Importance-performance analysis (IPA) of sustainable tourism initiatives: The resident perspective

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**Highlights**

- IPA of sustainable tourism initiatives applied to residents.
- IPA applied to three destinations with varying emphasis on sustainable tourism.
- IPA combined data-centered and scale-centered techniques to create cross hairs.
- County with most emphasis on sustainability in plan evaluated as most sustainable.
- Residents place high importance on sustainability but evaluate performance as low.

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**Abstract**

While importance-performance analysis (IPA) is one of the most ubiquitous methodological tools utilized in tourism research, its supply-side application to residents has been lacking. Additionally, little research has examined residents’ perceptions of sustainable tourism initiatives (STIs) or their community’s performance on these STIs. Given this gap, this study conducted an IPA of resident attitudes towards STIs across three U.S. counties in the Commonwealth of Virginia with varying levels of emphasis placed on sustainable tourism within their strategic plans. The results revealed residents of the three counties placed uniformly high levels of importance on the STIs, but varied in their perceptions of performance. The county with the most emphasis placed on sustainable tourism within their plan was found to have the highest performance evaluations. Methodological and theoretical considerations are discussed in detail, including the placement of cross-hairs and how IPA can be situated within social exchange theory and Oliver’s expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm.

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**1. Introduction**

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is one of the most ubiquitous methodological tools within the tourism literature. It is commonly used to distinguish discrepancies between what stakeholders’ think is an important component of a specific issue and their actual perceptions of how well the issue is being managed (Lai & Hitchcock, 2015; Oh, 2001). The widespread acceptance of IPA stems from its ability to provide “valuable and popular techniques for the management of tourism destinations,” as well as its simplicity that allows for easy interpretation (Taplin, 2012, p. 29). Importance-performance analysis (IPA) allows researchers to visually identify gaps between stakeholders’ perceptions of the importance of a specific attribute and the actual performance of a firm or destination on managing that attribute. By being able to simultaneously graph the mean importance and performance results for attributes, managers are able to see in which of the four quadrants the attribute falls: Quadrant I: “Concentrate Here,” Quadrant II: “Keep Up the Good Work,” Quadrant III: “Low Priority,” and Quadrant IV: “Possible Overkill.” Once this has been established, managers can then appropriate resources to adjust accordingly between importance and performance (Martilla & James, 1977).
These types of analyses have been predominantly demand-oriented within the tourism literature with an overwhelming majority focused on the importance tourists’ place on a certain experience, service, or product and how well a business or destination is doing at meeting the tourists’ expectations (Chen, 2014; Chu & Choi, 2000; Coghlan, 2012; Deng, 2007; Sheng, Simpson, & Siguaw, 2014; Taplin, 2012; Tonge & Moore, 2007; Ziegler, Dearden, & Rollins, 2012). Others have taken a supply-side approach by asking experts within the destination to evaluate the importance and performance of different factors leading to the competitiveness of the destination (Dwyer, Cvelbar, Edwards, & Dearden, 2013). Study in the literature with an overwhelming majority investigating the tourism planning process is “crucial” for successful sustainable tourism development, and Choi and Sirakaya (2006, p.1286) even place resident involvement as the “philosophical basis for sustainable community tourism.” Even though the importance of residents’ attitudes toward tourism is noted by many (see Nunkoo, Smith, & Ramkissoon, 2013), it has been rarely studied using IPA. According to Lai and Hitchcock’s (2015) list of 59 IPA tourism studies, only one applies IPA to permanent residents’ perceptions of tourism impacts within their community (e.g. Frauman & Banks, 2011). The scarcity of literature focused on residents’ perceptions of which aspects of tourism are important and how their community is performing on these aspects is surprising given the well-acknowledged ability of residents to thwart plans for tourism development (Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Hawkins & Cunningham, 1996).

Given this gap in the tourism literature, it should not be surprising that there has also been limited analysis of how residents perceive the importance of sustainable tourism initiatives (STIs) and how well their community is doing at enacting them. The sustainable tourism literature includes extensive discussion of the definition of sustainability (Butler, 1999; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002), the various paradigms of sustainable tourism (Clarke, 1997; Hunter, 1995), and the importance of empowering residents to sustainable tourism (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Cole, 2003; Scheyvens, 1999), but few studies have asked residents to evaluate which STIs they believe are important and how well their community is doing at enacting these specific STIs. There is a body of research on the indicators of sustainable tourism and what indicators make good barometers of tourism’s sustainability (Ko, 2005), but as Roberts and Tribe (2008) mention, there are no single perfect indicators of sustainable tourism and researchers need to development of their own site-specific indicators to limit criticism. Despite this recommendation from Roberts and Tribe (2008), most of the sustainable tourism literature has focused on developing universal indicators of sustainable tourism without first asking residents which aspects of sustainability they find important and worthy of emphasizing (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Manning, 2004; Mearns, 2011). In essence, residents’ uniform acceptance of STIs across the triple bottom line of environmental, social, and economic sustainability has been taken for granted by researchers and not empirically investigated (Dwyer, 2005; Elkington, 1997; Stoddard, Pollard, & Evans, 2012). The literature has not explored the notion that there may be a hierarchy of sustainability preferences by residents that are location specific. A better understanding of residents’ perceptions of the importance and performance of these STIs will provide those within the tourism industry with empirical support and clarity on where scarce resources should be appropriated to increase resident satisfaction with the industry, as well as maximize the potential for sustainability. IPA of STIs also has implications for the resident attitude literature, which has been measuring resident perceptions of the positive and negative environmental, social, economic impacts of tourism for years (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1990) but has yet to fully embrace IPA as a way to simultaneously gauge residents’ perceptions of the importance of STIs and their corresponding performance across the triple bottom line. The simultaneous evaluation of the importance and performance of STIs provides resident attitude researchers with an innovative application within the context of social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) and Oliver’s (1980) expectancy disconfirmation paradigm. Theoretically, the discrepancies between residents’ evaluations of importance and performance will shed light on their satisfaction with the current state of tourism development and explain why they support or oppose future tourism development within the community.

This study attempts to address these gaps by conducting an IPA of resident attitudes towards sustainable tourism initiatives across three counties (Floyd, Botetourt, and Franklin County, Virginia) with varying levels of emphasis placed on sustainable tourism. The three counties were chosen based upon the heterogeneity apparent in their strategic tourism plan’s emphasis on sustainable tourism. This provides the ability to apply the IPA mentioned above to three separate counties in order to test for differences in the importance placed on different aspects of sustainable tourism and perceived performance across the three counties of interest. Additionally, this format facilitates a test of validity for the segmentation strategy used to choose the counties. If the residents of the three counties perceive the performance of the STIs in alignment with the level of emphasis placed on sustainability within their tourism plans, it would provide credence to using published tourism plans as one de facto method to assess a destination’s emphasis on sustainability. The article continues with a review of the limited previous work conducted on IPA within the sustainable tourism and resident attitude literature, as well as some of the methodological issues associated with conducting IPAs such as where to place the cross-hairs.

2. Literature review

2.1. IPA in the context of sustainable tourism and resident attitudes

Importance-performance analyses have been plentiful within the broader tourism literature. Lai and Hitchcock (2015) recently reviewed 59 separate studies embracing the technique, demonstrating the flexibility of IPA and its ability to be easily adapted to destinations as a whole, as well as stakeholders of restaurants, hotels, and tourism attractions such as ski areas, hot springs and zoos. The wide acceptance of IPA stems partly from the clear empirical support and clarity on where scarce resources should be allocated to maximize the potential for sustainability. IPA of STIs also attributes its popularity to its ability to identify strengths and weaknesses within a firm or destination and its potential to be used as an alternative to the SERVQUAL framework (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

While IPA enjoys popularity across the broader hospitality and tourism literature, its application within the sustainable tourism literature has been limited to a few studies investigating what hoteliers, tourists and residents perceive as important aspects of sustainable tourism initiatives.
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