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Airline Marketing in the Time of a Pandemic: Examining the Variables Affecting the Booking Intent of Philippine Airlines Passengers

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Abstract

COVID-19 changed the dynamics of the travel industry, causing a sharp decline in demand. This paper intends to identify the factors influencing Philippine Airlines' booking intention in Metro Manila amidst the pandemic. It adopts an Extended Theory of Planned Behavior, incorporating the impact of safety perception and refund credibility towards Theory of Planned Behavior variables, specifically Attitude towards Behavior (ATB), Subjective Norms (SN), and Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC). It also extends to evaluating the impact of Brand Credibility in driving the booking intention of the consumers. This paper used a quantitative research design with the survey as the critical measurement tool. Path model coefficients, identified using SmartPLS 3.0, were used to confirm the hypothesized direct effects in the model. Findings affirm the positive effect of safety perception on all TPB constructs. Refund credibility, on the other hand, only predicts SN and PBC. It also presents the positive influence of all Theory of Planned Behavior variables on Brand Credibility. Finally, only brand credibility is found to influence booking intention significantly. The results of this study thus present valuable insights for the airline industry to consider. It poses an opportunity for airline marketers to regard the heavy influence of safety perception, refund the credibility of this pandemic, and manage the value of social groups and resources to brand perception. More importantly, this study presents the significant role of Brand Credibility in driving booking intention amid the pandemic, presenting a positive outlook for the overall airline industry to recover from the financial impact of COVID-19. Future studies may use a cross-airline analysis or cross-country analysis to broaden the perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the booking intention of travelers.

Keywords: *Airline Marketing, COVID-19, TPB, Safety Perception, Booking Intent*

Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 changed the dynamics of the travel industry at large. Ernst & Young Global Limited (2020) reported that the pandemic led to a shift in the 'urban landscape,' primarily driven by the rise of remote work. This spatial shift led to changes in the socio-cultural lifestyle of Filipinos, taking away travel as a recreational activity.

The pandemic also paved the way for the rise of *the new normal — "a strange situation that has become the standard, usual, or expected"* (Lexico, 2021). Contextualizing this in the Philippine market, Tanhueco-Tumapon (2020) reported that the *new normal* refers to lockdowns,

wearing of masks, handwashing, physical distancing, and the immense technological need. This lifestyle shift altered the passenger's daily lifestyle, affecting the travel sector.

Euromonitor (2020) reported that the COVID-19 impact in the Philippines registered a 44.8% sales decline in the travel industry year-on-year, manifesting across all transport types. Moreover, the report included the 52% reduction in total leisure outbound trips taken year-on-year.

Particularly in the Philippine market, Euromonitor (n.d.) reports that Philippine Airlines stands as the market leader in the airline industry, comprising 30.9% of the total brand shares. It has also been the national flag carrier for 80 years now, becoming Asia's oldest airline (Manila Bulletin, 2021). However, it is worth noting that PAL has been in a series of financial downturns since the 2009 global recession (Philippine Airlines, 2021) and has been severely affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with a -4.33% brand share impact year on year. This resonates with the financial impact experienced by the entire airline industry, even on a global scale.

However, Euromonitor (2020) projected a positive disposable income spending for the Filipino ABC market in the next five years. In the next four years, the forecasted travel flow in local and global contexts remains positive year on year (Euromonitor, 2020). This research aims to address these opportunities and identify the variables that influence passenger's booking intention amid the pandemic, piloting with the Philippine Airlines flyers.

Framework

In order to identify the variables influencing a passenger's booking intention, this paper will be extending Azjen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior which essentially details the motivational factors building an individual's intention to perform a behavior. Fitting this in the context of a pandemic, safety perception, and refund credibility were added as antecedents modulating the Theory of Planned Behavior variables. Furthermore, brand credibility was added as a modulating variable to booking intention.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Azjen (1991) argued in his Theory of Planned Behavior (TBP) that behavioral intent is determined by three factors: attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This theory stresses the notion that behavioral intent is directly proportional to the performance of the behavior, provided that the individual has a favorable appraisal towards the behavior, is supported by his/her social circle, and has the resources to do so.

Theory of Planned Behavior has been used as a consistent theoretical framework in passenger behavior studies (Al-Swidi et al., 2014; Erul et al., 2020). As expected, the Theory of Planned Behavior was used to determine the predictors influencing a passenger's booking intent in the context of the Airline Industry. Several pieces of literature affirmed the effectiveness of the identified Theory of Planned Behavior constructs in influencing booking intent (Tsai, 2010; Buaphiban and Truong, 2017; Ong & Tan, 2010; Sung et al., 2021).

However, the use of the Theory of Planned Behavior contextualized in the time of a pandemic remains sparse. In the Philippines, most literature produced in this pandemic only focused on overall preventive measures and Filipino's perception of the COVID-19 impact (Praseyo et al., 2020).

Only a few pieces of literature started exploring the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework in the travel industry in a global context. Bae & Chang (2021) used this in combination with the Health Belief Model in investigating the surge of *'untact'* tourism in Korea after the COVID-19 outbreak. This research classified risk perception into affective and cognitive, influencing attitude and subjective norms, respectively. Meanwhile, Sánchez-Cañizares et al. (2021) used the Theory of Planned Behavior to analyze the impact of risk perception in modulating traveling intent and the willingness of Spanish passengers to pay more for additional safety measures. Meanwhile, Li & Coca-Stefaniak (2021) used this theory in evaluating the planned changes of Chinese travelers in the post-pandemic era. Research findings present the significant relationship of the perceived impact of the pandemic in its current state. As well as the post-pandemic traveling intention, arguing that the *'crisis-sensitive tourists'* tend to shorten their planned post-pandemic holidays, while *'crisis-resistant tourists*,' mostly living independently and with a higher level of education, refused to alter their post-pandemic travel plans. More importantly, this research also observed a sharp decline in passengers' intention to use public transportation, posing a massive threat for the Airline Industry. Thus, this pandemic is poised to alleviate its perceived impact on the global airline industry by assessing the predictors to the passenger's booking intention.

Inclusion of New Constructs

Safety Perception

Several studies explored safety perception as a priori in boosting the destination-based tourism industry (Neumayer, 2004; Brown & Osman, 2017). Tasci & Boylu (2009) argued that one's sense of safety influences a traveler's behavior in terms of decision-making, destination choice, quality experience, satisfaction, enjoyment, loyalty, and word-of-mouth. Previous literature relates safety to security from political turmoil affecting their trip to the desired destination (Tasci & Boylu, 2009), safety drawn from the positive influence of familiarity (Prentice, 2004), or safety perception anchored on the influence of gender towards travel destination experiences (Brown & Osman, 2017). In order to address the research gap in exploring the *new normal*, this study is set to contextualize the impact of COVID-19 on safety perception.

It has been suggested that safety perception influences behavioral intent. Mansfeld & Pizam (2006) argued that travel plans would be adjusted accordingly when safety perception is not acceptable for tourists. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2005) argued that perceived risk modulates the international tourism intentions of travelers. Following the Theory of Planned Behavior as a theoretical basis for predicting booking intention, the three key constructs influencing behavioral intent shall be applied. As such, safety perception stands as a preceding antecedent attitude towards a booking and subjective norm, specifically leading to the following hypotheses:

H1: Passenger's perception towards safety positively influences their attitude towards booking a flight.
H2: The perceived safety perception of the passenger's referents affects one's booking intent.
H3: Passengers' perception towards safety positively influences passenger's PBC.

Refund Credibility

With limited movement and travel restrictions in place, the airline industry has suffered from a series of flight cancellations since the beginning of the pandemic outbreak last March 2020. Philippine Airlines reported a total of 60,00 pandemic-related flight cancellations that affected 1.3 Million passengers and tallied at over PHP 15.9 Billion refund value (Mercurio, 2020).

As the pandemic paved the way to an influx in digital consumption, previous refund experience became easily shareable across various digital platforms, mainly observed in social media. For repeat customers, the quality of refund service positively impacts customer satisfaction and succeeding behavioral intent (Mollenkopf et al., 2007). After all, a passenger's previous experience directly influences their risk-reduction needs (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011).

Furthermore, the past experiences of previous customers build potential electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages, which in turn may affect the purchase intention of other passengers (Park et al., 2007). The antecedent of this purchase intent was later identified by Wu & Wang (2011), pointing to eWOM message as a regulator of brand attitude leading to purchase intent. Several kinds of literature have supported this on the pre-purchase perceptions of new passengers via exploring the positive influence of perceived quality to signal credibility (Price 2002; Baek & King 2011; Wu, 2013).

H4: The airline's refund credibility moderates a passenger's attitude towards booking a flight.
H5: The perceived opinion of the passenger's referents towards an airline's refund credibility moderates a passenger's succeeding purchase intent.
H6: The airline's credibility to refund moderates a passenger's Perceived Behavioral Control.

Brand Credibility

Erdem et al. (2002) identify brand credibility as a critical area of research for passenger behavior as it influences passenger's succeeding brand consideration. Albeit critical to passenger behavior research, only a few kinds of literature explore credibility that identifies the brand as its source. Erdem & Swait (2004) discovered that brand credibility positively increases the likelihood of passengers to include the brand in their consideration set. It has been further expanded by Kao, Wang, & Farquhar (2020) in the airline management field, hypothesizing the beneficial link between brand credibility and purchase intention. Although research results partially supported this, it was not statistically significant. However, this research emphasized the role of brand credibility in influencing purchase intention, specifically true to established brands with already strong credibility and attitude towards an airline brand. Hence, it is hypothesized that the positive brand credibility of Philippine Airlines beneficially impacts the booking intention of passengers.

H7: The attitude towards booking a flight significantly influences a brand's credibility.
H8: The perceived opinion of a passenger's referents towards a brand's credibility moderates his/her booking intent.
H9: Passenger's Perceived Behavioral Control influences brand credibility
H10: Brand credibility of Philippine airlines positively influences flyer's intent to book flights.

Theory of Planned Behavior Constructs

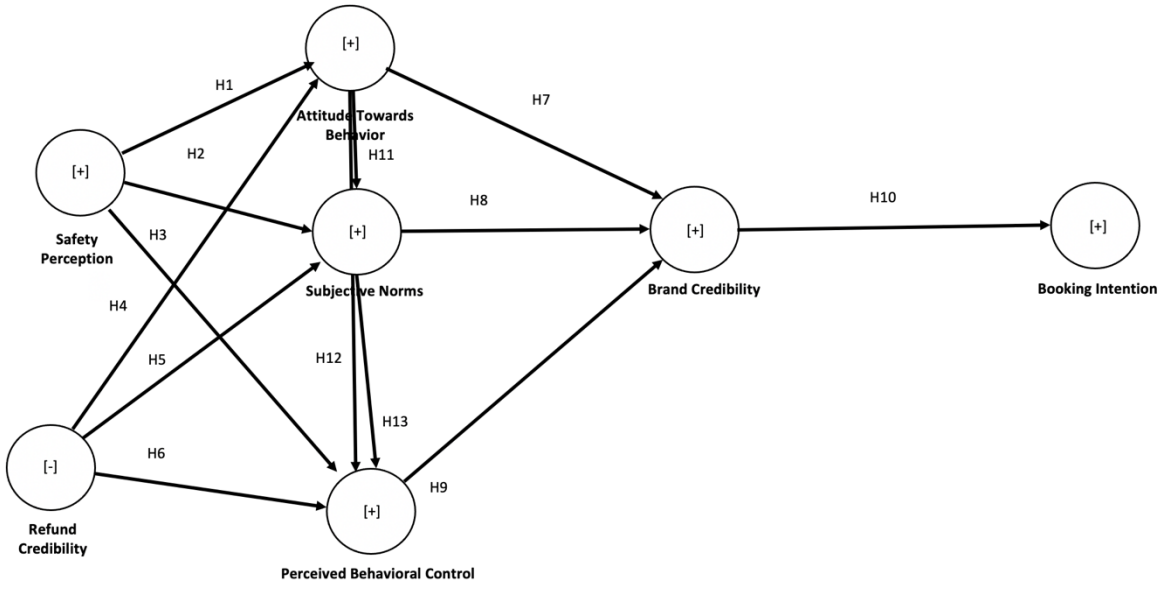
Following Theory of Planned Behavior as its theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are made echoing the earlier research of Azjen (1991):

H11: Attitude Towards Behavior has a positive effect on Subjective Norms.
H12: Attitude Towards Behavior beneficially impacts Perceived Behavioral Control.
H13: Subjective Norms significantly affect Perceived Behavioral Control.

Conceptual Framework

Integrating all the variables mentioned, Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework used for this research.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Methodology

Instrument

This research used a quantitative research design, obtaining primary data from an online survey questionnaire. The online survey was divided into four key sections: a. demographics, b.

close-ended questions that measure the identified variables through a 7-Point Likert Scale, where 7 signifies a positive response (Strongly Agree) and 1 signifies a negative response (Strongly Disagree), c. media consumption habits, d. descriptive questions to substantiate their travel intention and flight considerations. A pre-test with 50 samples was conducted to ensure the questionnaire is fitted for this research and verify the comprehensibility of each question and measure the response latency of the questionnaire. Revisions were done after the pilot testing to improve the questions further.

Participants

The online survey was distributed to 407 respondents from Metro Manila. Convenience sampling was used. Of the total respondents, 60.6% were females and a mean age of 28 years old. They belong to the upper-middle class with a monthly household income range from PHP 100,000 to PHP 249,000.

Data Analysis

To test the conceptual model, SmartPLS 3.0 was used to do path analysis. Following its margin of error, significance is reported at $p < .05$ level.

Discussion of Results

The study aimed to identify the factors influencing passengers' booking intent with Philippine Airlines during this pandemic. Hence, the study applied an experimental research design integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior constructs with the current issues faced by the airline industry in the pandemic, such as safety perception and refund credibility. As this study focuses on Philippine Airlines exclusively, brand credibility was integrated into the model as a regulating variable to the passenger's booking intent.

In order to test the reliability and validity of this model, Cronbach's alpha was identified. Following Hair et al. (2014), Cronbach's alpha value should at least yield 0.70 to confirm validity. Table 1 thus presents the internal consistency and reliability of the model as it has exceeded the set target of Cronbach's Alpha at > 0.70 (Hair et al., 2014), and the indicator loading values at ≥0.50 (Kock, 2015).

Table 1

Construct Reliability, Validity, and Loadings

	ATB	BC	PBC	BI	RC	SP	SN	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
ATB1	0.91							0.91	0.92	0.94	0.78
ATB2	0.91										
ATB3	0.83										
ATB4	0.87										
BC1		0.92						0.94	0.94	0.96	0.84
BC2		0.91									
BC3		0.93									
BC4		0.92									
PBC1			0.91					0.85	0.89	0.92	0.74
PBC2			0.92								
PBC3			0.81								
PBC4			0.82								
BI1				0.97				0.94	0.94	0.97	0.94
BI2				0.97							
RC1					0.91			0.87	0.92	0.92	0.79
RC2					0.92						
RC3					0.84						
SP1						0.95		0.94	0.94	0.96	0.89
SP2						0.95					
SP3						0.93					
SN1							0.94	0.96	0.96	0.97	0.88
SN2							0.94				
SN3							0.95				
SN4							0.94				

Table 2:
Discriminant Validity Using Fornell-Larcker criterion

	ATB	BI	BC	PBC	RC	SP	SN
ATB	**0.88**						
BI	-0.54	**0.97**					
BC	-0.33	0.56	**0.91**				
PBC	-0.71	0.61	0.56	**0.86**			
RC	-0.47	0.60	0.76	0.60	**0.89**		
SP	-0.71	0.56	0.52	0.77	0.64	**0.95**	
SN	-0.74	0.62	0.51	0.80	0.63	0.84	**0.94**

Meanwhile, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess discriminant validity. Hair et al. (2014) noted that the value of the square root of each construct's average variance should be greater than the correlations with other latent constructs. Thus, table 2 shows that the constructs present in the model are indeed distinct from each other.

In order to determine the predictive relevance of the constructs, a blindfolding procedure was conducted. Cross-Validated Redundancy (Q^2) measures the latent constructs present in the model, thus posing a significant role in this research. Following Hair et al. (2017), the value of Q^2 greater than 0 confirms its predictive relevance. Thus, Table 3 presents that brand credibility, PBC, Purchase Intent, and Subjective Norm all pose a predictive significance, with Subjective Norm yielding the highest Q^2 at 0.67, followed by PBC at 0.50. Similarly, the table also presents the substantial and moderate R squares (R^2) of the same constructs (Cohen, 1988).

Table 3:
Explained Variance and Cross-Validated Redundancy

	R Square	Q^2
Attitude Towards Behavior	0.50	0.38
Brand Credibility	0.34	0.29
PBC	0.57	0.50
Booking Intent	0.33	0.31
Subjective Norm	0.77	0.67

Standard Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was also analyzed. The conceptual model rendered 0.05 SRMR, confirming its validity as <0.10 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). Similarly, Normed Fit Index (NFI) analysis was measured, expecting values around 0 to 1. NFI computation likewise confirms its acceptability with a 0.84 value, drawing nearer to 1.

Path model coefficients, identified using SmartPLS 3.0, were used in hypothesis testing. Path analytic models partially supported the hypotheses presented in the conceptual framework. Safety perception was a significant predictor of all TPB Variables, namely Attitude Towards Behavior, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control. Refund credibility, on the other hand, only modulates Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioral Control. Finally, brand credibility positively influenced all Theory of Planned Behavior variables and is unveiled to influence booking intention significantly.

Table 4
Hypothesis Testing

	Path Coefficient	p Value	Expected Coefficient	Results
H1: Safety Perception -> ATB	-0.69	0.000	+	Supported*
H2: Safety Perception -> SN	0.53	0.00	+	Supported*
H3: Safety Perception -> PBC	0.22	0.00	+	Supported*
H4: Refund Credibility -> ATB	-0.03	0.58	-	Not supported
H5: Refund Credibility -> PBC	0.10	0.02	-	Supported*
H6: Refund Credibility -> Subjective Norm	0.17	0.00	-	Supported*
H7: ATB -> Brand Credibility	0.21	0.00	+	Supported*
H8: SN -> Brand Credibility	0.27	0.00	+	Supported*
H9: PBC -> Brand Credibility	0.49	0.00	+	Supported*
H10: Brand Credibility -> Booking Intent	0.37	0.00	+	Supported*
H11: ATB -> SN	-0.29	0.00	+	Supported*
H12: ATB-> PBC	-0.19	0.00	+	Supported*
H13: SN -> PBC	0.42	0.00	+	Supported*

TPB in the Time of a Pandemic

As expected, research results confirm the relationship among Theory of Planned Behavior variables with the positive influence of Attitude towards Behavior to Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioral Control and Subjective Norms to Perceived Behavioral Control. The use of the Theory of Planned Behavior in the context of pandemic remains relevant, consistent with the results from Prasetyo et al. (2020), Li & Coca-Stefaniak (2021), and Liu et al. (2021).

The essence of Safety Perception in the Time of a Pandemic

The conceptual model of this study exhibits a ruminative and deliberative explanation of passenger behavior in the airline industry during this pandemic, illustrating safety perception as a regulating construct in passengers' booking intent. It coincides with Cheng et al.'s (2005) finding that perceived risk shapes one is traveling intent. Even with recent literature, this study is aligned with the results from Sánchez-Cañizares et al. (2021) in the influence of safety perception on booking intention. Similarly, it is also consistent with Sotomayor-Castillo et al.'s (2020) research,

where frequent flyers exhibited a significant level of concern over safety perception in traveling by air during this pandemic. Such results may be attributed to the position of several researchers suggesting that traveling by air has been the root cause of COVID-19 transmission (Choi et al., 2020; Pavli et al., 2020; Khanh et al., 2020).

Results thus present passenger's safety perception is significant in the time of a pandemic. This finding also affirms the recent study of Bae & Chang (2021) on the surge of *'untact tourism'* in Korea, attributing COVID-19 *'affective risk perception'* as a predictor on attitude, while *'cognitive risk perception'* posing a positive influence on Subjective Norms.

Significance of Refund Credibility

Contrary to the earlier hypothesized negative effect of refund credibility to TPB variables, results reveal that the refund credibility particular to Philippine Airlines positively affects SN and PBC. This finding supports the earlier literature citing the effect of refund credibility on succeeding behavioral intention (Mollenkopf et al., 2007).

It also resonates with the Airlines' success in launching a refund portal that enables customers to refund and rebook their flights. Despite having a total of 60,00 pandemic-related flight cancellations (ABS-CBN News, 2020), Philippine Airlines was able to respond quickly with the launch of MyPALHub on the onset of the pandemic outbreak, allowing passengers to fill-up a refund form for faster data consolidation and refund process (Fernandez, 2020).

With the ease of sharing refund experiences across social media platforms, the refund credibility that their social circle perceives towards Philippine Airlines positively influences the booking intention. More so, the positive refund credibility that Philippine Airlines holds thus positively influenced its passenger's control in over intending to book a flight.

Influence of TPB Variables on Brand Credibility

The conceptual model affirmed the positive effects of all Theory of Planned Behavior variables on Brand Credibility. Predictably, Attitude towards Behavior positively influences brand credibility – consistent with the findings of Tsang et al. (2004), Sheeraz et al. (2016), and Chin et al. (2020), where attitude poses a positive effect on the credibility of the brand. This study thus extends the significance of attitude in the context of a pandemic.

Moreover, findings confirm the positive effect of Subjective Norms on Brand Credibility. If the passenger's significant circle holds positive brand credibility, passengers tend to be influenced by their personal view towards the brand. It amplifies the significant role of social influence in defining the passenger's overall brand credibility. It supports the findings of Leenders (2002), claiming that a passenger tends to adopt the ideas and beliefs of their significant circle. It is also consistent with the previous literature confirming the positive effect of subjective norms towards attitude (Yeh et al., 2021; Jain, 2020) and the positive effect of subjective norms on credibility (Perera et al., 2021). This finding thus poses an important opportunity for marketers to consider the significant value of social influence in driving brand credibility.

As expected, results show that Perceived Behavioral Control also positively influences brand credibility. When passengers have high regard for their ability to book a flight, their perception of Philippine Airlines' brand credibility is deemed to be amplified. This aligns with the previous literature relating the influence of Perceived Behavioral Control on brand credibility (Perera et al., 2020). Results also resonate with the passenger's high affinity towards Philippine Airlines, indicating that 91.3% of the respondents will be booking Philippine Airlines for future international travel plans and 78.3% for domestic travel plans.

Significance of Brand Credibility in Driving Booking Intent

Finally, findings thus reveal that the positive brand credibility of Philippine Airlines directly influences the booking intention of passengers, supporting the earlier literature affirming the significance of brand credibility towards driving behavioral intention (Wang & Yang, 2010; Wang, 2014; Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021). It is worth noting that the survey results also reveal that Philippine Airlines exhibited strong brand credibility, revealing the word *'credible'* as the best word to describe the brand.

Amidst the pandemic, the strong credibility of Philippine Airlines positively resonated with the booking intention of its passengers. It is in line with a more recent study from Giao & Tuan (2019), affirming the beneficial impact of brand credibility on the booking intention of Vietnamese consumers. It also confirms the hypothesized positive relationship between brand credibility and booking intention contextualized amid the pandemic in the airline sector (Kao et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The present study aimed to expand the Theory of Planned Behavior by adding three additional variables in its model: refund credibility, safety perception, and brand credibility. Path analytic models partially supported the hypotheses of the conceptual model. Safety Perception stands as a significant predictor of all Theory of Planned Behavior variables, in line with the previous pandemic-borne literature (Sotomayor-Castillo et al., 2020; Bae & Chang, 2021; Pavli et al., 2020). However, this study presents the positive effect of Refund Credibility to Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioral Control versus the hypothesized negative effect. This finding supports the earlier literature citing the effect of refund credibility on succeeding behavioral intention (Mollenkopf et al., 2007).

Moreover, this research unveils the positive and direct impact of all Theories of Planned Behavior towards Brand Credibility. More importantly, it presents the essence of Brand Credibility in influencing booking intention. The present study thus poses an opportunity for airline marketers to leverage its strong brand credibility to drive booking intention amidst the pandemic.

The pandemic indeed calls for distinct marketing strategies as the marketing landscape continues to be volatile. The results of this study thus enable marketers to consider Safety Perception and Refund Credibility in managing the impact of the pandemic towards booking intention. The significant role of Brand Credibility in influencing booking intention also presents a positive outlook for the airline industry to rebound from the financial impact of the pandemic.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Albeit its significant contributions to the global airline industry, it is imperative to note that this study is limited to the passengers of Philippine Airlines based in Metro Manila, Philippines. To further fortify the impact of the study, expanding this to a broader representative sample is recommended. Further studies may use a cross-airline analysis for a comparative grasp on the differing role of brand credibility in driving booking intention amid the pandemic. Conducting a cross-country analysis will also help broaden the perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the booking intention of travelers.

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