. Another study by Stuhkmacher and Citera (2005) revealed that face-to-face negotiations lead to less hostility and higher profits compared to virtual talks.

As a result, the course of the meeting and the potential impact on a company's profit margin can be critical factors in determining whether to travel for business. The importance and urgency of the trip have a significant influence on a company's decision to travel for business. Lin et al. (2022) suggested four dimensions — namely, the significance of trip benefits, the urgency of the trip, the importance of the trip purpose, and the legacy value of the trip — to measure trip importance. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H2: The importance of trips significantly influences carry-on force in business travel decisions.

The conceptual model of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The conceptual model for carry-on force



3. Methodology and data

In this study, structured self-administered questionnaires were used as the data collection tool to examine the factors influencing companies' and organisations' business travel decisions during the endemic era, as suggested by Lin et al. (2022). Self-administered questionnaires are widely used in research because they allow participants to complete surveys at their convenience, and responses can be kept anonymous, reducing any social desirability bias (Bowling, 2005). Structured questionnaires ensure that all participants are asked the same questions in the same order, increasing the reliability of the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The questionnaire was designed based on two hypotheses generated from the literature review and aimed to gather data related to the factors influencing business travel decisions during the endemic era. The questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of participants to ensure its clarity, simplicity, and understandability.

The use of self-administered questionnaires allowed us to gather data from a large sample size, regardless of their location, as the survey was conducted online. This method also enabled us to collect and analyse data efficiently using statistical software (Bowling, 2005). The questionnaire consisted of four parts: screening questions, questions related to job title and company background, questions regarding company travel patterns and purposes, and questions about carry-on factors. To increase the response rate, the questionnaire was translated into multiple languages and pre-tested in each focused country to ensure its accuracy.

The final questionnaire was administered to 2070 business travel decision-makers in nine countries in the Asia Pacific region and met the recommended minimum sample size of 200 for studies using structural equation modelling (Kline, 2011). The pilot test helped refine the questionnaire, ensuring that the questions were clear, and concise and that the results were reliable (Leon et al., 2010). The use of questionnaires as a data collection tool is effective in research studies (Marshall, 2005).

3.1. Data collection

We utilized the stratified random sampling method to ensure a representative selection of business travel decision-makers across various countries in the Asia Pacific region. This probabilistic sampling technique involves segmenting the entire population into homogeneous groups, known as strata, to streamline the sampling process. In the study of business travel decision-makers, this method entails categorizing the population into specific subgroups based on criteria such as job title, experience level, industry sector, and company size.

The selected countries, including Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, were chosen as major business centres in the region, as classified by the World Bank (The World Bank, 2021). These nations were selected based on the following factors:

- Recognized as significant business hubs in the Asia Pacific region, highlighting their economic importance, thriving business activities, and potential impact on regional and global commerce.
- Each country represents a substantial market with diverse industries, business practices, and cultural intricacies, providing a fertile ground for exploring various facets of business travel decision-making.
- They hold pivotal roles in shaping the regional economic landscape, trade dynamics, and business relationships within Asia and globally.
- Offering a blend of developed and emerging markets, these countries present varying levels of infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and business cultures, creating a diverse array of contexts for comprehending business travel decisions.

A total of 2,070 questionnaires were distributed, meeting the minimum recommended sample size of 200 for studies employing structural equation modelling (Kline, 2011), ensuring sufficient statistical power to analyse the data. The data were collected using Qualtrics over sixteen days, from January 6 to 21, 2022. Of the 2070 questionnaires distributed, 1948 usable responses were collected, resulting in a valid response rate of 94.10%. The collected data were then entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program, version 23, and the SPSS Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) program, version 23, to develop a Structural Equation Model (SEM) for further examination. This statistical technique is commonly used to analyse complex relationships between variables in social science research (Kline, 2011). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the questionnaires distributed and the response rates in each country, showing that the sample size was distributed proportionately across the nine countries. This sampling approach ensured a diverse and representative sample, allowing for the generalizability of the findings to business travel decision-makers in the Asia Pacific region. Overall, the response rates for all countries range from 91.30% to 96.95%, which suggests a high level of engagement and participation from respondents across the region.

Table 1
Respondents rate

	Australia	China	India	Indonesia	Japan	Korea	Malaysia	Singapore	Thailand	Total
Questionnaires Distributed	230	230	230	230	230	230	230	230	230	2070
Useable responses	223	219	221	211	210	211	216	216	221	1948
Response rate	96.95%	95.21%	96.08%	91.73%	91.30%	91.73%	93.91%	93.91%	96.08%	94.10%

3.2. The model

This study aimed to fill the research gap in examining the carry-on force of business travellers in the post-pandemic era by applying the theoretical concept proposed by Lin et al. (2022). To achieve this, we employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the complex relationships between variables and construct the carry-on factor (COF) latent variable, which is related to the identified carry-on forces of business travel in the Asia Pacific region. SEM is a statistical technique widely used in various fields to test theoretical models and hypotheses. Karl Jöreskog and Dag Sörbom first introduced it in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it has since evolved into a valuable tool for examining complex relationships between variables, exploring mediating and moderating effects, and predicting outcomes (Fan et al., 2016; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1982). Furthermore, SEM has also been used in tourism studies to measure changes in tourist behaviour. For instance, Ballantyne et al. (2011) used SEM to examine the tourists' environmental awareness and behaviour change towards wildlife tourism. Similarly, Chen et al. (2021) investigated how the tourists' responsible behaviour was affected by COVID-19 in the tourism industry. The study by Ruan et al. (2020) employed SEM to understand the behaviour of international tourists when travelling to Beijing under the threat of air pollution. Overall, SEM is a proper statistical technique that can provide valuable insights into complex relationships between variables in many fields, including tourism.

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is a statistical technique that involves two models: the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model is used to establish the relationship between the latent variables and their corresponding measures or indicators (Hair et al., 2006). In this study, we used the identified carry-on forces of business travel as indicators to construct the COF latent variable in the measurement model. In simpler terms, the measurement model helps to identify the indicators that measure the latent construct or variable of interest. For example, in this study, the COF latent variable is the construct of interest, and the identified carry-on forces of business travel serve as indicators of this construct. By using the measurement model, we can determine the relationships between the indicators and the latent variable and assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

Hair et al. (2006) and Hair et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of the measurement model in structural equation modelling (SEM). They suggest that we should evaluate the measurement model first before proceeding to the structural model. This is because a poorly specified measurement model can lead to biased and inconsistent estimates in the structural model. Thus, establishing a robust measurement model is a crucial step in structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis.

The structural model evaluates the relationships between the latent variables, which may include direct and indirect effects. Through SEM, we can examine not only the mediating effects but also the direct and indirect relationships between variables. By using SEM, we were able to evaluate the relationships between the latent variables and carry-on forces of business travel in the Asia Pacific region. This allowed us to construct the COF latent variable and explore the various factors that influence business travel in the area.

To measure the reliability of the measurement model, we employed Cronbach's alpha, average variance extracted (AVE), and Composite reliability coefficient (CR). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or above indicates acceptable internal consistency, and a CR of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We

also examined model fitting using the relative/normed chi-square (χ^2/pdf), the root means square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the Goodness-of-fit index (GFI), as recommended by Hair et al. (2014). The acceptable index of the relative/normed chi-square (χ^2/pdf) should be no more than 0.05; the root means square error of approximation (RMSEA) falls within the range between 0.05 to 0.08 and the Goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI) is 0.9 or above (Kline, 2011).

Therefore, we used SEM to construct the COF latent variable and evaluate the relationships between the latent variables and carry-on forces of business travel in the Asia Pacific region. The reliability of the measurement model was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, AVE, and composite reliability (CR). In contrast, the model fit was evaluated using the relative/normed chi-square (χ^2/pdf), RMSEA, and GFI indexes.

4. Result

Table 2 presents the respondents' profiles, including the frequency and percentage of variables related to job titles and industries in the sample population. The job title variable indicates that Senior management is the most common job title, with a frequency of 627, accounting for 32% of the total respondents, followed by middle management with a frequency of 794 (41%). Analysts and associates have the lowest frequency, at 274 (14%), and entry-level positions have a frequency of 253 (13%). The locally based employee variable shows that 387 respondents (19.87%) work in companies with 50 or fewer employees, 396 (20.33%) work in companies with 51-100 employees, 343 (17.61%) work in companies with 101-200 employees, 266 (13.66%) work in companies with 201-300 employees, and 596 (30.60%) work in companies with more than 300 employees.

The industries variable shows the frequency and percentage of respondents working in different industries. The largest industry represented is accountancy, banking, finance or insurance, with 214 individuals in the sample, accounting for 10.99%. The next largest industry is computing, information technology, and telecommunications, with 201 respondents (10.32%). On the other hand, PR, advertising, and marketing have the smallest representation, with only five respondents (0.26%). The table provides an overview of the job titles and industries from which the sample population is drawn, which can aid in analysing and interpreting the study's results.

Table 2
Profile of respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Job title	Senior management	627	32.00%
	Middle management	794	41.00%
	Entry level	253	13.00%
	Analyst / Associate	274	14.00%
Locally based employees	50 or less	387	19.87%
	51-100	396	20.33%
	101-200	343	17.61%
	201-300	266	13.66%
	more than 300	596	30.60%
Industries	Accountancy, banking, finance or insurance	214	10.99%
	Advertising, marketing, PR	102	5.24%
	Agriculture or Fishing	34	1.75%
	Arts, cultural, entertainment and recreation	70	3.59%
	Building, construction, property or real estate	115	5.90%
	Business, consultancy or management	130	6.67%
	Chemical, oil or plastics	39	2.00%
	Computing, information technology and telecommunication	201	10.32%
	Defence, public services or administration	33	1.69%
	Education	112	5.75%

Table 2 (continued)

Industries	Electronic, engineering, machinery and equipment	91	4.67%
	Energy and utilities	37	1.90%
	Environment and forestry	7	0.36%
	Events, hospitality, leisure, tourism and sport	53	2.72%
	Food and beverages, food production or restaurant	80	4.11%
	Healthcare and social services	62	3.18%
	International trade, retail or wholesale	104	5.34%
	Law and legal services	21	1.08%
	Logistics, storage and transportation	43	2.21%
	Manufacturing	200	10.27%
	Media	21	1.08%
	Mining and quarrying	10	0.51%
	Pharmaceutical	19	0.98%
	PR, Advertising, marketing, PR	5	0.26%
	Science and technology research	40	2.05%
Others	105	5.39%	

Table 3 provides information on two constructs: "Client's Demand" and "Trip Importance". For each construct, the table presents the mean and standard deviation of responses, the factor loading (which indicates how well each item contributes to the construct), and Cronbach's alpha coefficient (which measures the internal consistency or reliability of the scale). Under the "Client's Demand" construct, four items are listed, each representing a statement about how the respondent's organization responds to clients' requests for overseas business trips. The mean score for each item ranges from 2.872 to 2.881, with a standard deviation ranging from 1.179 to 1.252. The factor loading for each item is high, ranging from 0.78 to 0.83, indicating that each item contributes significantly to the construct. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this construct is 0.843, which suggests good internal consistency among the items. Under the "Trip Importance" construct, four items are listed, each representing a statement about factors that influence the respondent's decision to travel on overseas business trips. The mean score for each item ranges from 2.812 to 2.914, with a standard deviation ranging from 1.191 to 1.332. The factor loading for each item is also high, ranging from 0.75 to 0.87, indicating that each item contributes significantly to the construct. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this construct is 0.875, which suggests good internal consistency among the items.

Table 3
Reliability and validity analysis

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Client's Demand (CD)				
We will travel on overseas business trips at the request of our clients or collaborating parties.	2.881	1.251	0.80	0.843
We will reduce travel on overseas business trips if we have stable relationships with our clients or collaborating parties.	2.872	1.252	0.78	
We will reduce our overseas business trips, as we anticipate that our clients and collaborating parties will not feel comfortable meeting in person.	2.875	1.225	0.78	
We will travel on overseas business trips as meeting face-to-face with clients or collaborating parties is the standard practice by our competitors.	2.881	1.179	0.83	
Trip Importance (TI)				
We will travel on overseas business trips if the benefits or returns brought by the business trips are attractive enough.	2.817	1.246	0.87	0.875
We will travel on overseas business trips if swift actions are needed at the intended destinations.	2.850	1.263	0.84	
We will travel on overseas business trips if the trip's purpose is essential to our organisation.	2.812	1.332	0.77	
We will travel on overseas business trips if the trips are integral parts of the traditions, culture or legacy of our organization.	2,914	1.191	0.75	

Table 4 presents the inter-construct correlations between two constructs: Client's Demand (CD) and Trip Importance (TI). The table shows the construct reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, and the correlation coefficient between CD and TI.

CD and TI have high construct reliability (CR) values of 0.875 and 0.883, respectively, indicating that the items within each construct are highly correlated and measure the same underlying concept. The average variance extracted (AVE) for CD and TI are 0.636 and 0.655, respectively, indicating that each construct explains more than 60% of the variance in the items used to measure it. The correlation coefficient between CD and TI is 0.938, which is a remarkably high positive correlation. This suggests a strong relationship between these two constructs – specifically, the extent to which travel is influenced by client demand is closely tied to the perceived importance of the trip.

Table 4
Inter-construct correlations

		CR	AVE	CD	TI
1	CD	0.875	0.636		0.938***
2	TI	0.883	0.655	0.938***	

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed)

This table presents suggested fitting measures for evaluating the fit of a measurement model and a structural model. These measures are crucial for assessing the model's fit to the data and determining whether it is suitable for further analysis.

The suggested fitting measures include the relative or normal chi-square (χ^2/df), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and goodness-of-fit index (GFI). The recommended values for each measure are provided, along with the actual values obtained for the measurement model and structural model being evaluated. The χ^2/df measure should be less than 5 for a good fit, and the recommended value is less than 0.05 for statistical significance. In this case, the actual value obtained for both the measurement model and structural model is 0.000, which indicates an excellent fit. The RMSEA measure should be between 0.05 and 0.08 for a good fit, and the recommended value falls within this range. The actual values obtained for both the measurement model and structural model are 0.054 and 0.058, respectively, which also suggest a good fit. The GFI indexes should be greater than 0.90 for a good fit, and the recommended value is greater than 0.90. The actual values obtained for both the measurement model and structural model are 0.91 and 0.915, respectively, which suggest a good fit.

Table 5
Goodness-of-Fit indices for the measurement model and structural model

Suggested fitting measures	Recommended value	Measurement model	Structural model
Relative/normal chi-square (χ^2/pdf)	P<0.05	0.000	0.000
Root means square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.05-0.08	0.054	0.058
Goodness-of-fit statistic (GFI) indexes	>0.90	0.91	0.915

Figure 2 and Table 6 present the findings of a structural path analysis that investigated the relationship between the dependent variable, Carry-on Force, and two independent variables, Client Demand and Trip Importance. The standardised coefficients (β), t-values, p-values, and squared multiple correlations for both paths are presented. The results indicate that the carry-on force of business trips influences both client demand and the importance of the journey. Trip Importance showed a higher influence ratio, with a standardised beta of 0.972, compared to Client Demand's standardised beta of 0.932. The statistical significance of the P-values for the two factors indicates that both hypotheses in the study are supported.

Moreover, in the path between Carry-on Force and Client Demand, the beta coefficient of 0.932 suggests a strong positive relationship between the two variables. The t-value of 41.423 is highly significant, and the squared multiple correlation (R^2) of 0.867 indicates that Carry-on Force can explain 86.7% of the variation in Client Demand. Similarly, in the path between Carry-on Force and Trip Importance, the beta coefficient of 0.972 indicates a strong positive relationship between the two variables. The t-value of 40.055 is highly significant, and the squared multiple correlation (R^2) of 0.912 suggests that Carry-on Force can explain 91.2% of the variation in Trip Importance.

Figure 2
The structural model

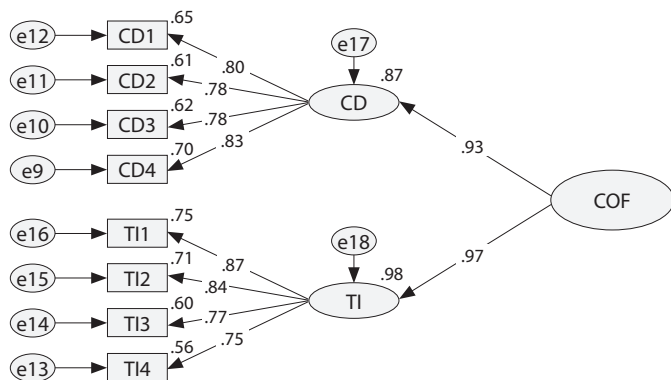


Table 6
Structural model result (Path coefficients/Standardized regression weights)

Structural path	Standardize coefficients	t value	P value	Squared multiple correlations
Carry-on Force (COF) → Client Demand (CR)	0.932	41.423	***	0.867
Carry-on Force (COF) → Trip Importance (TI)	0.972	40.055	***	0.912

5. Conclusion

The study's findings reveal that the influence of client demand on travel decisions significantly shapes the perceived significance of business trips, emphasizing the pivotal role of client preferences in determining the value of such engagements. This insight highlights the crucial connection between client preferences and the perceived value of business travel, providing valuable guidance for organisations seeking to align their strategies effectively with client needs. By recognising and leveraging this strong correlation, businesses can enhance client management practices, optimise resource allocation, and refine travel planning strategies to meet client expectations better and improve the overall efficiency of their business travel endeavours. Moreover, this research enriches the existing knowledge base by illuminating the intricate dynamics between client demand and trip importance in business travel contexts, providing a deeper understanding of the decision-making processes involved in such scenarios.

Based on this study, evidence has long recognised the importance of face-to-face meetings in building stronger and more meaningful connections, leading to long-term business relationships. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional meeting arrangements, leading businesses to shift from physical to virtual meetings due to travel restrictions. Even as virtual meetings have become commonplace post-pandemic, contemporary studies indicate that physical meetings continue to hold a pivotal position in nurturing business relationships (Persson et al., 2021).

According to Mago et al. (2022), while virtual meetings have several advantages, they cannot replace the real-world experience and learning associated with physical conferences. Similarly, Ross et al. (2020) concluded that virtual conferences may not entirely replace in-person meetings, but they are rapidly becoming an accepted alternative format. These views suggest that while virtual meetings are here to stay, they cannot fully replace the value of physical meetings. The study by Persson et al. (2021) has further highlighted the importance of trip importance and client demand as critical factors influencing business travel decisions, even in the post-pandemic era. The purpose of the trip and its benefits are evaluated, with the importance of the journey being a significant push factor. This is consistent with Hugoson's (2001) study, which concluded that anticipated profits drive companies' decisions on physical meetings.

Face-to-face meetings provide clients with the opportunity to interact and engage with their business partners, allowing them to develop trust and confidence in the relationship. This is especially important in transactions involving significant investments where the risks are high, and the consequences of a failed deal can be substantial. In-person meetings enable clients to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of their business partners more effectively, as well as evaluate the potential risks and benefits of the investment. This is supported by research that has shown most people prefer face-to-face interaction, as it fosters conversational confidence between meeting partners (Oviedo & Tree, 2021). Therefore, physical meetings are often seen to reduce the uncertainty and risks associated with significant investments, making them an essential aspect of business relationships.

The study highlights that physical meetings remain crucial in business relationships and continue to be important even after the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, stakeholders in the aviation, hospitality, and tourism industries should adjust their strategic plans to continue targeting business travellers in the endemic era. To do so, stakeholders must prioritize the safety of travellers by implementing health and safety protocols that mitigate the risks associated with the pandemic. By ensuring the safety of business travellers, stakeholders can encourage their return to physical meetings while mitigating the risks associated with the pandemic. In summary, the study's findings emphasize the importance of physical meetings and call for businesses and stakeholders to adapt their strategies to continue targeting business travellers in the endemic era. Despite the increasing popularity of virtual meetings, physical meetings remain an integral part of building and maintaining long-term business relationships.

The concept of the "endemic era" represents a novel paradigm shift in the way businesses approach and adapt to ongoing health challenges, implying a sustained focus on safety and risk mitigation strategies in the long term. In the current business travel landscape, notable innovations are shaping the industry's trajectory. These include the advent of hybrid meeting models that blend virtual and in-person interactions to optimize engagement and flexibility, the integration of cutting-edge technologies such as AI-driven health monitoring and virtual reality experiences to enhance safety and customer satisfaction, a heightened focus on sustainability practices reflecting an industry-wide commitment to eco-conscious operations, and the necessity for stakeholders to pivot towards adaptive business strategies that respond effectively to evolving market dynamics and consumer behaviours. These advancements underscore a transformative shift towards resilience and innovation in the business travel sector, offering a dynamic and progressive outlook on the enduring value of physical meetings in fostering robust relationships and operational success.

5.1. Remaining issues for future research

This study highlights the importance of in-person meetings for businesses and underscores the need for additional research. The relationship between client demand and the importance of the trip for businesses in the Asia Pacific region requires further exploration to understand how businesses in each country behave under different levels of COVID-19 restrictions. Conducting additional research by revisiting the survey, comparing the behaviour of each country, and conducting a comparative study between domestic and international travel would provide a more comprehensive understanding of businesses in the Asia Pacific region.

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Appendix: Survey questionnaire

1. Are you the decision maker/influencer of the corporate travel policy (formal and informal) of your organization?
 Yes / No [TERMINATE if No]

2. Does the staff of your organization travel overseas by air for business purposes?
 Yes / No [TERMINATE if No]

3. Which country is your organization located in (if there are offices in multiple countries, choose the one that you are located in)?

<input type="checkbox"/> Australia	<input type="checkbox"/> Korea
<input type="checkbox"/> China	<input type="checkbox"/> Malaysia
<input type="checkbox"/> India	<input type="checkbox"/> South Korea
<input type="checkbox"/> Indonesia	<input type="checkbox"/> Thailand
<input type="checkbox"/> Japan	<input type="checkbox"/> None of the above [TERMINATE]

4. Which of the following most closely matches your job title?

<input type="checkbox"/> Entry Level	5. How many locally based employees does your organisation have?
<input type="checkbox"/> Analyst / Associate	<input type="checkbox"/> 50 or less;
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Management	<input type="checkbox"/> 51 – 100;
<input type="checkbox"/> Senior Management	<input type="checkbox"/> 101 – 200;
	<input type="checkbox"/> 201 – 300;
	<input type="checkbox"/> More than 300

6. Which of the following industries does your organization belong to?

<input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy, banking, finance or insurance	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment and forestry
<input type="checkbox"/> Advertising, marketing, PR	<input type="checkbox"/> Events, hospitality, leisure, tourism and sport
<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture or Fishing	<input type="checkbox"/> Food and beverages, food production or restaurant
<input type="checkbox"/> Arts, cultural, entertainment and recreation	<input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare and social services
<input type="checkbox"/> Building, construction, property or real estate	<input type="checkbox"/> International trade, retail or wholesale
<input type="checkbox"/> Business, consultancy or management	<input type="checkbox"/> Law and legal services
<input type="checkbox"/> Chemical, oil or plastics	<input type="checkbox"/> Logistics, storage and transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> Computing, information technology and telecommunication	<input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing
<input type="checkbox"/> Defence, public services or administration	<input type="checkbox"/> Media
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Mining and quarrying
<input type="checkbox"/> Electronic, engineering, machinery and equipment	<input type="checkbox"/> Pharmaceutical
<input type="checkbox"/> Energy and utilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Science and technology research
	<input type="checkbox"/> Others, please specify: _____

7. What are the top three overseas destinations where your staff travels to?

Asia Pacific

- Australia
- Brunei
- Cambodia
- China
- Fiji
- Hong Kong
- India
- Indonesia
- Japan
- Malaysia
- Maldives
- Myanmar
- New Zealand
- Philippines
- Singapore
- South Korea
- Taiwan

- Thailand
- Vietnam
- Others in Asia Pacific

Middle East

- Egypt
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- United Arab Emirates
- Others in the Middle East

Europe

- Armenia
- Austria
- Belgium
- Denmark
- Finland
- France
- Greece
- Italy
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Poland
- Russian Federation
- Spain
- Switzerland
- Turkey
- United Kingdom
- Others in Europe

Africa

- Algeria
- Ethiopia
- Mauritius
- South Africa
- Others in Africa

Americas

- Argentina
- Brazil
- Canada
- Chile
- Mexico
- United States
- Others in the Americas

8. How many overseas business trips by air does your organization make in the year before COVID-19? (One overseas travel involving one staff counts as one trip; one overseas travel involving 10 staff counts as 10 trips.)

- 10 or Less;
- 11 – 20;
- 21 – 30;
- 31 – 40;
- More than 40

9. Before COVID-19, which types of business travel involving air travel does your organization engage in?

External:

- a. Business development (e.g. sales and client meetings)
- b. Account maintenance (e.g. support of existing clients and collaborating parties)
- c. Consultancy & professional services
- d. External training
- e. Conferences, trade shows, exhibitions and events

Internal

- f. Periodic internal meetings/activities/events
- g. Internal training
- h. Technical support to equipment and IT for overseas branches/offices
- i. Periodic site visits or inspections of overseas branches/offices
- j. Incentive trips
- k. Relocation to/from overseas branches
- l. Others, please specify: _____

10. Compared to pre-COVID-19, how will the volume of annual overseas business travel of your organization change in the first year of borders reopening? [Slider bar from -100% to +100%, with intervals of 10%]

11. Which travel purpose(s) are key in contributing to the changes in the total overseas business travel volume of your organization? To what extent will the overseas travel volume of the travel purpose(s) change? (Please indicate up to 3 business travel purposes) [Show only selected options from Q8, allow respondent to check up to 3 options, and adjust the slider bar from -100% to +100% with intervals of 10%]

12. To what extent would you agree with the following statements regarding the travel volume and pattern of your organization after borders reopen? [1: Strongly Agree to 5: Strongly disagree and NA: Not Applicable]

- We will avoid travelling to destinations which are deemed as COVID-risky.
- We will avoid travelling with airlines that are deemed as COVID-risky.
- We will avoid travelling to or transiting at airports that are deemed as COVID-risky.
- Our staff will travel more on business class compared to pre-COVID-19.
- Our travel group size per trip will reduce compared to pre-COVID-19.
- The duration per trip will be longer compared to pre-COVID-19.
- We will travel on non-stop flights only.
- We will encourage staff to use virtual platforms to replace overseas business trips.

13. Compared to pre-COVID-19, to what extent would you agree with the following statements regarding the corporate travel policy (formal or informal) of your organization after borders reopen? [1: Strongly agree to 5: Strongly disagree and NA: Not Applicable]

- Higher level of approval for overseas business trips will be required.
- More levels of approval for overseas business trips will be required.
- Stronger justifications will be required for seeking approval to overseas business trips.
- We will reduce our annual travel budget for overseas trips in the first year after borders reopen.
- We will increase the threshold for allowing less staff to travel on business class.
- We will tighten the maximum number of staff to be allowed to travel on the same trip.
- Vaccination will be mandatory for staff who travel overseas for business.
- We will categorize destinations according to their risk level of COVID-19.
- We will categorize airports according to their risk level of COVID-19.
- We will categorize airlines according to their risk level of COVID-19.
- We will categorize destinations according to their travel restrictions and quarantine policies.
- COVID-19 related travel insurance will be purchased for overseas business trips.
- We will allow staff to opt out of travelling overseas business trips.
- We will tighten the approval for staff who wishes to stay on for leisure purposes after completing the business assignments at respective destinations.

14. Compared to pre-COVID-19, to what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding the decisions about overseas business trips of your organization after borders reopen? [1: Strongly Disagree to 5: Strongly Agree and NA: Not Applicable]

- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms (e.g. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, etc.) as long as suitable platforms are available.
- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as virtual platforms will be able to connect people at the same level of personal touch as physical meetings.
- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as personal touch is not perceived as essential as pre-COVID-19.
- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as virtual platforms will be able to achieve the same purposes.
- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms due to lower cost.
- We will replace overseas business trips with virtual platforms as people have gotten used to communicating via virtual platforms.
- We will hire local staff in the intended overseas destinations instead of travelling there.
- We will travel on overseas business trips based on the requests from our clients or collaborating parties.
- We will reduce travel on overseas business trips if we have stable relationships with our clients or collaborating parties.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips as we anticipate our clients or collaborating parties will not feel comfortable to meet physically.
- We will travel on overseas business trips as meeting face-to-face with clients or collaborating parties is the normal practice by our competitors.
- We will travel on overseas business trips if the benefits or returns brought by the business trips are attractive enough.
- We will travel on overseas business trips if swift actions are needed at the intended destinations.
- We will travel on overseas business trips if the trip purposes are important to our organization.
- We will travel on overseas business trips if the trips are the integral parts of the traditions, culture or legacy of our organization.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the monetary expenses of quarantine.
- We will reduce the annual travel budget within one year after borders reopen.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips after borders reopen as we anticipate worsening economies relative to pre-COVID-19.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips if the associated costs of travel (e.g. airfare, hotel, etc.) increase.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips if the frequency of flights to the intended destinations decreases compared to pre-COVID-19.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips if additional travel documents are required due to COVID-19.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the quarantine requirements.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the anxieties about sudden changes to travel restrictions.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips due to the anxieties about sudden changes in quarantine policy.
- We will reduce business trips to the intended overseas destinations if non-stop flights are not available.
- We will reduce business trips to the intended overseas destinations if flights are expected to be packed.
- We will reduce overseas business trips due to the anxieties about staff being exposed to other passengers in an enclosed flight cabin.
- We will not travel on overseas business trips if reputable airlines committed to safety management measures are not available.
- We will not travel on overseas business trips if vaccination is not mandatory for all travellers.
- We will not travel to the intended overseas destinations if new COVID-19 cases at the destinations are high.
- We will not travel to the intended overseas destination if they are popular amongst travellers from countries with high number of COVID-19 cases.
- We will not travel on overseas business trips if our staff perceives travel as unsafe.
- We will reduce our overseas business trips if COVID-19 related travel insurance is not available.

We have reached the end of the survey. Thank you for your time!