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Supplier selection as ex ante governance in Vietnam–South Korea outbound tourism

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Abstract

Aim/purpose – This study develops and prioritizes a context-sensitive framework for selecting destination-based tourism suppliers in Vietnamese outbound operations to South Korea. It conceptualizes supplier selection as an ex ante governance mechanism for interpreting how tour operators screen partners and address information asymmetry, service-quality risk, and operational risk before interorganizational exchange occurs.

Design/methodology/approach – We used a sequential Delphi-AHP design. Twenty-five experts (10 outbound tour managers, eight senior outbound tour guides, and seven supplier representatives) participated in three Delphi rounds and the subsequent analytic hierarchy process (AHP). The Delphi stage elicited and refined context-relevant criteria; AHP established their relative priorities. Microsoft Excel for Microsoft 365 was used for data management, Delphi statistics, AHP weighting, and consistency assessment.

Findings – The expert-validated framework comprises 21 criteria across seven dimensions. Food and beverage received the greatest weight, followed by safety and legitimacy and accommodation and hospitality. Food safety and hygiene, compatibility with Vietnamese taste, and risk management and incident response were the highest-priority sub-criteria. The priority structure indicates that experts assigned greater relative priority to food and beverage, safety and legitimacy, and accommodation and hospitality than to cost efficiency.

Research implications/limitations – The findings support interpreting supplier selection as an ex ante governance mechanism in cross-border tourism supply chains. However, the framework reflects expert judgments in one source-destination corridor and has not yet been tested against supplier performance, tourist satisfaction, service incidents, or other operational outcomes.

Originality/value/contribution – The study connects context-specific supplier prioritization with interorganizational governance and service-dominant logic. It distinguishes the transferability of the decision architecture from the context dependence of the estimated weights and provides a transparent decision-support framework for outbound tour operators.

Keywords: Supplier selection; outbound tourism; tourism supply chain governance; Delphi; analytic hierarchy process.

JEL Classification: L14; L83; Z31.

Article type: Original article.

1. Introduction

Vietnam has become an important outbound tourism source market in South-east Asia, and South Korea is among its most established destinations. More than 511,000 Vietnamese visited South Korea in 2024, a 21.7% increase from 2023 (Vietnam News Agency [VNA], 2025). Cross-border package-tour operations in this corridor require synchronized contributions from accommodation, food, transport, attractions, and guiding services across differences in language, food practices, service routines, and operating environments. Such interdependence can magnify the operational consequences of supplier failure because tourism services are produced in real time and coordinated around time-bound itineraries (Zhang et al., 2009). The corridor therefore provides a useful setting to examine how cultural expectations and cross-border risk translate into supplier-selection priorities.

An outbound package is jointly produced by legally independent accommodation providers, restaurants, transport firms, attractions, guides, and destination-management companies. Because tourism services are intangible, perishable, and produced in real time, the tour operator cannot fully inspect service quality before consumption. A failure at one node can affect the entire itinerary and the operator's reputation (Zhang et al., 2009). Cross-border differences in language, regulation, and operating standards deepen information asymmetry and make monitoring more costly. Accordingly, this study treats supplier selection

as more than a purchasing task and conceptualizes it as an early governance decision concerning which organizations enter the service network and which capabilities, safeguards, and behavioral expectations are prioritized before exchange.

Existing supplier-selection research offers extensive multi-criteria decision-making techniques and repeatedly identifies cost, quality, reliability, safety, and sustainability as relevant attributes (Karakoç et al., 2024; Ye et al., 2024). Tourism and hospitality research similarly documents criteria relating to accommodation, food services, communication, and service interactions (Tang et al., 2024; Vasilakakis & Sdrali, 2022). Nevertheless, three limitations motivate the present study. First, generic models often treat criteria as portable across markets, giving limited attention to the culturally embedded character of tourist needs and tour operator judgments. Second, within the literature reviewed here, corridor-specific evidence on supplier selection in Vietnamese outbound operations is sparse; the tourism supplier studies identified above focus on other hospitality settings. Third, recent Delphi-AHP applications demonstrate transparent consensus and prioritization procedures (Shume & Mitikie, 2024; Ye et al., 2024), but they are primarily method-oriented rather than framed around interorganizational governance. The present study therefore uses governance theory to interpret supplier screening and context-specific criteria in cross-border coordination.

This study addresses these limitations by conceptualizing supplier selection as an *ex ante* governance mechanism. Governance refers here to the arrangements through which a focal tour operator structures interorganizational exchange, limits exposure to opportunism and service uncertainty, and coordinates independent partners. Supplier screening is *ex ante* because it operates before contracting and service delivery: unsuitable partners are excluded, while suppliers with appropriate legal, relational, cultural, and operational capabilities are admitted to the network. This interpretation does not imply that Delphi-AHP results prove governance effectiveness. Rather, it provides a theoretical explanation for why experts prioritize particular capabilities when attempting to reduce foreseeable coordination and performance risks.

The study pursues two objectives: to identify a context-relevant set of supplier-selection criteria for Vietnamese outbound tour operations to South Korea and to determine the relative importance of the resulting dimensions and criteria. These objectives are expressed in two research questions:

RQ1: What supplier-selection criteria are considered relevant for Vietnamese outbound tour operations to South Korea?

RQ2: What is the relative importance of the identified dimensions and criteria in supplier-selection decisions?

By combining a three-round Delphi process with AHP, the study makes three contributions. It develops an expert-validated, culturally embedded framework for an underexamined outbound corridor; links supplier screening to *ex ante* interorganizational governance; and separates the framework's potentially transferable architecture from the context-specific priority weights produced by the expert panel.

The remainder of the manuscript is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature; Section 3 describes the research methodology; Section 4 presents the findings; Section 5 discusses their theoretical and managerial implications; and Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Supplier selection in services and service-dominant logic

Supplier-selection research originated largely in manufacturing contexts, where price, conformance quality, delivery performance, and capacity can often be specified and monitored through observable outputs. Reviews show that conventional economic and operational criteria remain central while sustainability concerns have become increasingly prominent (Karakoç et al., 2024). Recent supplier-selection models have also emphasized explainability and transparent decision support (Abdulla & Baryannis, 2024). Transferring manufacturing-oriented scorecards directly to tourism is problematic because suppliers do not produce service value in isolation and then deliver it intact to the buyer.

Service-dominant logic (SDL) treats value as emerging through resource integration and interaction among multiple actors rather than as embedded in a finished output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Grönroos (2011) similarly emphasized interactive processes through which providers may facilitate or directly participate in customers' value creation. In tourism, hotels, restaurants, transport providers, guides, tour operators, and tourists jointly shape the realized experi-

ence. Supplier capability must therefore include not only technical service provision but also responsiveness, communication, cultural adaptation, and the ability to recover when coordination fails.

SDL explains why experiential and relational criteria matter, but it does not by itself specify how a tour operator should control entry into a cross-border service network. The governance perspective complements SDL by focusing on the mechanisms used to organize exchange and limit coordination hazards. In this study, the two perspectives performed different functions: SDL explained the co-created and context-dependent nature of tourism value. In contrast, governance theory explained why selecting capable and compatible partners before service delivery could reduce foreseeable interorganizational risks.

2.2. Tourism supply chains and interorganizational governance

Tourism supply chains are networks of interdependent organizations whose outputs must be synchronized around a time-bound itinerary (Zhang et al., 2009). Perishability, seasonality, simultaneous production and consumption, and the inability to inventory failed service encounters make recovery difficult. Cross-border operations add legal distance, language barriers, heterogeneous standards, and limited visibility of destination-based suppliers. These conditions increase both coordination requirements and the consequences of selecting an unsuitable partner.

Interorganizational governance concerns the structures and safeguards used to coordinate exchange when organizations remain legally independent. Governance may rely on contracts, monitoring, incentives, relational norms, trust, qualification rules, or combinations of these devices. Research has shown that formal and relational governance could complement rather than substitute for each other in reducing opportunism and improving relationship performance (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). Global value-chain research further emphasized that transaction complexity, codifiability, and supplier capability shape the degree and form of coordination required (Gereffi et al., 2005).

Supplier selection occupies a distinctive position in this system and can be conceptualized as an *ex ante* boundary-setting mechanism. Before contracts, monitoring, or service recovery begin, the focal firm decides which suppliers have the legitimacy, resources, routines, and adaptive capability needed to join

the network. Criteria relating to licensing, complaint history, incident response, communication, and cost transparency can function as screening safeguards. Experiential criteria, including food compatibility and cultural sensitivity, address service uncertainty that is difficult to resolve through contractual specification alone. Selection does not replace contractual or relational governance; rather, it may shape the quality and compatibility of the partners to whom those mechanisms apply.

2.3. Context-embedded criteria in tourism supplier evaluation

Sector-specific hospitality studies identify supplier criteria within particular operational settings. In Greek hotel food-and-beverage divisions, Vasilakakis and Sdrali (2022) identified six broad sets of factors related to raw materials, financing, environment, services, origin and nutrients, and people; factors associated with changing a supplier concerned service and product quality, economic-policy change, and food-quality and safety-management systems. A restaurant-focused cross-industry review by Tang et al. (2024) distilled five criteria: finance, technology, product quality, cost, and supplier service. These studies established useful sector-specific domains but did not demonstrate that their relative priorities transfer to integrated outbound-tour supplier networks or remain constant across source markets and travel corridors.

Food illustrates the importance of context. Eating during travel involves sensory evaluation, health risk, cultural identity, and familiarity. Mak et al. (2012) showed that tourist food consumption is shaped by interacting cultural, motivational, and destination factors. For group travelers, a restaurant supplier may therefore be assessed simultaneously as a meal provider, a health-risk node, and a source of cultural comfort. In the Vietnam–South Korea corridor, compatibility with Vietnamese tastes may carry an operational meaning that a generic food-quality measure cannot capture.

Cross-cultural tourism research has supported treating cultural background and nationality as context-sensitive influences rather than assuming uniform tourist responses (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Soldatenko & Backer, 2019). In the present study, frontline language capability, bilingual information, and sensitivity to Vietnamese guests are therefore examined as potential coordination safeguards; the cited cross-cultural sources have not themselves established these

attributes as supplier-selection criteria. Tourism crisis and resilience research supported attention to disruption and response capabilities in interdependent tourism systems (Erol et al., 2024; Ritchie, 2004). Alreahi et al. (2023), in a systematic review of green supply-chain management in the hotel industry, documented the complexity of stakeholder relationships and barriers to implementation. Sustainability has therefore been treated here as a relevant supplier domain whose relative priority is determined empirically rather than assumed from prior literature.

2.4. Research gap and analytical positioning

The preceding literature has revealed four connected gaps. First, supplier-selection reviews have shown the continued importance of economic and operational criteria alongside growing sustainability concerns (Karakoç et al., 2024). Second, the sector-specific studies reviewed here identified supplier-selection criteria within hotel food-and-beverage and restaurant settings, but neither developed an integrated outbound-tour governance framework spanning accommodation, food, safety, language support, flexibility, cost, and sustainability (Tang et al., 2024; Vasilakakis & Sdrali, 2022). Third, the cross-cultural sources reviewed here addressed cultural background, nationality, tourist motivation, and related behavior, but neither operationalized these differences as formal supplier-screening criteria (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Soldatenko & Backer, 2019). Fourth, the two recent Delphi-AHP applications used here demonstrated transparent consensus and prioritization procedures in contractor and supplier selection (Shume & Mitikie, 2024; Ye et al., 2024), but neither tested interorganizational-governance theory. Rather than treating this as a universal deficiency of Delphi-AHP research, the present study added a governance interpretation tailored to cross-border tourism supplier screening.

The present study used expert consensus to define a context-specific screening framework and AHP to reveal its internal priority structure. The framework was not treated as proof that selection improves performance. It was treated as an empirically grounded representation of the safeguards and service capabilities that knowledgeable actors consider important before entering or continuing cross-border supplier relationships.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

The study employed a sequential Delphi-AHP design. The Delphi stage elicited, refined, and assessed the content relevance of supplier-selection criteria. The AHP stage then translated the retained criteria into relative weights. This sequence was appropriate because the decision problem combined context-dependent expert knowledge with the need for a transparent prioritization structure. The design supported expert-based content validation and prioritization; it did not constitute external validation against realized supplier or tourist outcomes.

Data collection spanned two field periods, October-December 2025 and March-April 2026. The Delphi and AHP activities were completed by April 2026. Twenty-two experts were based in Vietnam, and three supplier-side representatives (E19, E23, and E25) were based in South Korea.

3.2. Expert recruitment and panel characteristics

Purposive expert sampling captured purchaser, service-delivery, and supplier-side knowledge. Eligibility required at least three years' Vietnam–South Korea tour-operations experience and current involvement in supplier selection, coordination, service provision, or on-site evaluation. Tour managers worked with South Korean land-tour suppliers, guides had led South Korea groups, and supplier-side representatives coordinated services for Vietnamese operators. Four supplier-side representatives were based in Vietnam, and three (E19, E23, and E25) were based in South Korea. All participants completed the Delphi rounds and AHP assessment. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and we obtained informed consent before participation. To enable repeated-round matching without collecting names or other direct identifiers, we used non-identifying participant codes on questionnaires. We did not create or retain a re-identification key linking codes E01-E25 to participants' identities. We treated individual responses confidentially and circulated only aggregate feedback between Delphi rounds. The study involved no sensitive personal data or experimental manipulation.

The panel included 10 outbound tour managers, eight outbound guides, and seven supplier-side representatives; 15 were men (60%), and 10 were women (40%). Tourism experience ranged from 4–15 years ($M = 8.1$), and corridor experience ranged from 3–8 years ($M = 4.9$). All 25 experts completed every stage (100% retention). Their complementary roles reduced dependence on a single organizational viewpoint, but the judgments should not be interpreted as direct evidence of tourist preferences.

Table 1. Characteristics of the expert panel

Expert group	n	Men	Women	Tourism experience M (range), years	Vietnam–South Korea experience M (range), years	Principal expertise represented
Outbound tour managers	10	6	4	8.5 (5–11)	5.1 (4–6)	Supplier screening, selection, and coordination
Outbound tour guides	8	4	4	10.1 (5–15)	5.3 (3–8)	Direct observation of service delivery; more than five South Korea groups each
Supplier-side representatives	7	5	2	5.1 (4–6)	4.3 (4–5)	Service provision, coordination, and adaptation for Vietnamese operators
Total/overall	25	15	10	8.1 (4–15)	4.9 (3–8)	Purchaser, operational, and supplier-side perspectives

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

3.3. Delphi procedure and decision rules

We developed a bilingual Vietnamese-English questionnaire using forward-backward translation (Brislin, 1970) to support conceptual equivalence. We administered the Delphi rounds online to preserve independent judgment and limit dominance effects. In Round 1, experts proposed criteria they considered important when selecting destination-based suppliers. Two authors independently coded the open-ended responses and grouped semantically similar statements into preliminary categories. Their coding produced 32 initial criteria, provisionally organized into seven thematic domains. Inter-coder agreement was strong (Cohen's kappa = 0.84); disagreements were resolved through discussion before the Round-2 list was finalized.

In Round 2, experts rated the relevance of the 32 criteria on a five-point relevance scale: 1 = not relevant, 2 = slightly relevant, 3 = moderately relevant, 4 = relevant, and 5 = highly relevant. We treated ratings of 4 or 5 as endorsement of relevance when calculating the item-level content validity index (I-CVI), defined as the proportion of the 25 experts selecting either category. Following the recommended benchmark of 0.78 (Shi et al., 2012), we operationalized the primary content-relevance threshold as endorsement by at least 20 of 25 experts, corresponding to the nearest attainable I-CVI of 0.80. Values for a 25-member panel occur in increments of 0.04; consequently, an observed I-CVI of 0.80, rather than 0.78, was the minimum value satisfying the content-relevance threshold. Final inclusion additionally required fit with the focal decision scope: destination-based suppliers supporting mainstream leisure outbound group tours from Vietnam to South Korea. Thus, $I-CVI \geq 0.80$ was necessary for content relevance but not sufficient for retention. We could exclude an item meeting the threshold when qualitative panel feedback indicated it fell outside this construct boundary. This scope-fit rule applied to ancillary or pre-departure services outside the focal destination-supplier relationship and to specialized MICE/event facilities outside the focal leisure group-tour context. Items below the I-CVI threshold were removed, merged with conceptually overlapping items, or revised in response to qualitative feedback. Mean relevance, standard deviation, median, interquartile range (IQR), and the percentage of ratings in the two upper relevance categories (4-5) were used as supporting evidence rather than as substitutes for the I-CVI rule.

Round 3 returned the refined, in-scope set to the same experts with aggregated feedback. For items remaining within the defined decision scope, I-CVI ≥ 0.80 was the primary item-retention criterion. We used $IQR \leq 1$ and at least 80% of experts selecting the two upper relevance categories (4 = relevant; 5 = highly relevant) as convergence indicators alongside qualitative comments rather than as automatic exclusion rules. We permitted conceptual splitting or relabeling when Round 3 feedback showed that a compound item contained managerially distinct decisions. This process yielded 21 criteria across seven dimensions. Kendall's coefficient of concordance assessed panel convergence, and S-CVI/Ave summarized scale-level content validity.

3.4. AHP procedure and analysis

All 25 Delphi participants completed the AHP pairwise comparisons. The hierarchy contained seven dimensions at the first level and 21 criteria at the second. Experts used Saaty's (2008) 1-9 scale to compare the relative importance of elements within each level. Individual judgments were aggregated element-wise using the geometric mean to form reciprocal group matrices. For reproducibility of the reported aggregate weights, priority vectors were derived from each aggregated matrix using the normalized row-geometric-mean method, $g_i = (\text{product of } a_{ij})^{(1/n)}$ and $w_i = g_i / \sum(g_i)$. We calculated local weights within dimensions and multiplied them by dimension weights to obtain global weights. Consistency was evaluated for the aggregated group matrices using $CI = (\lambda_{\max} - n) / (n - 1)$ and $CR = CI / RI$. We used Random Index values of 0.00 for $n = 2$, 0.58 for $n = 3$, 1.12 for $n = 5$, and 1.32 for $n = 7$ (Saaty, 2008), and used $CR < 0.10$ as the acceptance criterion. This study performed the consistency assessment only at the aggregated-matrix level. The retained study records do not document a separate expert-level CR screening procedure; accordingly, we do not claim that every individual expert matrix met $CR < 0.10$, and we do not report any individual judgment as excluded or revised based on an expert-level consistency threshold.

We used Microsoft Excel for Microsoft 365 for data management and analysis in both stages, including Delphi descriptive statistics and content-validity calculations, aggregation of pairwise-comparison matrices, derivation of row-geometric-mean priority vectors, calculation of local and global AHP weights, ranking, and aggregated-matrix consistency assessment ($\lambda_{\max}$, CI, and CR).

4. Research findings

4.1. Delphi results

All 25 experts completed the three rounds. Round 1 generated 32 initial criteria across seven provisional domains. Round 2 applied two sequential considerations: content relevance and fit with the focal decision scope. The spa/gym item was removed because it did not meet the I-CVI content-relevance threshold. Full-package visa and extended insurance services and MICE capacity/dedicated event facilities met the I-CVI threshold but were excluded on scope-fit grounds: panel feedback placed the former outside the core destination-supplier relationship and the latter outside the focal mainstream leisure group-tour context. Round 2 also consolidated overlapping items on taste, food quality, and food safety, and combined closely related legal-compliance, licensing, and reputation statements. These decisions reduced the list to 18 consolidated criteria. In Round 3, we split hotel quality and location into room quality and amenities and location and accessibility (net +1); split taste compatibility and food safety into two separate criteria (net +1); and added bilingual documents and signage (net +1). The three documented changes explain the increase from 18 to 21 final criteria. Supplementary Table A1 provides a complete criterion-level audit trail linking the 32 initial items to the 18-item Round-2 set and 21 final criteria.

We applied the decision rule consistently as a two-stage logic: I-CVI ≥ 0.80 served as the primary content-relevance threshold, and final inclusion also required fit with the defined supplier-selection scope. With 25 experts, the theoretical benchmark of 0.78 required endorsement by at least 20 participants and therefore corresponded to an observed I-CVI of at least 0.80. The spa/gym item, excluded in Round 2, had an I-CVI of 0.68 and did not meet the content-relevance threshold. By contrast, the visa/extended-insurance and MICE/event-facility items met the content-relevance threshold. However, we excluded them under the scope-fit consideration described in Section 3.3 and documented in Supplementary Table A1. At the final round, Kendall's W was 0.68 ($p < .001$), S-CVI/Ave was 0.91, 95% of items had IQR ≤ 1 , and every retained item received a rating of 4 or 5 from at least 80% of the panel. These results provide supporting evidence of convergence; the IQR and upper-category percentages are interpreted as supplementary indicators rather than external performance validation.

Table 2. Documented evolution of the criteria across Delphi rounds

Round-2 formulation or candidate item	Round-3 decision	Rationale documented in panel feedback	Final representation
Hotel quality and location	Split	Room attributes and geographic accessibility were treated as distinct decisions	Room quality and amenities; Location and accessibility
Taste compatibility and food safety	Split	Cultural fit and health-risk control were judged managerially distinct	Compatibility with Vietnamese taste; Food safety and hygiene
Bilingual documents and signage	Added	Repeated feedback identified a communication safeguard not captured by staff proficiency alone	Bilingual documents and signage
Spa and gym facilities	Removed in Round 2	Limited relevance to mainstream group tours; I-CVI = 0.68	Not retained
Visa/extended insurance services	Removed in Round 2	Scope-fit exclusion: ancillary/pre-departure services were outside the focal destination-supplier relationship despite meeting the I-CVI content-relevance threshold	Not retained
MICE capacity and other luxury facilities	Removed in Round 2	Scope-fit exclusion: specialized MICE/event facilities were outside the focal mainstream leisure group-tour context despite meeting the I-CVI content-relevance threshold	Not retained

Note. Table 2 summarizes the principal documented changes. Supplementary Table A1 provides the complete 32 → 18 → 21 criterion-level audit trail. Where an item-level statistic was not preserved in the retained study records, no value was retrospectively imputed.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Table 3. Final supplier-selection criteria

Group	Sub-Criteria
G1. Accommodation & hospitality (5)	G1.1 Room quality & amenities; G1.2 Location & accessibility; G1.3 Group check-in/out process; G1.4 Professionalism & friendliness of staff; G1.5 Support services (Wi-Fi, heating/AC, kettle)
G2. Food & beverage (3)	G2.1 Food safety & hygiene; G2.2 Compatibility with Vietnamese taste; G2.3 Menu diversity & portion size
G3. Safety & legitimacy (3)	G3.1 Legal compliance/licensing; G3.2 Reputation & complaint history; G3.3 Risk management & incident response
G4. Language & cultural support (3)	G4.1 Frontline staff's Vietnamese/English proficiency; G4.2 Bilingual documents/signage; G4.3 Cultural sensitivity toward Vietnamese guests
G5. Flexibility & seasonality (3)	G5.1 Flexibility in itinerary adjustments; G5.2 Alignment with seasonality (weather, opening hours); G5.3 Responsiveness to special needs (vegetarian/Halal, elderly/children)
G6. Cost efficiency (2)	G6.1 Value for money; G6.2 Cost transparency (no hidden charges)
G7. Sustainability & CSR (2)	G7.1 Environmental practices (waste reduction, energy saving); G7.2 Social responsibility (labor standards, community engagement)

Source: Authors' own calculations.

4.2. AHP dimension results

The aggregated dimension-level pairwise-comparison matrix met the $CR < 0.10$ criterion ($CR = 0.08$). Food and beverage received the highest dimension weight (0.264), followed by safety and legitimacy (0.241) and accommodation and hospitality (0.198). Together, the three leading dimensions accounted for 0.703 of the total weight.

Table 4. AHP dimension weights and rankings

Dimension	Weight	Rank
Food and beverage	0.264	1
Safety and legitimacy	0.241	2
Accommodation and hospitality	0.198	3
Language and cultural support	0.127	4
Cost efficiency	0.092	5
Flexibility and seasonality	0.049	6
Sustainability and CSR	0.029	7

Note: Overall $CR = 0.08$.

Source: Authors' own calculations.

4.3. AHP sub-criterion results

Each aggregated second-level pairwise-comparison matrix satisfied $CR < 0.10$. Food safety and hygiene received the highest global weight (0.111). Compatibility with Vietnamese taste and risk management and incident response were tied at 0.092, followed by legal compliance/licensing (0.079) and reputation and complaint history (0.070). Table 5 reports all local weights, global weights, and rankings.

Table 5. Global weights and priority rankings of supplier-selection criteria

Priority order	Sub-Criterion	Group (weight)	Local weight	Global Weight
1	Food safety & hygiene	G2 (0.264)	0.420	0.111
2 (=)	Compatibility with Vietnamese taste	G2 (0.264)	0.350	0.092
2 (=)	Risk management & incident response	G3 (0.241)	0.380	0.092
4	Legal compliance/licensing	G3 (0.241)	0.330	0.079
5	Reputation & complaint history	G3 (0.241)	0.290	0.070
6	Room quality & amenities	G1 (0.198)	0.320	0.063
7	Menu diversity & portion size	G2 (0.264)	0.230	0.061
8	Value for money	G6 (0.092)	0.610	0.056
9	Location & accessibility	G1 (0.198)	0.260	0.051
10	Frontline staff's Vietnamese/English proficiency	G4 (0.127)	0.400	0.051
11	Bilingual documents & signage	G4 (0.127)	0.320	0.041
12 (=)	Group check-in/out process	G1 (0.198)	0.180	0.036
12 (=)	Cultural sensitivity toward Vietnamese guests	G4 (0.127)	0.280	0.036
12 (=)	Cost transparency (no hidden charges)	G6 (0.092)	0.390	0.036
15	Professionalism & friendliness of staff	G1 (0.198)	0.150	0.030
16	Flexibility in itinerary adjustments	G5 (0.049)	0.420	0.021
17	Support services (Wi-Fi, heating/AC, kettle)	G1 (0.198)	0.090	0.018
18	Alignment with seasonality (weather, opening hours)	G5 (0.049)	0.340	0.017
19	Environmental practices (waste reduction, energy saving)	G7 (0.029)	0.530	0.015
20	Social responsibility (labor standards, community engagement)	G7 (0.029)	0.470	0.014
21	Responsiveness to special needs (vegetarian/Halal, elderly/children)	G5 (0.049)	0.240	0.012

Source: Authors' own calculations.

5. Discussion

5.1. Answering the research questions

RQ1 asked which criteria are relevant to supplier selection in Vietnamese outbound operations to South Korea. The Delphi process produced an expert-validated architecture of 21 criteria across seven dimensions: Accommodation and hospitality, food and beverage, safety and legitimacy, language and cultural support, flexibility and seasonality, cost efficiency, and sustainability and CSR. The architecture integrates conventional supplier attributes with culturally and operationally specific safeguards. RQ2 asked about relative importance. Food and beverage ranked first, followed by safety and legitimacy and accommodation and hospitality; food safety and hygiene, compatibility with Vietnamese tastes, and incident-response capability ranked highest globally.

5.2. From supplier ranking to *ex ante* governance

The theoretical significance of the results lies not in the ranking alone but in what the high-priority criteria are intended to govern. Licensing and complaint history screen for legitimacy and observable past behavior. Incident-response capability screens for resilience under uncertainty. Food safety reduces foreseeable health exposure, while taste compatibility and language support reduce experiential and coordination uncertainty that is difficult to specify completely in a contract. Together, these criteria define conditions of entry into the service network.

This pattern supports interpreting supplier selection as *ex ante* governance. Interorganizational governance research shows that contracts, relational norms, and trust work jointly to reduce opportunism and improve exchange performance (Cao & Lumineau, 2015; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). The present framework adds a temporally prior mechanism: before those arrangements can function, the tour operator screens whether a supplier possesses the legitimacy, capabilities, and contextual compatibility required for collaboration. Supplier selection therefore does not replace contractual or relational governance; it shapes the pool of partners those mechanisms operate on.

The findings also refine SDL's role. SDL explains why value depends on interaction and resource integration across actors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), but the results show that not all potential resource integrators are treated as equally

suitable. Tour operators use screening criteria to govern access to the value-creation network. Culturally embedded criteria are consequently not peripheral preferences: they are attempts to protect the conditions under which value co-creation can occur without avoidable health, communication, or continuity failures.

5.3. Interpreting the priority structure

Food and beverage stands out compared with supplier models that prioritize cost, delivery, or generic quality. Tourism food consumption combines health risk, sensory evaluation, familiarity, and cultural identity (Mak et al., 2012). For Vietnamese group tours, safe and culturally acceptable meals may stabilize the broader travel experience, particularly when travelers face unfamiliar service environments. This interpretation aligns with food-tourism research but extends it from tourist experience to tour operator governance: restaurant criteria become supplier safeguards rather than mere satisfaction attributes.

Safety and legitimacy ranked a close second. The importance of incident response relative to formal credentials suggests that experts distinguish legal eligibility from operational readiness. Tourism crisis research emphasizes the vulnerability of interdependent systems to disruption (Laws & Prideaux, 2006; Ritchie, 2004), while recent resilience research highlights response capabilities throughout tourism supply chains (Erol et al., 2024). Screening for response capacity is therefore a practical attempt to preserve itinerary continuity and limit reputational spillover from supplier failure.

Accommodation ranked third and appears to function as an essential platform rather than the sole source of differentiation. Room quality and location remained important, but they did not displace food safety or risk response. This ordering cautions against importing hotel-centered evaluation models into an integrated outbound-tour context. At the same time, differences between several global weights are modest. The rankings should be read as an ordered priority profile, not as evidence that similarly weighted criteria are managerially unrelated or dramatically different.

Language and cultural support and cost efficiency occupied intermediate positions, whereas flexibility and seasonality and sustainability and CSR ranked lower. Lower weight does not mean irrelevance: every retained item passed the primary expert-content threshold. Experts assigned greater relative priority to

food and beverage, safety and legitimacy, and accommodation and hospitality than to sustainability and CSR. This ordering represents a relative priority structure rather than a temporal sequence in supplier evaluation. The comparatively lower sustainability weight may reflect a stronger emphasis on immediate operational safeguards within this panel; whether this pattern corresponds to an implementation gap requires direct investigation of actual supplier-selection behavior.

5.4. Expert priorities, tourist preferences, and transferability

The priority structure reflects industry experts' judgments, not tourists' revealed preferences. Managers and guides may emphasize operational continuity, complaint prevention, and coordination burdens that travelers do not observe directly. Conversely, tourists may value experiential novelty, price, or sustainability differently. The framework should therefore be interpreted as an operator-facing governance instrument rather than a proxy measure of consumer preference.

The seven-dimension architecture may be transferable as a starting structure for other source-destination corridors because it covers recurring service, risk, relational, and sustainability concerns. The numerical weights are not automatically transferable. They reflect the Vietnam–South Korea corridor, this panel's composition, and the data-collection period. Applying the framework elsewhere requires renewed content review and local weighting, not direct adoption of the reported coefficients.

5.5. Managerial implications

Tour operators may use the framework as a staged supplier-assessment aid. They could use legitimacy, food-safety, and incident-response criteria as preliminary screening checks before applying the weighted framework to remaining candidates. However, the present study did not establish empirical pass/fail thresholds, so any minimum qualification rule would require managerial calibration and subsequent validation. Sensitivity analysis should examine similar total scores because small weight differences do not necessarily justify categorical supplier choices. Post-contract performance data should also be recorded so that expert-derived weights can later be compared with actual complaints, incidents, satisfaction, and service-recovery outcomes.

For South Korean suppliers, the findings identify concrete adaptation priorities: documented food-safety routines, menus compatible with Vietnamese group needs, clear escalation procedures, bilingual support, transparent pricing, and evidence of prior performance. For industry associations, the framework offers a basis for developing corridor-specific qualification guidelines without assuming that the reported weights are universal.

6. Conclusions

This study developed and prioritized a supplier-selection framework for Vietnamese outbound tour operations to South Korea. In response to RQ1, the Delphi process identified 21 relevant criteria across seven dimensions. In response to RQ2, AHP placed food and beverage, safety and legitimacy, and accommodation and hospitality at the top of the dimension hierarchy, with food safety and hygiene, compatibility with Vietnamese taste, and risk management and incident response leading the global criterion ranking.

The study's principal theoretical contribution is to distinguish empirical prioritization from governance interpretation. Delphi-AHP reveals which safeguards and capabilities experts prioritize; governance theory explains why screening those attributes before exchange may reduce information asymmetry, coordination failures, and operational vulnerability. Supplier selection is therefore conceptualized as an *ex ante* complement to subsequent contractual and relational governance, not merely as a technical purchasing scorecard.

The findings also qualify the transferability claim. The framework's architecture offers a structured starting point for other outbound markets. However, its weights are context-specific and should not be applied directly to other corridors without renewed expert validation and prioritization. Practically, the framework can support transparent screening and supplier-development conversations, but it should not be treated as a predictive model at its current stage.

Several limitations delimit these contributions. The panel was small by survey standards but appropriate for an expert-based Delphi-AHP design, and its judgments were concentrated in one source-destination corridor. The study did not collect tourist preference data. More importantly, the framework has not been tested against actual supplier performance, tourist satisfaction, complaints,

service incidents, recovery effectiveness, or financial outcomes. Expert consensus and AHP consistency establish content relevance and internally coherent prioritization, not external or predictive validity.

Future research should test the framework using observed supplier and tour-performance data, compare expert priorities with tourist preferences, and assess whether higher-scoring suppliers produce fewer incidents or stronger satisfaction outcomes. Replication across other Vietnamese regions and source-destination pairs would reveal which dimensions are stable and which weights are culturally or institutionally contingent. Longitudinal research could also examine whether sustainability and flexibility become more prominent as the Vietnamese outbound market matures.

In summary, the study provides an expert-grounded decision architecture for a consequential tourism corridor and a theoretically clearer interpretation of supplier selection as *ex ante* governance. Its value lies in making screening priorities transparent while defining the empirical tests still required before claims of predictive effectiveness can be made.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Hung Quoc Le – 60% (research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article).

Le Khang Chung – 40% (research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing the article, critical revision of the article).

Ethics statement

This study involved human participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained before participation. Under applicable institutional and national regulations (Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam), this type of study did not require formal ethical approval.

Data availability statement

Non-identifiable study materials supporting the reported framework, including the Delphi questionnaire and criterion-evolution audit trail, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Participant-level response files are not available for sharing; therefore, the manuscript reports only aggregate statistics supported by retained study records and participant-confidentiality requirements.

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Annex

Table A1. Criterion-level Delphi audit trail (32 → 18 → 21)

Initial criterion	Round-2 disposition/formulation	Round-2 I-CVI	Round-3 status	Final representation
A1. Room quality and core amenities	merged → hotel quality and location	≥0.80	split	G1.1. Room quality & amenities; G1.2 Location & accessibility
A2. Hotel location	merged → hotel quality and location	≥0.80	split	G1.1. Room quality & amenities; G1.2 Location & accessibility
A3. Accessibility to itinerary points/transport	merged → hotel quality and location	≥0.80	split	G1.1. Room quality & amenities; G1.2 Location & accessibility
A4. Group check-in/out process	retained → group check-in/out process	≥0.80	retained	G1.3. Group check-in/out process
A5. Staff professionalism	merged → staff professionalism and friendliness	≥0.80	retained	G1.4. Professionalism & friendliness of staff
A6. Staff friendliness	merged → staff professionalism and friendliness	≥0.80	retained	G1.4. Professionalism & friendliness of staff
A7. Support services (Wi-Fi, heating/AC, kettle)	retained	≥0.80	retained	G1.5. Support services (Wi-Fi, heating/AC, kettle)
A8. Spa/gym and luxury facilities	removed	0.68	not retained	—
F1. Food safety	merged → taste compatibility and food safety	≥0.80	split	G2.1. Food safety & hygiene; G2.2 Compatibility with Vietnamese taste
F2. Food hygiene	merged → taste compatibility and food safety	≥0.80	split	G2.1. Food safety & hygiene; G2.2 Compatibility with Vietnamese taste
F3. Compatibility with Vietnamese taste	merged → taste compatibility and food safety	≥0.80	split	G2.1. Food safety & hygiene; G2.2 Compatibility with Vietnamese taste
F4. Food quality/freshness	merged → taste compatibility and food safety	≥0.80	split	G2.1. Food safety & hygiene; G2.2 Compatibility with Vietnamese taste
F5. Menu diversity	merged → menu diversity and portion size	≥0.80	retained	G2.3. Menu diversity & portion size
F6. Adequacy of portion size	merged → menu diversity and portion size	≥0.80	retained	G2.3. Menu diversity & portion size

Table A1 cont.

Initial criterion	Round-2 disposition/formulation	Round-2 I-CVI	Round-3 status	Final representation
S1. Legal compliance	merged → legal compliance and licensing	≥0.80	retained	G3.1. Legal compliance/licensing
S2. Valid licensing/certification	merged → legal compliance and licensing	≥0.80	retained	G3.1. Legal compliance/licensing
S3. Supplier reputation	merged → reputation and complaint history	≥0.80	retained	G3.2. Reputation & complaint history
S4. Complaint history	merged → reputation and complaint history	≥0.80	retained	G3.2. Reputation & complaint history
S5. Risk management and incident response	retained	≥0.80	retained	G3.3. Risk management & incident response
L1. Frontline staff Vietnamese proficiency	merged → Vietnamese/English proficiency of frontline staff	≥0.80	retained	G4.1. Frontline staff's Vietnamese/English proficiency
L2. Frontline staff English proficiency	merged → Vietnamese/English proficiency of frontline staff	≥0.80	retained	G4.1. Frontline staff's Vietnamese/English proficiency
L3. Cultural sensitivity toward Vietnamese guests	retained	≥0.80	retained	G4.3. Cultural sensitivity toward Vietnamese guests
X1. Flexibility in itinerary adjustments	retained	≥0.80	retained	G5.1. Flexibility in itinerary adjustments
X2. Alignment with seasonal/weather conditions	merged → seasonality alignment (weather/opening hours)	≥0.80	retained	G5.2. Alignment with seasonality (weather, opening hours)
X3. Alignment with opening hours/operating periods	merged → seasonality alignment (weather/opening hours)	≥0.80	retained	G5.2. Alignment with seasonality (weather, opening hours)
X4. Responsiveness to special needs	retained	≥0.80	retained	G5.3. Responsiveness to special needs (vegetarian/Halal, elderly/children)
C1. Value for money	retained	≥0.80	retained	G6.1. Value for money
C2. Cost transparency / no hidden charges	retained	≥0.80	retained	G6.2. Cost transparency (no hidden charges)

Table A1 cont.

Initial criterion	Round-2 disposition/formulation	Round-2 I-CVI	Round-3 status	Final representation
R1. Environmental practices	retained	≥ 0.80	retained	G7.1. Environmental practices (waste reduction, energy saving)
R2. Social responsibility	retained	≥ 0.80	retained	G7.2. Social responsibility (labor standards, community engagement)
P1. Full-package visa and extended insurance services	removed – scope-fit exclusion: ancillary/pre-departure services outside the focal destination-supplier relationship	≥ 0.80	not retained (scope fit)	–
P2. MICE capacity and dedicated event facilities	removed – scope-fit exclusion: specialized MICE/event facilities outside the focal leisure group-tour context	≥ 0.80	not retained (scope fit)	–
NEW Bilingual documents/signage	not in initial 32	–	added in Round 3	G4.2. Bilingual documents/signage

Source: Authors' own elaboration.