

A Comparative Assessment of Two Important Destinations in India in an IPA Framework

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Abstract

Achieving competitive advantage for any destination requires tourism stake holders to have a proper understanding of the destination attributes perceived important by the holiday makers. The IPA framework is a very popular tool to discern the performance of a destination with regard to very popular attributes considered relevant by the tourists. In this paper an attempt has been made to compare the destination image of Sikkim and Darjeeling with regard to sixteen attributes selected from prior studies involving image of tourism destinations. The findings of the study reveal that Sikkim is performing better with regard to various attributes in comparison to Darjeeling. Stake holders should periodically review the image of the destination and formulate constructive tourism marketing strategies to ensure that it finds favorable position in the minds of the holiday makers.

Key words: IPA, Destination, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Tourists, Image

Introduction

It can be discerned that over the last three decades the travel and tourism industry is growing exponentially and has become one of the most important businesses all over the world. Even the stake holders in the developing economies are spending lavishly to develop the infrastructure, developing new destinations, spending heavily on promotional activities to attract the international and domestic tourists. As a sequel to these developments the competition among tourism destinations, travel and tour operators has become intense. With the changing lifestyle and demand for various tourism products the marketers of tourism need to develop a proper image of the destinations to adapt the multifarious requirements of different types of tourists. As such, there is a need to conduct periodically to identify the attributes the tourists consider important while selecting a destination.

This study portrays the results of a quantitative analysis to investigate tourists' insight of Sikkim and Darjeeling two very popular destination in India. The objective of the study is to make a comparative assessment of perceptions of domestic as well as international tourists regarding the image of these two destinations on some relevant attributes considered by earlier researchers working in this field. The managerial implications of the research findings are also presented along with scope for further research in this field.

Literature Review

Matrilla and James (1977) in their outstanding article proposed Importance Performance Analysis (IPA). Tourism products can be viewed as a package of tangible and intangible elements presented as an activity experience to the tourists because of their complicated and multifarious nature (Gilbert, 1990). It is possible to disband tourism product into different stages from expectation and planning to booking, travel and evaluation. A different view suggests that a tourism product is made of destination elements including tourist attractions and supporting services such as accommodation, food and drink, and transportation (Cooper *et al*, 2005). Consequently, tourism product alludes to the holiday experience on the whole consisting of various components including transportation, accommodation, meals, image along with other attributes vital for tourists

(Mehmetoglu and Normann, 2013). Copious research studies connect this set of tourism product components to the tourist quality perception (Blazquez *et al*, 2012).

As customers' perceptions are usually considered against expectations, it is important to use suitable measurement tools to appraise customer satisfaction. In addition, expectations may change over time and the assessments may shift with passing time (Zeithaml *et al*, 2013), so it is essential to conduct customer satisfaction surveys on a regular basis.

There is an abundance of tools measuring service quality and customer satisfaction. Among the most frequently used analytical instruments are: SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and IPA. SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al*, 1988) is a measure of service quality, which is used to assess customers' expectations and perceptions with regard to five service quality dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992) is based only on the perception component, while IPA (Martilla and James, 1977) measures the importance and performance of various products attributes. Customers' perceptions are generally considered relatively to expectations and as such, it is important to use appropriate measurement tools to assess customer satisfaction. Furthermore, expectations are dynamic and the evaluations may shift over time (Zeithaml *et al*, 2013), so it is necessary to conduct customer satisfaction surveys regularly.

There are numerous tools measuring service quality and customer satisfaction. Among the most commonly used analytical instruments are: SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and IPA. SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al*, 1988) is a measure of service quality, which is used to measure customers' expectations and perceptions with regard to five service quality dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992) is based only on the perception component, while IPA (Martilla and James, 1977) measures the importance and performance of various products attributes. As customer satisfaction is supposed to be a broader concept than service quality, IPA is considered a superior analytical instrument to measure satisfaction since it is not restricted to five service quality dimensions and allows to assess the significance and performance of various elements like product and service features, quality, price, and other factors. Owing to its simplicity and ease of application IPA has been used frequently for research studies involving tourism and hospitality industry (Evans and Chon, 1989; Chu and Choi, 2000; Deng, 2007).

Methodology

The IPA approach has gained popularity in the field of social research during the last three decades. This approach has a distinct advantage in studying destination competitiveness. In this paper an attempt has been made to compare and contrast the image of two very popular mass tourism destinations in India. The destinations covered in this study include Darjeeling and Sikkim where a large number of domestic as well as foreign tourists visit on a mass scale. Several challenges confront researchers in measuring destination competitiveness. The major problem is to gather responses from the same sample of tourists visiting both these destinations and provide responses on different destination attributes in an IPA framework. In this study, we have approached a local tour operator recognized by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, to collect data from the holiday makers who visited these destinations during the last quarter of 2014. The study was conducted during the peak season of 2014 to obtain the required information on various destination related attributes for conducting an IPA analysis to portray the image of the two destinations as mentioned above. The data have been gathered using a five point semantic differential scale bounded by bipolar adjectives. The respondents were simply asked to provide their perceptions on the performance on various attributes along with the importance they assign to these attributes selected for this particular study. A very short questionnaire was distributed to 148 respondents who visited both the destinations out of which 113 responses were found complete in all respects. The responses were processed for

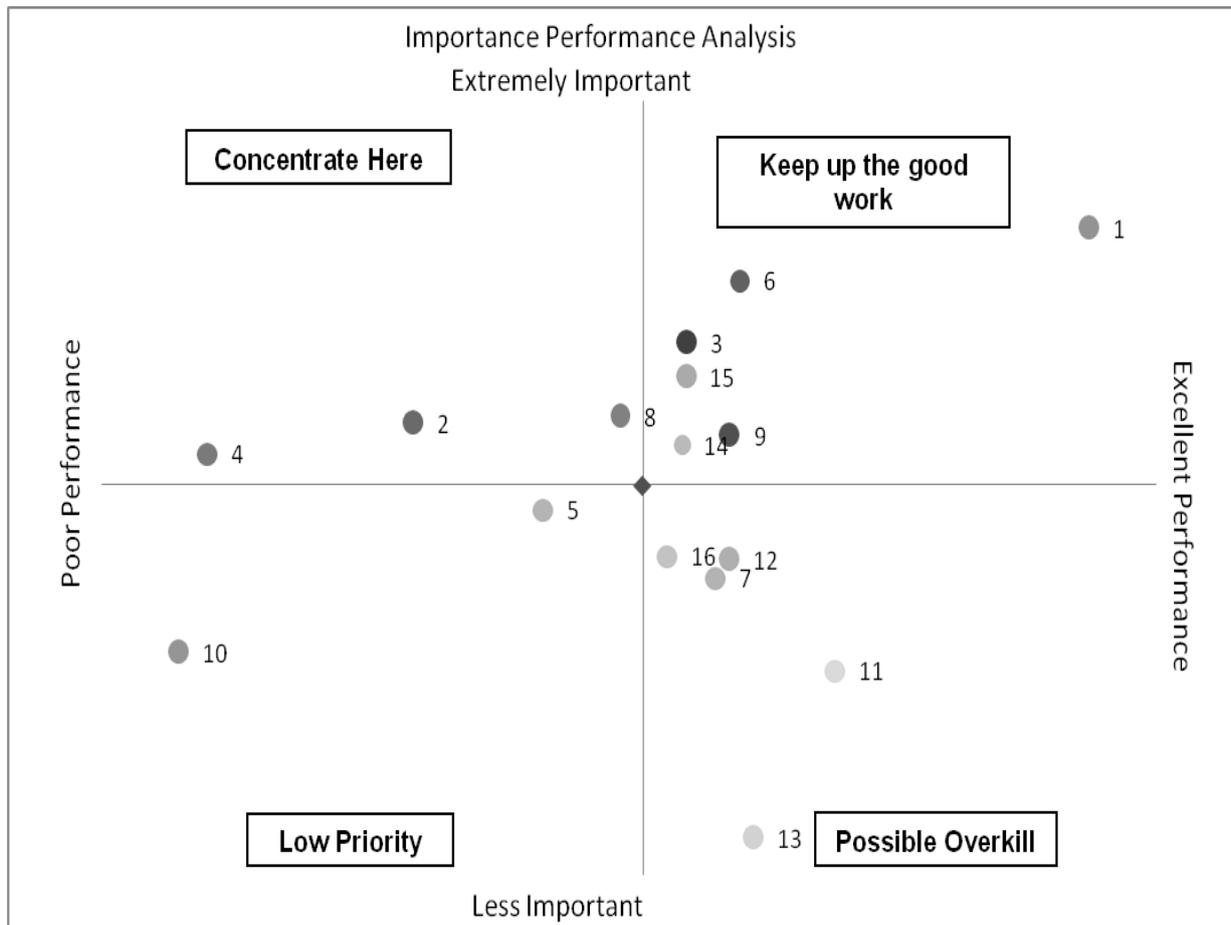
each attribute by computing the mean values for both importance and performance to derive the IPA matrix.

Table-I

Sikkim

Attribute	Legend	Importance Mean	Performance Mean
Beautiful Scenery	1	4.59	4.86
Welcome	2	3.96	3.45
Litter Free Environment	3	4.22	4.02
Pretty Tea Gardens	4	3.86	3.02
Night Life	5	3.68	3.72
Safety & Security	6	4.42	4.13
Pleasant Climate	7	3.46	4.08
Quality Service	8	3.98	3.88
Relaxed Pace of Life	9	3.92	4.11
Wilderness	10	3.22	2.96
Price/Quality Ratio	11	3.16	4.33
Calm/Tranquility	12	3.52	4.11
Political Stability	13	2.62	4.16
Accommodation Quality	14	3.89	4.01
Friendly People	15	4.11	4.02
Shopping Facilities	16	3.53	3.98
Grand Mean		3.76	3.93

Figure-I
Sikkim



Results and discussions

Sikkim as a destination is considered to be much more attractive than Darjeeling with regard to various destination attributes considered in our study. The destination marketers should take care of extension of better welcome, improvement in quality of service and presentation of opportunity to the tourists to visit the lush green tea gardens. With regard to scenic beauty, safety and security, litter free environment, friendly people, accommodation quality and relaxed pace of life, Sikkim is far ahead of Darjeeling. Attributes like night life entertainment and wilderness are low on the priority scale as perceived by the tourists.

The data presented in Table-I reveal that the tourists attach maximum importance to the scenic beauty of the destination, safety and security, accommodation quality, price quality ratio and political stability so far as attractiveness of Darjeeling as a tourism destination is concerned. It is revealed from the table that the performance ratings are much lower than the importance assigned by the tourists. With regard to political stability,

Litter free environment. Pretty tea gardens and safety and security, the destination marketers should concentrate on these issues to make the destination more attractive for the tourists visiting the queen of hills, Darjeeling. It should be pointed out here that there are many beautiful tea gardens surrounding the destination but they are kept out of bounds for the tourists. Again, the tourists assign low priority to various attributes like

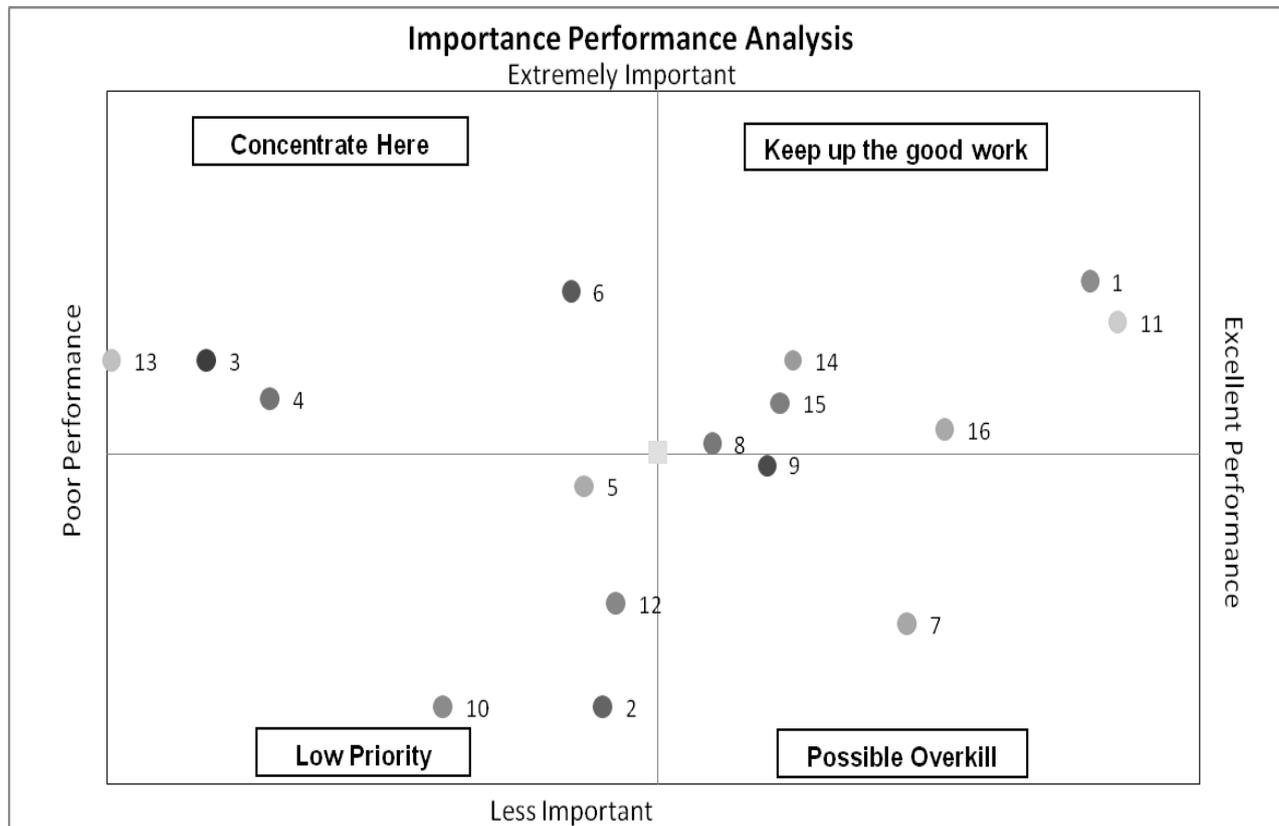
night life entertainment, welcome, wilderness and calm and tranquility. Unlike the eco-tourists the mass tourists are not at all concerned with these attributes. From the IPA matrix it is clear that with regard to scenic beauty, service quality, price quality ratio, accommodation quality, friendly people and shopping facility, the destination is quite attractive to the tourists.

Table-II

Darjeeling

Attribute	Legend	Importance Mean	Performance Mean
Beautiful Scenery	1	4.45	4.16
Welcome	2	3.22	3.09
Litter Free Environment	3	4.22	2.22
Pretty Tea Gardens	4	4.11	2.36
Night Life	5	3.86	3.05
Safety & Security	6	4.42	3.02
Pleasant Climate	7	3.46	3.76
Quality Service	8	3.98	3.33
Relaxed Pace of Life	9	3.92	3.45
Wilderness	10	3.22	2.74
Price/Quality Ratio	11	4.33	4.22
Calm/Tranquility	12	3.52	3.12
Political Stability	13	4.22	2.01
Accommodation Quality	14	4.22	3.51
Friendly People	15	4.1	3.48
Shopping Facilities	16	4.02	3.84
Grand Mean		3.95	3.21

Figure-II
Darjeeling



Managerial Implications

The analysis of the tourists’ assessments regarding the importance and performance of the distinguished tourism product attributes enables to draw a number of conclusions. First of all, the results of the study indicate that the importance of all the distinguished tourism product attributes is relatively high for tourists. Thus, tourist satisfaction depends on the quality of package holiday services (internal tourism product attributes) as well as other destination attributes (external tourism product attributes). This implies the necessity of considering the external factors while designing tourism products such as package holidays. Moreover, the development of the competitive tourism products requires cooperation among all tourist services providers as well as other entities involved in the tourism development. The assessments of the internal tourism product attributes were high, which means that the services provided by tour operators were on the high quality level. The only noticeable quality gap refers to the hotels, thus this product attribute requires thorough analysis. The assessments of the external tourism product attributes were also high, which shows that generally tourists’ expectations were met and they were even exceeded in some cases. Thus, it can be concluded that Poland is perceived as an attractive tourist destination and the quality of tourist services offered in Poland is high. Another conclusion refers to the effectiveness of the applied research method. The Importance-Performance Analysis can be used as one of the managerial tools, which enables to specify the importance of the selected product attributes to target customers and define the quality gaps and the areas of customer discontent. However, it cannot be used as the only research tool. Other measurement instruments such as open-ended questions should be also applied in order to gather detailed information on the areas of customer

dissatisfaction and possible ways to increase product quality and improve customer satisfaction.

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