

TOURISTS' PERCEPTION ON DESTINATION QUALITY: AN ANALYSIS USING IMPORTANCE-PERFORMANCE GRID IN KERALA

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Abstract

Culinary tourism plays an important role in promoting local culture, boosting the economy, and enhancing the travel experiences of tourists. As food becomes a key reason for travel, culinary tourism helps destinations stand out and attract visitors seeking authentic and memorable experiences. Destination quality consists of number of attributes, including cleanliness, safety, infrastructure, hospitality, and attractions, which plays an important role in shaping tourist experience, their decision to revisit the destination, and satisfaction. The present study analyses the perception of tourists on 27 attributes of culinary destination based on the theory of Smith and Costello (2008). The analysis is based on the Importance-Performance Analysis following Martilla and James (1977) theory. The study classified the attributes into four quadrants, particularly focusing on the low performance-high importance quadrant. Nine attributes - cooking methods, knowledgeable staff, safety and hygiene standards, cultural experiences, culinary knowledge, friendly service, event information, nightlife, and cooking showcases – were found to be areas where the destinations need to improve their performance to enhance customer satisfaction. The study contributes to existing literature and proposes theoretical and practical approaches for practitioners and policy makers for enriching tourist experience.

Keywords: Culinary tourism, Importance-Performance Analysis, tourist perception, satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Culinary tourism is a category of tourism focusing on experiencing and promoting local delicacies and drinks of a destination based on their history, culture, and heritage. In culinary tourism, various definitions have put forward. The Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance (OCTA) defined culinary tourism as any tourism experience in which a person learns about appreciates, consumes, or indulges in food and drink that reflects the local cuisine, heritage or culture of the place. Wolf (2002) and Smith & Xiao (2008) suggested that it includes a combination of different activities related with experiencing melas while walking, relaxing and traveling to places which serves local foods. It includes physical experiences stimulated by a desire to fascinate oneself with local foods (Berttella, 2011; Everett & Slocum, 2013; Hall & Sharples, 2003). World Tourism Organization UNWTO (2012) found that food tourism has gained increasing attention over the past years. Culinary tourism draws on the experiential dimensions that strongly define consumer expectations (de la Barre & Brouder, 2024). Stone, Sthapit, and Bjork (2022) suggested that though research usually focus on positive experiences of tourists, it may not always cover all experiences. Applying Herzberg's theory, they found that attributes of a culinary tourism site may be satisfiers or dissatisfiers. The impact of negative experiences may be greater than that of positive experiences (Chen & Kim, 2019). Such experiences may affect a tourist's decision to revisit the destination (Shoukat et al., 2023), ultimately leading to subjective well-being or happiness and life satisfaction (Rodrigues, Borges, & Vieira, 2023).

Culinary Tourists' Perception on Destination

Studies evidence that the perception of tourists on the culinary destination is very important in shaping their future behaviour. To develop the food tourism, destinations engage in various kinds of promotional activities such as cooking classes, visitor-friendly food markets, and packaged food tours. It will help the food tourists to increase friendships with other tourists, familiarize themselves with the farmers, cooks, and food producers, or engage with local chefs. In this modern world, food has become a significant aspect of the tourist experience of a destination. Each tourist tries to make their journey filled with experiences that can last for many years. Quality, health, emotion, and prestige are some of the values that tourists attach to a destination affecting their intention and behaviour (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Chatterjee and Suklabaidya (2021) suggested that the gap between perception and satisfaction of tourists visiting a culinary destination is important to be studied. Destinations may possess many resources or attributes with strong pulling power that may motivate a tourist to travel again. Food experiences in tourism is considered as a strong pulling force that can

attract tourists to visit a destination with an intent of experiencing the unique food products offered (Smith & Costello, 2008). Long (2004) suggested that foodways includes physical, social, cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects which include preparation, presentation, cooking techniques, menus, and consumption.

Tourists visit a culinary destination with specific perception in their mind, and after their visit, may develop a level of experience and satisfaction that may be very different from what they had expected to experience. The attempt of the present study is to examine such difference in the levels of perception in the minds of tourists about how well a destination would perform, and their perception on how well the particular destination actually performed. Perceptions are developed before undertaking the actual visit, and after completing the visit. The perception of tourists is dependent on a number of attributes of the destination.

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Importance Performance Analysis

Importance-Performance analysis (IPA) was developed by Martilla and James (1977) as a graphical tool to analyze the importance and performance of attributes of a product or service. The objective of IPA is diagnostic in nature, aiming to help in the identification of attributes (given their importance) that the product or service underperforms or overperforms (Abalo, Varela, & Manzano, 2007). In the present study, the conceptual model was developed based on the theory developed by Smith and Costello (2008). A 27-item scale was developed specifying various attributes of culinary destination. The scale was used to evaluate the importance and performance assigned to these attributes of the culinary destination by the tourists.

Methods

Regarding the selection of culinary tourists as respondents, it was decided to include both male and female individual tourists, and also both foreign and domestic tourists. With a view to ensure that only tourists with serious interest in experiencing culinary delicacies were included in the study, it was decided to adopt a two-point approach. One, tourists were approached by the researcher at their time of visit to specific culinary tourist destination; two, tourists were asked to specify whether the purpose of their visit included experiencing the local culinary delicacies and those with affirmative responses only were included in the study. It was also decided to include only tourists who were at least 18 years of age. Regarding the identification of specific culinary destination, those with at least three years of experience in rendering culinary tourism services, and those who had culinary services as their major source of revenue in the tourism sector were only included in the study. The study was conducted among culinary tourists and culinary tourism destinations in the state of Kerala in South India. There exists no official record of culinary tourism destinations in Kerala. As an alternative, sample culinary tourism destinations were identified using the government department of District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), set up by the state government in all fourteen districts of Kerala. DTPC is responsible to provide aid and information to tourists. Depending on the geographic division of the state of Kerala, thirty culinary destinations were identified spread across the fourteen districts in the state. Once the destinations were identified, local community members and the tourism guides were contacted personally to identify culinary tourism spots like homestays, restaurants, plantations, cooking demonstrations, food festivals, food tours, etc. where culinary tourism-related activities are conducted. Tourists visiting these destinations and actively engaged in culinary related activities were approached personally. Based on an initial discussion with these tourists regarding their willingness to participate in the survey, the final sample unit was selected through a purposive sampling method. Primary data were collected from culinary tourists in two stages. In the first stage, the questionnaire on the importance of the attributes at the destination was administered, while they were participating in the culinary-related activities at the destination. Based on the convenience of the respondents, either a printed version or an online version of the questionnaire was administered. Primary data on the other aspect (performance of attributes at the destination) were collected using an online self-administered version of the questionnaire. The email addresses collected from the respondents in the first stage were used for sending the second stage questionnaire. The second stage questionnaire was sent after three days, presuming that the tourist had completed their culinary experience. A reminder e-mail was sent after one week following the initial distribution. In the first stage of data collection, 250 questionnaires were administered to the respondents both in the online and offline versions. Responses were received from 221 respondents, and it was found that 11 questionnaires were either incomplete or laden with multiple entries. Thus, 210 questionnaires were usable for final analysis on the importance of the attributes at the destination at a response rate of 84 percent. In the second stage, an online version of the questionnaire on performance of the attributes was sent to the entire 210 respondents who had responded in the first stage, using the mail ids collected. Nine mails bounced back as invalid. Over a period of two weeks, 179 responses were received back as responded. Data were collected over a period of eight months during September 2023 to April 2024.

The data collected in the two stages were examined for quality. Univariate outliers were examined by computing z-scores based on Polit (2010). Based on Tabachnick & Fidell (2013), scores outside the value of ± 3.29 were considered outliers,

and based on Mowbray, Fox-Wasylyshyn, & El-Masri (2019), these were substituted with sample mean. Univariate normality of the distribution of data was examined using the ratio between skewness and standard error of skewness, with ratios within ± 2.0 indicating normality (IBM, 2022). Homogeneity of variance of data across gender and type (foreign and domestic) of tourists was examined using Levene's test based on Howell (2013), with the resulting p-values above 0.05 denoting homogeneity, based on Derrick et al. (2020). All the results confirmed adequate data quality for further analysis.

The survey instrument was developed based on the theory of Smith and Costello (2008) using a 27-item scale anchored on a seven-point Likert-type.

Analysis Results

Data on the perceived importance of various culinary tourism attributes was gathered from tourists during their visits to different culinary tourism destinations across Kerala. In the second phase of data collection, information was obtained on the perceived performance of these culinary tourism attributes.

The collected data was analyzed using IBM SPSS software. A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was initially conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the perceived importance and performance of the attributes. In the MANOVA test, importance and performance were treated as independent variables, while the 27 attribute items served as dependent variables. The mean importance score ($n = 179$) was 4.446 ± 0.776 , whereas the mean performance score ($n = 179$) was 4.242 ± 0.772 . The Wilk's Lambda value was 0.019 and found to be statistically significant ($F = 637.32, p < 0.001$). This indicates a significant overall difference between the importance and performance scores of the culinary tourism attributes. Since the multivariate test revealed a significant overall difference, the next step involved examining whether significant differences existed between the importance and performance levels for each of the 27 individual culinary tourism attributes. To assess this, a Repeated Measures ANOVA was conducted. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1, which shows the mean scores for both the perceived importance and performance levels of each attribute as rated by culinary tourists. The differences between the importance assigned to each attribute and the corresponding performance of the culinary tourism destinations were calculated. The statistical significance of these differences was evaluated using the F-ratio at a 5% significance level. The findings are as follows:

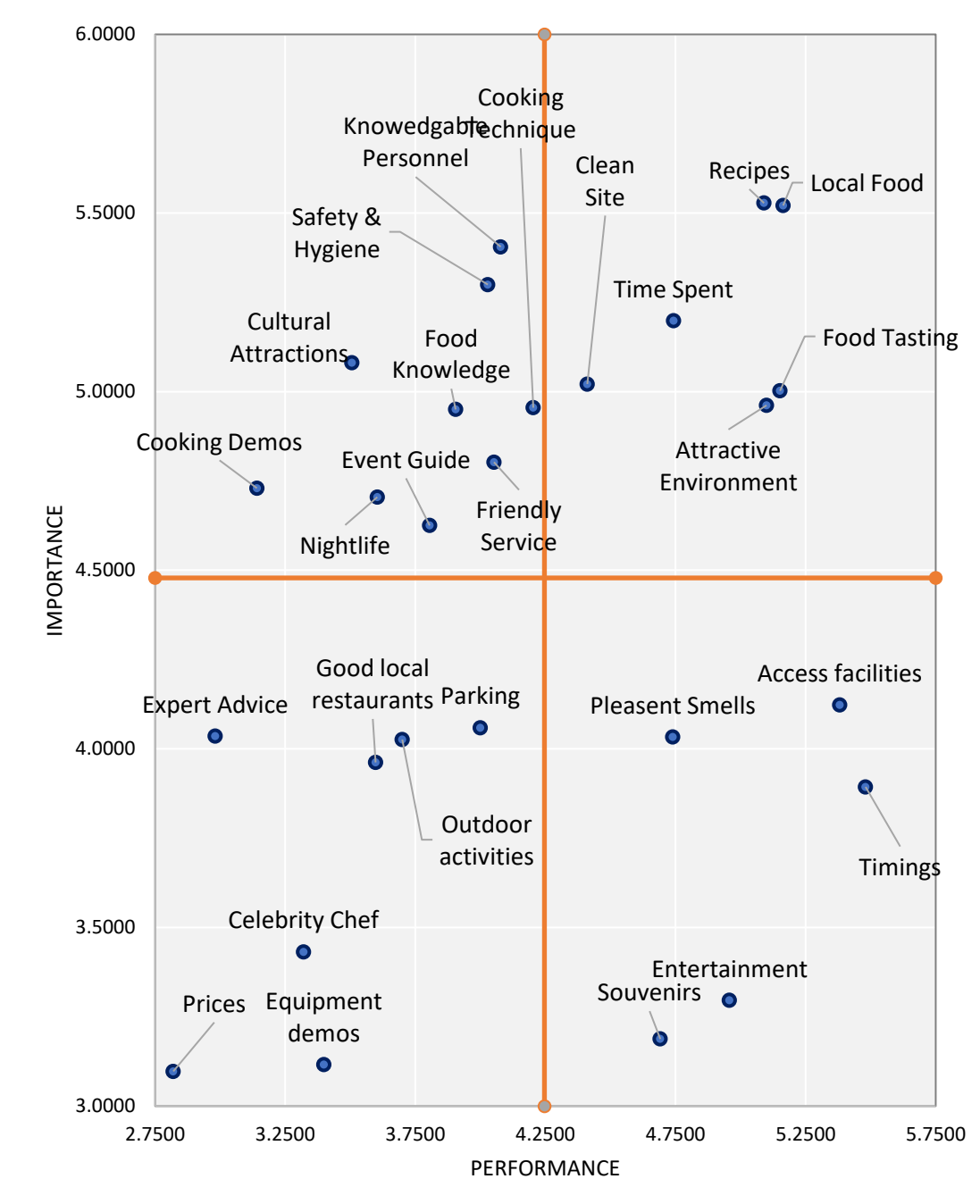
Attribute-Wise Analysis of Importance and Performance

Key findings are summarized below:

- **Food Tasting:** The performance score (5.150) slightly exceeded the importance score (5.002), indicating that tourists' expectations were slightly surpassed. However, the difference (+0.148) was not statistically significant ($F = 3.432, p = 0.065$).
- **Time Spent:** Tourists placed high importance (5.195) on the quality of time spent, but performance was lower (4.762). The significant difference (-0.433) indicates a gap ($F = 27.282, p < 0.001$).
- **Local Foods:** Local cuisine was highly valued (importance = 5.521), but performance was slightly lower (5.164). The difference (-0.357) was statistically significant ($F = 25.791, p < 0.001$).
- **Clean Site:** Cleanliness was rated highly important (5.017), but performance (4.413) fell short. The gap (-0.604) was significant ($F = 22.338, p < 0.001$).
- **Attractive Environment:** Both importance (5.100) and performance (4.962) were high, with a small, non-significant difference (-0.138; $F = 1.067, p = 0.303$).
- **Recipes:** Tourists valued the availability of recipes (importance = 5.093), and destinations exceeded expectations in performance (5.530). The significant difference (-0.437) was favorable ($F = 35.817, p < 0.001$).
- **Knowledgeable Personnel:** This attribute was rated lower in importance (4.078), yet performance (5.405) was significantly higher, resulting in a large, significant difference (-1.327; $F = 345.862, p < 0.001$).
- **Cooking Demonstrations:** Low importance (3.147), but high performance (4.725) resulted in a significant difference (-1.578; $F = 661.477, p < 0.001$).
- **Cultural Attractions:** Tourists rated this low in importance (3.506), while performance (5.081) was much higher. The difference (-1.575) was significant ($F = 480.623, p < 0.001$).
- **Friendly Service:** Importance (4.052) was lower than performance (4.803), with a significant difference (-0.751; $F = 77.411, p < 0.001$).
- **Event Guide:** Importance (3.810) was lower than performance (4.472), with a significant difference (-0.662; $F = 23.347, p < 0.001$).
- **Food Knowledge:** Assigned importance (3.905) was lower than perceived performance (4.950), showing a significant difference (-1.045; $F = 145.779, p < 0.001$).
- **Nightlife:** Lower importance (3.604) but higher performance (4.705) yielded a significant difference (-1.101; $F = 152.224, p < 0.001$).
- **Cooking Techniques:** Importance (4.203) was lower than performance (4.955), with a significant gap (-0.752; $F = 76.758, p < 0.001$).
- **Food Safety & Hygiene:** Importance (4.028) was significantly lower than performance (5.300), leading to a large difference (-1.272; $F = 194.410, p < 0.001$).
- **Convenient Parking:** Both importance (4.000) and performance (4.059) were similar; the difference (-0.059) was not statistically significant ($F = 0.741, p = 0.390$).

- **Outdoor Activities:** Low importance (3.700) with slightly better performance (4.026) yielded a significant difference (-0.326; $F = 14.225, p < 0.001$).
- **Celebrity Chefs:** Both importance (3.317) and performance (3.421) were low. The minor difference (-0.104) was not significant ($F = 1.567, p = 0.213$).
- **Equipment Demonstrations:** Both scores were low, but importance (3.399) exceeded performance (3.116). The difference (0.283) was significant ($F = 21.863, p < 0.001$).
- **Expert Advice:** Tourists rated this low in importance (2.981), but performance (4.036) was higher, yielding a significant difference (-1.055; $F = 348.325, p < 0.001$).
- **Good Local Restaurants:** Importance (3.597) was slightly below performance (3.962), and the difference (-0.365) was significant ($F = 26.494, p < 0.001$).
- **Food/Beverage Prices:** Low importance (2.820) and slightly higher performance (3.097) resulted in a small but significant difference (-0.277; $F = 10.852, p = 0.01$).
- **Entertainment:** Very high importance (4.957) contrasted sharply with lower performance (3.296), producing a large, significant difference (1.661; $F = 473.690, p < 0.001$).
- **Festival Souvenirs:** High importance (4.691), but low performance (3.188), resulted in a significant difference (1.503; $F = 428.265, p < 0.001$).
- **Access Facilities:** Easy access was highly valued (5.375), but performance (4.119) was lower, producing a substantial difference (1.256; $F = 384.367, p < 0.001$).
- **Opening/Closing Times:** Very high importance (5.481) and low performance (3.893) created a large significant gap (1.588; $F = 447.910, p < 0.001$).
- **Pleasant Smells:** High importance (4.729) but lower performance (4.037) resulted in a significant difference (0.692; $F = 83.152, p < 0.001$).

An evaluation of the overall results shows that out of the 27 attributes of culinary tourism used to measure the perception of tourists in its importance and performance, it is seen that in eight attributes (food tasting, attractive environment, equipment demonstrations, entertainment, festival souvenirs, access facilities, closing and opening times, and pleasant smells), the importance level attached was more than the performance level perceived by the culinary tourists. It indicates a comparative level of unhappiness among culinary tourists for these eight criteria. However, for the remaining nineteen criteria, the perceived level of performance exceeded the visitors assigned level of priority. It suggests that tourists are satisfied with these nineteen characteristics.



Importance-Performance Grid of Culinary Tourists

Figure 2

Discussions

Grid I is the High Importance, Low Performance quadrant. This grid includes nine key attributes. These are cooking methods, knowledgeable staff, safety and hygiene standards, cultural experiences, culinary knowledge, friendly service, event information, nightlife, and cooking showcases. These attributes are crucial for culinary tourism, as tourists hold high expectations for them; however, the performance of tourism sites in these areas is relatively poor, leading to low evaluations from tourists. Culinary service providers must focus on these aspects to improve the quality. The goal should be to shift tourists' negative perceptions, ultimately increasing their overall satisfaction.

Grid II is the High Importance, High Performance quadrant. This grid encompasses six key attributes: recipes, local food, food tasting, attractive environment, clean site, and time spent. These attributes signify elements of culinary tourism that travelers regard as extremely important while believing that the locations perform well in these areas. These are factors that hold significant weight for both tourists and service providers. Tourists view these aspects as crucial and set high expectations for the tourist destinations. Additionally, they believe that the sites meet their expectations effectively, leading to considerable satisfaction regarding these attributes. Any decline in quality or negligence from providers regarding these factors could adversely impact tourists' satisfaction levels.

Grid III is the Low Importance, Low Performance quadrant. This grid contains seven characteristics. They include specialist recommendations, quality local dining, outdoor experiences, availability of parking, renowned chefs, pricing, and equipment showcases. These characteristics hold little significance for both tourists and service providers. Tourists

regard these aspects as having minimal importance and do not contribute to their overall satisfaction. Similarly, culinary establishments do not place significant emphasis on these features. Modifications in these aspects are unlikely to influence tourists' perceptions of the services offered. Furthermore, service providers are not required to exert additional effort or incur expenses to improve these characteristics.

Grid IV is the Low Importance, High Performance quadrant. This grid contains five characteristics: enjoyable aromas, accessibility features, schedules, memorabilia, and leisure activities. Tourists do not consider these features crucial for their overall satisfaction, and variations in these aspects are unlikely to influence their contentment. However, these characteristics could suggest an excess of attention, as providers are concentrating their resources on them, potentially squandering valuable time and financial resources. Efforts in these areas yield little return and fail to deliver lasting advantages in tourist satisfaction. There is a necessary shift in focus required from the providers regarding these characteristics.

Conclusions

The study revealed that there were nine attributes in the quadrant I. These attributes are extremely important in generating and determining tourist satisfaction. The focus of tourism service providers should be to improve their performance on these nine attributes. Future studies may measure the level of tourist satisfaction, and attempt to examine the effect of these nine factors on the satisfaction of tourists. The managements should consistently strive to improve their performance, thereby leading to higher levels of tourist satisfaction.

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