

New dimensions of bleisure tourism – Synergies between business and leisure travel in the context of sustainable development in Hungary

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THE AIMS OF THE PAPER

Bleisure tourism, defined as the combination of business and leisure travel, is becoming an increasingly significant phenomenon within business tourism. This research explores the sustainability considerations identified through a comparative analysis of business and bleisure tourism, with particular emphasis on the role of service providers in Hungary. This study's theoretical framework is positioned at the intersection of business tourism, bleisure tourism, and sustainability and is informed by established theories on consumer decision-making, adaptive mechanisms in tourism service provision, and sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

In the preliminary phase of the study, interviews with 41 conference participants were conducted. This was followed by 46 interviews conducted with senior representatives of Hungarian hotels, event venues, as well as companies specialising in business event planning, and corporate travel management. The interviews were carried out in the first quarter of 2025.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The findings of these interviews indicate that while service providers have encountered the phenomenon of bleisure tourism, its conceptual definition remains relatively unfamiliar to them. Results show that bleisure tourism manifests across multiple dimensions, including variations in the duration of extended stays, preferences for specific leisure activities, and the customisation of package offerings by service providers. The findings highlight a dual-faceted impact on sustainability: while extending the duration of business trips may reduce travel frequency and its associated environmental footprint, sustainability strategies among service providers remain in an early stage of development, with only a low potential to reduce emissions and promote local culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research contributes to tourism studies by examining the sustainability dimensions of bleisure travel, highlighting the potential for aligning business–leisure patterns with environmental objectives. It also offers practical guidance for supply-side actors to develop sustainable business models and tailored packages that integrate bleisure principles.

Keywords: bleisure tourism, business travel, sustainability

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1. INTRODUCTION

Business tourism has faced numerous challenges over the past five years. Following the recovery period after the COVID-19 pandemic, business-related travel has generated substantial passenger traffic worldwide, evidenced by the exponential growth in such trips since 2021. Recent figures confirm the strong resurgence of business travel, with finalised data indicating that global business travel expenditure reached approximately USD 1.5 trillion in 2024, representing an 11% increase compared to the pre-pandemic peak of USD 1.3 trillion in 2019 (GlobalData 2024). Building on the previous year's recovery, these figures indicate that business travel has not only stabilised but is entering a renewed period of growth, setting new benchmarks in both activity and economic impact.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point across all sectors of tourism, including business tourism. The crises of recent years, particularly the travel restrictions implemented to curb the pandemic, underscored the pivotal role travel plays in both our professional and personal lives. Following the easing of restrictions, business tourism began to recover, as evidenced by the above data from GlobalData (2024). This growth has been bolstered by the rising popularity of trips that combine business and leisure activities. Bleisure tourism represents the convergence of business and *leisure* tourism (Lichy & McLeay 2018). According to a 2021 survey by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), the number of travellers incorporating leisure activities into their business trips has grown significantly (GBTA 2022). Among the surveyed corporate travel organisers, 82% reported that their clients showed interest in engaging in leisure activities during business trips, comparable to or even exceeding pre-pandemic levels (GBTA 2022).

Further supporting this trend, 66% of corporate travellers now mix business and leisure at least occasionally (Deloitte 2024). The global market value of bleisure tourism was estimated at USD 394 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach USD 430 billion in 2024, representing an annual growth rate of approximately 9% (Business Research Company 2025). Market forecasts anticipate a fivefold increase by 2033, potentially reaching USD 3 trillion in value (López 2023). In terms of expenditure, business travel budgets typically allocate 34% to accommodation, 27% to airfare, 20% to meals, and 19% to car hire (GBTA 2023). Sustainability has also become a growing concern: 56% of business travellers consider reducing CO₂ emissions a moderate priority, while for 21%, it is their top priority (ITILITE 2023).

While bleisure tourism is not new, its relevance has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, with business travel increasingly seen as an opportunity for unique experiences and destination exploration. Its relationship with sustainability in a post-pandemic Central and Eastern European context has received limited scholarly attention. From an environmental perspective, extending business trips for leisure can reduce the need for additional flights, fostering slower, more sustainable travel patterns and potentially lowering carbon footprints (Wicker et al. 2020). However, the extent of these benefits may be limited by structural and behavioural barriers within corporate travel policies (Müller 2023). This study addresses that gap by analysing, through qualitative demand- and supply-side perspectives, how bleisure practices in Hungary can support or conflict with sustainable tourism goals. The research has been built on the triple bottom line framework – economic, environmental, and social dimensions – as a key conceptual lens for assessing sustainability in tourism (Stoddard et al. 2012). The paper reviews the literature, outlines the methodology, presents the findings, and concludes with implications for integrating sustainability into bleisure tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Concept and characteristics of bleisure tourism

In the 21st century, business travel has evolved to include opportunities for relaxation and leisure without compromising its primary work purpose (Chung et al. 2020). According to Ezeuduji (2024), a type of this activity is referred to as “*bizcation*”, a term indicating the blending of “*business*” with “*vacation*” by incorporating more substantial, purposeful vacation-style activities into a business trip, distinguishing it from bleisure, which usually involves shorter personal downtime. Bleisure tourism often appeals to Generation Y travellers (Pinho & Marques 2021), though recent Hungarian evidence suggests that openness to bleisure is shaped less by age than by situational or institutional factors (Nick & Balogh 2024).

Boros and Keller (2023) found that Generation Z participants are highly receptive to hybrid and virtual business events, revealing potential synergies between digital formats and bleisure travel. Regardless of age, many travellers incorporate leisure elements – such as wellness, cultural, gastronomic, or sports activities – into their business trips, sometimes accompanied by a partner. These experiences can involve sightseeing, hiking, or visiting attractions, reflecting demand

for meaningful, personalised trip extensions. Yet, some business travellers adhere to a strictly work-oriented model (Dragomir et al. 2021). Nonetheless, the benefits of bleisure tourism are undeniable for business travellers, employers, and the tourism industry alike (Çulfaçlı et al. 2024).

Academic interest in bleisure has grown, though Sohaili et al. (2022) highlight that it remains under-researched, with most studies focusing on Portugal, South Korea, Turkey, and Thailand. The three main motivational categories identified are seeking knowledge and novelty; entertainment and relaxation; and escape. These findings align with Lichy and McLeay's (2018) results, while Batala and Slevitch (2024) also emphasise that travellers value learning experiences, short and well-planned leisure activities, and family-friendly options. Service providers can enhance these experiences by offering bundled packages, flexible arrangements, and partnerships with local businesses (Chung et al. 2020).

Event-related travel dominates bleisure activity, with 67% linked to conference attendance, followed by corporate meetings and sales trips (Thomas 2022). Destinations that meet both business and leisure needs generate higher engagement (Madeira et al. 2023). Several researchers note the rise of blurred travel, merging leisure, business, and work mobility (Bréchemier et al. 2021, Muller 2022, Tran 2022).

2.2. Sustainability dimensions of bleisure tourism

Bleisure tourism's relationship with sustainable tourism is still largely unexplored, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. This is notable given that bleisure can both support and challenge sustainability goals. By extending business trips to include personal time, travellers may reduce their overall carbon footprint compared to taking separate business and leisure trips (Routespring 2024). At the same time, increased leisure activities may raise local environmental pressures, requiring careful destination management. Hungarian evidence from Formádi et al. (2021) shows that even under pandemic conditions, event organisers integrated sustainability-oriented adaptations into their services, offering transferable models for the development of event management. Nemes and Happ (2023) further highlight that sustainability criteria are increasingly embedded in Hungarian tourism development programmes, creating a policy framework supportive of responsible bleisure integration. Sustainable bleisure development calls for collaboration between destinations, service providers, and small and medium-sized enterprises

(SMEs) to design authentic, low-impact packages that meet market demand while advancing local cultural and environmental sustainability.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the overall methodological framework guiding our investigation of bleisure tourism practices and sustainability in Hungary. We formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How do business travellers and service providers in Hungary differ in their practices and perceptions of bleisure tourism?

RQ2: What are the sustainability implications of the identified differences between demand- and supply-side perspectives on bleisure tourism?

To investigate bleisure tourism from both traveller and service provider perspectives, we adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are well-suited to exploring underlying motivations, interpretations and perceptions, offering in-depth insights into participants' experiences and viewpoints (Draper 2004). Specifically, semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed, allowing for a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to enable participants to express their thoughts freely in their own terms (King 1994). Such an approach is widely recommended for organisational and tourism research when the goal is to uncover how individuals make sense of a phenomenon (Longhurst 2016).

The study comprised two data collection phases: the first focused on conference attendees, and the second involved service providers. These two sets of stakeholders were selected to capture both the demand and supply sides of bleisure tourism.

3.1. Phase 1 – Conference attendees from the demand side

The first data collection phase drew on interview material from the first author's doctoral dissertation (Boros 2024), which examined the decision-making processes of academic conference participants, including aspects related to bleisure. Between 2018 and 2023, a total of 41 interviews using purposive and snowball sampling methods were conducted with researchers, keynote speakers, and industry professionals who had attended at least one in-person international academic conference in the past five years and incorporated, or considered leisure elements. Travel frequency ranged from one to over six annual trips. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged. Interviews lasted about one hour, were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised (from [D01] to [D41]). For this study, the dataset was re-analysed through

a sustainability and supply-demand lens, retaining only relevant segments and recoding them to match the current analytical framework.

3.2. Phase 2 – Service providers from the supply side

The second phase of data collection in this study focused on service providers in the business tourism sector. Between late 2024 and early 2025, a total of 46 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of three key segments: hotels with business/conference facilities, event venues and conference centres, and business travel organisers (e.g., Professional Congress Organisers (PCOs), Destination Management Companies (DMCs), and corporate travel management firms). Participants, including general managers, event coordinators, sales directors, and travel consultants, were purposively selected for their decision-making roles, or direct client involvement. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, when no new themes emerged. This diverse sample provided insights across sub-sectors of Hungary's post-pandemic business tourism industry (Madeira et al. 2023). Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised (from [S01] to [S46]).

3.3. Data analysis

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review body. Participation in both phases of research was voluntary and based on informed consent. All interviewees were assured anonymity and could withdraw at any time. Due to the non-sensitive nature of the research topic and the professional profile of the participants, ethical risks were minimal. Data were stored securely, and no identifying information was linked to quotations or findings. All interview transcripts and coding files were stored on a secure, password-protected institutional server, accessible only to the research team. Backup copies were encrypted and kept on an external drive to prevent data loss.

Data analysis employed a qualitative thematic content analysis approach using NVivo software. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were applied. Deductive codes were based on existing literature (e.g., bleisure motivations, sustainability considerations, barriers to adoption), while inductive coding allowed new patterns to emerge from the data. The two datasets (conference participants and service providers) were analysed separately to identify intra-group themes and then were compared so that we can explore cross-cutting and diverging perspectives.

The trustworthiness of the research was supported by clear documentation of coding decisions, consistency in the analytical process, member checking (sharing key findings with selected interviewees for confirmation), peer debriefing (consultation with academic colleagues experienced in qualitative tourism research), and researcher reflexivity throughout coding and interpretation.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In this section, we present the key findings of our qualitative analyses and discuss the implications they offer for bleisure tourism practices and sustainability in Hungary.

4.1. Conference attendees' perspectives

Evidence derived from interviews conducted for a doctoral dissertation (Boros 2024) provide a basis for concluding that bleisure tourism is widely practised among academic conference attendees, even if the term itself is not commonly known. *"Conferences have a certain excursion-like aspect, where you feel that you are not exactly on holiday, but you are still breaking out of your routine a little, and you can focus on both work and personal matter."* [D07] This framing of bleisure as a primarily business-driven experience with integrated leisure components aligns with the definitions outlined by Lichy and McLeay (2018) and Pinho and Marques (2021), who describe bleisure as a hybrid form of travel where professional obligations are combined with opportunities for personal enrichment. Although the practice is widespread, its environmental and sustainability implications were rarely articulated explicitly by participants, suggesting that awareness of such potential benefits remains low in the demand side.

Institutional support plays a crucial role in enabling such travel practices. As Çulfacı et al. (2024) argue, the availability of financial resources often shapes the feasibility of bleisure extensions. This was clearly reflected in the interviews, where participants mentioned receiving partial funding for transport, registration fees, and lower-cost accommodation. *"Support usually involves covering the registration fee if there is one, and they subsidise accommodation below a certain quality level. For instance, they support an apartment but not a hotel. Travel costs are also covered. However, additional expenses such as full-board catering, meals, and leisure programmes are not funded by the university."* [D16]

"In Montréal, for example, they paid for the flight ticket, waived the registration fee, and covered

one or two nights of accommodation. I added three or four extra nights at my own expense, but it was at a hostel that was absolutely decent.” [D09]

Nevertheless, participants often identified administrative bureaucracy as a deterrent. *“Taking leave is not the issue because academic leave is more than sufficient. The problem is that when you prepare the necessary permits, you must justify in detail why you want to stay longer, and that makes it cumbersome.” [D15]* This challenge corresponds with the findings of Madeira et al. (2023), who emphasised the structural frictions that limit flexibility in institutional travel frameworks.

The destination’s attractiveness emerged as another key motivator, as shown in research by Chung et al. (2020) and López (2023), who emphasise the significance of place in travel decision-making. Several participants expressed a strong preference for locations with cultural, climatic, or leisure appeal. *“As I gain more professional experience, the location becomes increasingly important. I mean, I prefer an exotic, sunny destination where I can mix business with pleasure.” [D28]* For many, it was not only about adding leisure days but also about maximising the travel experience within the broader context of the destination.

This desire to explore was also shaped by the perception of what constitutes responsible participation. *“Whenever we travelled abroad, we always tried to spend at least an extra day or two if we were already there. For me, it was an expectation that I would participate in the conference and not just give my presentation and then spend three days sightseeing while the conference was still ongoing.” [D28]* Such reflections indicate a deliberate balance between fulfilling professional duties and seeking personal enrichment.

Conference organisers increasingly play a role in facilitating this balance. As noted by Sohaili et al. (2022), structured leisure components within events enhance the experiential value of travel. *“These programmes allow you to discover the cultural and gastronomic aspects of the destination, and their experiential and unique qualities are incredibly important.” [D01]* This view reinforces the growing emphasis on cultural immersion and destination uniqueness as core components of bleisure tourism.

Importantly, the personalisation of bleisure travel also extends to the involvement of family members. Several participants described travelling with relatives or planning trips around shared experiences. As Batala and Slevitch (2024) note, the inclusion of family-friendly elements is becoming an increasingly relevant feature in the evolving landscape of business travel. These practices reflect broader shifts in traveller priorities, particularly in

the post-pandemic era. Recent evidence shows that Hungarian travellers’ destination choices and leisure extensions evolved considerably during and after COVID-19, with shifts toward flexibility, safety, and sustainable options (Behringer et al. 2023). Flexibility, well-being, and meaningful engagement are gaining prominence over rigid itineraries and single-purpose travel (Ezeuduji 2024, Muller 2022).

In summary, the interviews indicate that bleisure tourism is not only widespread among conference attendees but also perceived as both professionally valuable and personally meaningful. While institutional and administrative factors shape the extent to which leisure can be integrated, the destination’s appeal and the traveller’s intention to derive deeper experiences are decisive. These findings reaffirm that bleisure tourism represents a dynamic response to shifting expectations within academic and professional mobility. While extending trips can theoretically reduce flight frequency and support slower, more sustainable travel patterns, such outcomes were incidental rather than deliberately planned by travellers.

4.2. Service providers’ perspectives

The qualitative interviews with service providers operating in the tourism and events sectors revealed a nuanced and evolving understanding of bleisure tourism. Although most respondents were familiar with the practice of combining business and leisure travel, the term “bleisure” itself remained largely unknown. As one hotel representative explained, *“I know the phenomenon, but not the term itself.” [S35]* *“I might know it, I just haven’t heard it referred to like that.” [S11]*

This lack of shared terminology has practical consequences: without a clear label for the segment, providers may overlook opportunities to design targeted packages, optimise marketing messages, or collect relevant performance data. This discrepancy reflects findings in recent literature, which note that terminology often lags behind practice in the adoption of hybrid tourism concepts (Lichy & McLeay 2018, Pinho & Marques 2021). Service providers reported that bleisure extensions typically last between one and two days, but may extend into full weekends, especially when family members accompany the traveller. This was exemplified by one respondent who noted: *“If the weekend falls in between, then it is typical that they plan it that way and stay for the whole weekend.” [S6]* The presence of leisure companions and extended stays underlines the growing importance of destination appeal, a factor well-documented in earlier studies on travel motivation (Madeira et al. 2023). In terms of preferred activities, providers frequently mentioned

sightseeing, cultural events, and gastronomy. “I think sightseeing is attractive for them, and definitely the cultural line, maybe a sports event or a concert” [S28], one interviewee remarked, while another pointed out that “Budapest is ideal, not just for sightseeing, but also for gastronomy and thermal spas.” [S33] Most sustainability measures mentioned—such as green accommodation preferences or local experience bundles—were exceptions rather than widespread practice and often emerged from marketing considerations rather than environmental commitments. These responses support the notion that bleisure travellers seek meaningful, experience-based value that goes beyond traditional business accommodation (Chung et al. 2020).

When discussing sustainability, providers showed an awareness of global trends but acknowledged that their own practices were still developing. “If guest expectations reach the point where they want to live sustainably and act for the environment, then it will be able to function. And we must meet the needs of our guests” [S10], one respondent stated, capturing the reactive nature of current strategies. While some firms have introduced basic sustainability guidelines, such as green accommodation preferences, these remain isolated cases rather than industry norms (ITILITE 2023).

Several providers recognised that bleisure can support sustainability through extended stays and fewer additional flights yet noted risks of higher resource use without proper management. Current offers—such as discounted extra nights, digital guides, and local experience bundles—are often marketing-driven rather than rooted in environmental commitment. Providers’ approaches can be grouped into four main categories: (1) accommodation and logistical flexibility, (2) integrated leisure packages, (3) sustainability-oriented initiatives, and (4) marketing and communication strategies.

While these can help reduce emissions, stimulate local economies, and foster cultural engagement, most respondents acknowledged that sustainability efforts are still at an early stage, with potential to align bleisure with sustainable tourism through extended, slower travel and fewer flights (Batala & Slevitch 2024, Ezeudji 2024). However, policies, partnerships, and strategic commitment remain underdeveloped, and the approach is largely reactive to guest expectations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Bleisure tourism—the blending of business and leisure travel—has become a defining feature of the post-COVID era, and this study examined its

practice and sustainability implications in Hungary. Using a dual-perspective and mixed-methods approach, we analysed interviews with 41 academic conference attendees and 46 service providers in hotels, event venues, travel agencies, as well as conference organisers.

On the demand side, travellers extended business trips to save time and costs while gaining personal benefits such as cultural enrichment, relaxation, and family time. Employer support and simplified planning enhanced satisfaction, while bureaucratic procedures and rigid itineraries remained key barriers. On the supply side, Hungarian providers are increasingly aware of the bleisure trend, offering flexible check-in/out, curated excursions, and combined co-working-leisure options. However, sustainability integration—such as green transport partnerships or carbon-offset schemes—is still limited, with most initiatives in pilot stages.

Environmentally, extended stays can reduce the need for additional flights, though rebound effects may occur if they lead to more frequent leisure trips. Economically, longer visits diversify revenue streams and support SMEs; socially, they foster work-life balance and well-being but may contribute to overtourism without careful management. Similar trends are observed internationally – for example, in cities like Berlin and Singapore – where coordinated destination marketing, SME partnerships, and sustainable transport options are increasingly embedded in bleisure strategies, offering a benchmark for development in Hungary.

To realise bleisure tourism’s potential responsibly, employers should streamline approvals for eco-conscious extensions, providers should embed sustainability standards into offers, and policymakers should incentivise off-peak travel and community-based tourism. Ethical considerations also warrant attention, particularly regarding the use of publicly funded business trips for private leisure. Transparent policies and clear boundaries can mitigate reputational risks while supporting legitimate and sustainable extensions.

While the Hungarian conference context offers valuable insights, the non-representative sample, the time gap between data phases, and the qualitative focus limit generalisability. Future research should use larger, multi-industry samples, assess the long-term impact of remote work, and conduct detailed carbon footprint analyses. Overall, bleisure tourism reflects shifting traveller values and offers a pathway toward more integrated, rewarding, and sustainable business travel, provided that economic benefits are aligned with environmental responsibility and social well-being.

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