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Exploring an Importance-Performance Analysis Approach to Evaluate Destination Image

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Abstract
This paper aims to explore the effectiveness of an Importance-Performance Analysis approach to assess destination image. It focuses on the image of the UK for Chinese students studying in the country. That is because the destination image of a certain country for a homogenous group, such as Chinese students, has not been studied enough and this specific market is central for the UK, especially its education and tourism sector. In total, 23 attributes were examined and each was found in one of the five quadrants. Two attributes related to the environmental aspect of the UK were found in the Competitive Attributes quadrant. These attributes are key strengths of the UK in relation to Chinese students' images of the country. Three attributes placed in the Keep Up Good Work quadrant are associated with British culture and heritage. This signifies that the UK should keep utilising these resources to improve Chinese students' images of the nation. 14 attributes were identified in the Concentrate Here quadrant. These attributes include essential elements of tourism such as local cuisine and transportation. Their roles are vital in enhancing the image of the UK for Chinese students, but more efforts must be made to this end.

Keywords
Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), destination image, Chinese students, the UK, university

Introduction

As "an innate part of the tourism phenomenon" (Prayag, 2009: 837), destination image has been a hot topic of discussion among tourism scholars since the 1970s. The important role of destination image could be considered from two perspectives: "designing effective tourism marketing strategies and understanding travel behaviours" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991: 38). This is essential when thinking about the links between tourism and soft power. There is a need to explore this importance because tourism and understandings across cultures is a way of also linking ideas and connecting nations based on preferences and influences. Hence, destination image is critical not only because it is the key to the destination selection process and tourists' subjective (cognitive) perceptions (Jalilvand et al., 2012), but also for its significant influence on tourists' satisfaction with the destination and their subsequent behaviors and future intentions (Prayag, 2009; Qu et al., 2011).

With the increasing destination choices available for tourists, the importance of destination marketing and branding has been continually increasing. In light of the increasing choice facing tourists, the importance of destination image as it is portrayed through promotional tools is an important consideration for Destination Management Organisations and

Policymakers. As such, the relationship between soft power and tourist perceptions commands further exploration. If destination planners and managers can understand how consumer groups perceive destination images, this then allows destination planners and managers to consult different groups in discussions of how to meet the demands of these diverse consumer groups so that they can enhance the appeal and gain market capture. The creation and assessment of a destination image is essential for developing a productive and successful destination marketing strategy (Son and Pearce, 2005). On one hand, destinations need to "maintain a favorable position in the minds of potential visitors by developing a positive and memorable image" (Baloglu et al., 2014: 1058) to win the fiercely competitive market. On the other hand, the evaluation of destination image could help destination marketing organisations (DMOs) identify their destination strengths and weaknesses to "provide critical insights for managing and developing tourist destinations" (Lee, 2009: 217). To do this, there is a need to propose a new approach that can help destination planners, managers and marketers visualise and realise how travellers from particular markets perceive a destination's image.

Inbound tourism is vital for the economic development of tourism (locally, regionally and nationally) because overseas tourists generally have higher consuming abilities than domestic tourists do. Chinese outbound tourists in particular have significantly increased since the 1990s. 40.6 million Chinese travelers have visited overseas destinations in 2007. By 2016, the number of China's outbound tourists had soared to 122 million (China National Tourism Administration, 2018). Chinese travellers spent US$261.1 billion abroad in 2016 (Visit Britain, 2018). This has made Chinese outbound tourism be one of the most profitable markets in the world. While Chinese outbound tourists share many of the same fundamental needs and desires of all tourists, this group has particular expectations in terms of amenities and service standards (Li et al. 2011). Understanding these expectations may help Western service providers, including British ones, better serve this market. Besides, studies on Chinese students' perceptions of destination image of the UK contribute to nascent insight amid this widely popular study area concerning Chinese travellers in the UK. The importance of destination image is widely acknowledged in tourism literature due to its remarkable impact on destination choice processes, which plays a significant role in designing effective tourism marketing strategies (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). To boost the Chinese overseas student travel demands, it is essential to understand their perceptions of the UK as a tourist destination.

In tourism marketing studies, the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) has been adopted to examine destination image (see Chon et al., 1991; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005; Lee and Lee, 2009). This is a unique approach when considering understandings between consumers and suppliers. The link here to soft power again, is that communication of what is important to consumers and how suppliers in a destination can learn from and create opportunities and in turn channel that through marketing and communication to specific groups to ultimately impact on the local economy. Thus, this paper proposes the IPA approach to assess destination image, as image is linked to power, persuasion and tourist desires. The approach outlined in this paper and the pilot testing presented in this paper has both conceptual and practical transferability for both local and national tourism policy makers. The design of the research approach and analysis is aimed at collecting data from homogeneous populations. There is a need to focus on homogeneous populations to highlight the soft power context based on the need to attract and improve relationships based on offering a product that appeals to a target group. From here, destination planners, managers and marketers can gain specific insight into perceptions of destination image and how they can then promote places

(destinations) to target populations.

This paper aims to explore the effectiveness of the IPA approach to evaluate a specific target group, Chinese students in the UK. To assist with designing and developing this approach, a pilot exploratory study was conducted with 110 Chinese student participants to understand their image perceptions of the UK. It is important to note that all participants at the time of research were studying in the UK, and this population was targeted for this pilot study based on Chinese students representing a large population of current international students who regularly travel during their time of study. The IPA approach can help us: 1. To find out the overall image of a destination among a homogenous group of travellers or potential travellers; 2. To explore favorable/unfavorable and significant/insignificant destination image attributes among a particular group of people; 3. To suggest strategies to improve destination image to attract a particular group of people. This paper now turns to a review of the literature concerning destination image research.

Destination image Research

In the early days of tourism marketing studies, Crompton (1979: 418) defined destination image as "the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination". This simplified definition could not meet the needs of measurement and assessment, but offers foundational insight as it can help connect people based on how they perceive and what they want to consume. Gunn (1988) suggested that destination image can be divided into two types of images, namely organic image and induced image. The former is developed based on the information obtained from non-marketing sources such as education and general media, whilst the latter is created through marketing sources such as travel brochures/leaflets and the websites of DMOs. Echtner and Ritchie (1993: 3) suggested that the concept of destination image should possess two primary components, namely attribute-based components and holistic components. Every component of destination image should contain functional and psychological characteristics. This approach emphasised that the destination image could be better understood from three dimensions, namely attribute-holistic, functional-psychological, and common-unique. The attribute-holistic dimension stressed that destination image should be measured from both individual destination attributes and holistic impressions of destination. While, the functional-psychological aspect of destination image comprised both functional components that could be directly observed and intangible psychological characteristics. Linked to the focus and direction of this paper, these each relate to cognitive attributes of destination image. Furthermore, the common-unique dimension represents some of the attributes of destination are common or similar to other destinations, while others were unique to the specific destination.

Chon (1990: 4) found that tourists' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a destination was arising from the interaction between "the accumulated image and actual experience at the destination". Since the satisfaction is a critical factor for tourists to revisit a destination (Prayag, 2009; Wang and Hsu, 2010), understanding the destination image tourists are likely to have is helpful for DMOs to make appropriate strategic and marketing decisions to influence tourists' experience and intention of revisit (Hernández-Lobato et al., 2006).

The meaning of destination image research is also highlighted in research on the country image (see Nadeau et al., 2008). In the highly globalised world, international travels have become more attractive and approachable thanks to an increase in the number of tourist-generating countries such as China, the development of diverse types of media, typically the

Internet, and the growth of affordable travel, including low-cost careers. At the same time, this has resulted in socio-economic inclusion and exclusion as who has access and the means to travel. Correspondingly, country image has become a popular research topic in the research on destination image (see Mossberg and Kleppe, 2005). Countries are competing with each other to win a competitive advantage among tourists, which is important in the design of this exploratory IPA approach pilot study. Many countries national tourism authorities have launched worldwide marketing campaigns to create/enhance positive images to attract potential tourists (Mossberg and Kleppe, 2005), for example Visit Britain. Thus, today countries should carefully analyse their images in target markets and adopt strategic marketing management tools and conscious branding (Gertner, 2002).

With increased opportunities and competition in the international tourism market, national tourism organisations (NTOs) progressively face increased pressure to present unique insight about their country and particular attractions to catch the attention of those planning future travel. Destination images are oftentimes generated through marketing strategies, to create or recreate a perception of a place. Activities, on the other hand help us highlight significant developments, attractions and tourism resources in a destination (Govers et al., 2007). According to Dwyer and Kim (2003), destination image is an important situational condition. This is because image is related to cognition, and how people perceive a place and this can influence on the likelihood of a place receiving (or not receiving) tourists, relating to how we come to recognise a place (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Wise and Mulec, 2015).

There are a wide number of factors and attributes assessed when analysing destination image. For instance, one widely accepted study is Beerli and Martín's (2004) present nine dimensions pertinent to how they describe perceived destination images, including: natural resources, tourist leisure/recreation, natural environment, general infrastructure, culture/history/art, social environment, hotel/self-catering, political/economic factors and place atmosphere. Kim and Perdue (2011) note natural environments play a key role in image perceptions, and this is commended later in this study. Shankar (2018) suggests cultural elements of a tourist destination such as culture, history and tradition are variables that create destination image. Linked to promoting and advertising what consumers seek, pertinent to cognition, (Govers et al., 2007), NTOs and tourism managers also must consider psychological factors, or personal (such as values, age, motivation) and stimulus (such as information sources, previous experiences) factors (see Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Stimulus factors, especially, invoke cognitive memories—linked to what past associations people might have of a particular country/place, or what they expect to see. For instance, the media communicates place images, and research has addressed how the past can convey how destination image is perceived, positively and negatively (Wise, 2011). In some respects, the success of a destination is dependent upon how place awareness develops—as this helps to shape and create perceptions (Mulec and Wise, 2012). Arguably, perceptions are linked to several destination image attributes, and expected image is shaped by what general destination knowledge and/or awareness tourist have.

To link this work to the Chinese example explored in this study, Wang and Davidson (2008) found that the components of Chinese students' pre- and post-arrival perceptions on attributes of Gold Coast of Australia are different in numbers and rank order. Although the pre-visit and post-visit design has been adopted by several studies, the complex image of during-visit has been neglected. More recently, Smith et al. (2015) tried to utilise digital video elicitation method to examine how images had been shaped throughout the tourist experience. Martín-

Santana et al. (2017) further identified that tourists' actual experience would significantly and positively influence their perceived image towards a destination. In this sense, Chinese students who are studying in the UK could be viewed as tourists on their during-visit phase. Again, the importance of studying Chinese students' destination image perceptions of the UK is critical because the complex image in this phase could offer more insights to destinations' managerial needs. As discussed earlier, the IPA is one of the research approaches employed to look at destination image. Moreover, destination image can be understood and examined as a form of soft power (Wang, 2008; Hunter, 2016). This means that this research could also explore destination image as soft power, utilising the IPA approach. Regarding China specifically, outbound tourism is acknowledged a way to demonstrate the country's soft power (Tse, 2013; Chen and Duggan, 2016) based on symbolisms and key destination attributes (Ooi, 2015).

Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) Approach

The IPA approach aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of products through the comparison of importance rating and performance rating given by consumers (Chu and Choi, 2000), and has become popular since it was introduced by Martilla and James (1977). For researchers that focus on exploring marketing and managerial insights, IPA is a common method to employ. For example, IPA has been utilised to analyse the hotel selection factors in the Hong Kong hotel industry (Chu and Choi, 2000), and to identify management concerns for whale shark tours in Isla Holbox, Mexico (Ziegler et al., 2012). Through the comparison of the importance and performance of each cognitive attribute, the results will lay a foundation for further strategic marketing decisions (Coghlan, 2011). Besides, Chinese overseas students may have unique perspectives regarding the importance of each attribute. For instance, Joppe et al. (2001) have found that the importance and satisfaction levels are different by the origin of visitors. IPA could further help DMOs to decide which attributes need more attention, and which attributes have most potential to increase the level of visitor satisfaction.

To study destination image using an IPA approach, insight from highly visible and widely recognised conceptual destination image studies helps us to identify key attributes. For the purpose of this pilot, we identify attributes to study, but for future researchers who may adapt this approach it is important to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the literature to identify any key attributes and indicators specific to the destination being analysed (Mulec and Wise, 2013). Then respondents can evaluate the importance and performance of each attribute in different sections of the questionnaire, which follows Martilla and James's (1977: 79) suggestion to separate importance measures and performance measures "to minimize compounding and order effects".

Common IPA practice involves placing the mean scores of importance and performance on a matrix with four quadrants. Figure 1 displays the X-axis represents the performance rating, while the Y-axis represents the importance rating of the same attributes. The results of the IPA grid are interpreted according to different quadrants. Usually, the attributes located in quadrants 1 and 2 are the focus of marketing and managerial efforts (Figure 1).

[Figure 1. about here]

Figure 1. The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) grid (adapted from O'Leary and Deegan, 2005: 250)

The IPA measurement is a relative approach rather than an absolute one. Therefore, the placement of crosshairs in IPA is somewhat subjective according to researchers' needs (Martilla and James, 1977). The most popular crosshair measures are scale means (e.g. Tonge and Moore, 2007) and result means (e.g. Joppe et al., 2001). The scale-means approach was considered as allowing a simpler comparison of importance and performance (Oh, 2001). Moreover, to achieve more practical marketing insights, Wade and Eagles (2003: 200) have set the crosshair at 4 out of 5 which generated the "standards of extremely important and excellent performance". This approach was believed more "useful and pertinent to managers" (Tonge and Moore, 2007: 774). Despite various ways of placing the gridlines, there are limitations on interpreting attributes of different categories. For example, if the attributes placed in the IPA grid are close or on the two axes, they are hard to fit into any categories to help generate valid interpretation (Azzopardi and Nash, 2013). Besides, if most attributes fit into one or two quadrants, it would be hard to tell the difference between these attributes to obtain in-depth insights on destination management. These limitations are most likely to influence the research with a small sample size (e.g. less than 400) (Tarrant and Smith, 2002).

Other researchers suggest a diagonal line model, which divides the graph into two areas (e.g. Ziegler et al., 2012). As shown in Figure 2, the attributes, which were placed above the 45% line, indicates improving efforts were needed because their performance scores were lower than importance scores. The attributes below the 45% line were considered as sustainable items because they have higher performance scores than importance scores.

[Figure 2. about here]

Figure 2. The diagonal line model.

To avoid the limitations of scale-center approach and to generate more insights on the management of destination image, based on the work of Abalo et al. (2007) and Wade and Eagles (2003), this paper combines the diagonal line model and quadrant model which contains both scale-centered axes and crosshair at 4 out of 5. As it is shown in Figure 3, all the attributes with an importance value greater than the corresponding performance value will be placed in the zone above the 45% line which indicates improvements are needed. The attributes, which have a mean value over 4 in both importance and performance scores are considered as core competitive attributes which could be primarily utilised for marketing purposes, but can help us and practitioners better visualise the impact of destination image attributes.

[Figure 3. about here]

Figure 3. IPA grid developed and used in this paper.

Cognitive attributes from the literature review

By consulting key conceptual literature on destination image (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Lin et al., 2007; Liu and Ryan, 2011; Prayag, 2009; Stylos et al., 2016; Stylidis et al., 2017; Wang and Hsu, 2010), an initial list of attributes used to theoretically measure destination

image was developed around five key areas of research in this area: nature/natural (a great variety of plants and animals, good climate, and unpolluted/unspoiled environment), cultural (many interesting attractions and things to do, many interesting cultural heritage & relevant events, and good opportunities for cultural activities), amenities (exciting nightlife/entertainment, a wide variety of cuisines, good shopping opportunities, a wide variety of outdoor activities, and a variety of hotels/lodging/camping), accessibility/infrastructure (good quality of infrastructure, convenient transportation, convenience to access travel information, and convenience to obtain a travel visa), and social/travel environment (great public security, safe place to travel, standard hygiene and cleanliness, friendly and hospitable local people, satisfactory service quality on behalf of various professions, great cultural diversity, and good value for money). However, given there is little research conducted on Chinese students' perceptions of destination image of the UK, there was a need to adopt attributes used from other destinations, but were still relevant to the focus of this study. The 23 attributes presented in the analysis sections were the final list determined to conduct this study, and these attributes are given a number that is used to map results in Figure 4 to map and understand the overview of the data in relation to the importance-performance grid developed for this study shown in Figure 3:

1. Natural beauty
2. Good Climate
3. Unpolluted/unspoiled environment
4. Many interesting attractions and things to do
5. Many interesting cultural heritage & relevant events
6. Good opportunities for cultural activities
7. Good experience of royal family culture and relevant attractions
8. Good experience of sports culture
9. Good experience of film tourism
10. A wide variety of interesting festivals
11. Exciting nightlife/entertainment
12. Variety of local cuisine
13. Good shopping opportunities
14. A variety of outdoor activities
15. Good quality hotels/lodging/camping
16. Good quality of infrastructure
17. Convenient transportation
18. Convenience to obtain travel information
19. Safe place to travel
20. Standard hygiene and cleanliness
21. Friendly and hospitable local people
22. Satisfactory quality of services on behalf of various professionals
23. Good value for money

Questionnaire design

The developed IPA questionnaire tested in this paper concerning destination image focuses on cognitive image. Cognitive image was often measured with a 5-point Likert scale (Wang and Davidson, 2008). The importance of the above-listed 23 attributes related to the UK was rated with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important to 5 = very important). Then in a separate question, respondents were asked to rate the performance of the same 23 attributes with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

There are mainly two ways in the destination image literature to assess the overall image. The first method is summing up the scores of cognitive attributes, and the second method is evaluating the overall image in a single measure. It is believed that the former approach may not be accurate because some crucial attributes may be neglected by researchers (Prayag, 2009). Hence, in line with other researchers (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Son and Pearce, 2005; Stylos et al., 2016), respondents were asked to rate their overall image of the UK in a separate question with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = highly unfavorable to 5 = highly favorable).

Sampling, surveying and participants

Nine students attended a focus group to help with the questionnaire clarity; therefore, it could be discussed and validated before distribution for relevance and suitability of the research instrument. Consideration was given that although all the Chinese overseas students have a certain level of English skills, a full English questionnaire could have been overwhelming for some respondents. Besides, some participants were confused with some English expression of attributes. As a result, the questionnaire design utilised both English and Chinese, which could not only make sure respondents fully understood the questions, but also increase the efficiency and accuracy.

The questionnaire survey was conducted online and online questionnaire was distributed through WeChat, the most popular social media application widely used among mainland Chinese. The questionnaire was designed with the support of Tencent Survey. Tencent Survey is a popular online tool for designing surveys, collecting data and further analysing data, although several constraints of the sampling process have to be considered.

Non-probability sampling was employed to access as many Chinese students in the UK as possible; the first author combines the convenience and snowball sampling techniques. There are two WeChat groups of Chinese students amongst students studying in Liverpool. The first author posted a link to the questionnaire in these two groups and asked his friends to send the link to other Chinese students they know so that this research can collect data as large sample as possible. Consequently, 114 completed questionnaires were collected. Four out of 114 were excluded from the data analysis because they either missed many questions or chose the same score (1 and 3) to all Likert scale questions. Consequently, 110 usable responses were collected to pilot this exploratory study.

The 110 participants consisted of 68 females, 40 males and two who did not complete the demographic sections. Respondents comprise of 74 undergraduate students, 22 postgraduate students and 12 PhD students. The majority of respondents (94) have lived in the UK for more than six months. Most respondents reported that they had travelling experience within the UK, visiting two or three places. Again, this suggests that overseas students make a significant economic contribution to the tourism sector in the UK (Son and Pearce, 2005).

IPA Results: Data Analysis and Findings

Perceived importance and performance of cognitive attributes

Table 1 reveals that the following attributes, safe place to travel, natural beauty, standard hygiene and cleanliness, convenient transportation, good climate, unpolluted/unspoiled environment, good value for money and convenience to obtain travel information, can be seen as important attributes (each with a mean score above 4.00) for Chinese overseas students when considering travelling within the UK. In contrast, exciting nightlife/entertainment and good experience of sports culture are considered as less important

than the abovementioned factors. Good experience of sports culture is the only attribute which was rated with a 'not important' overall mean (mean = 2.88). Exciting nightlife/entertainment was just above the neutral level, with a mean score of 3.01.

The performance ratings of all attributes were listed in Table 2. Four attributes had a mean score higher than 4.00, ranging from 4.06 to 4.15, represent that Chinese students rated all these attributes between 'important' and 'extremely important'. Respondents reported that the UK had performed best at unpolluted/unspoiled environment (mean = 4.15), natural beauty (mean = 4.10), good opportunities for cultural activities (mean = 4.06) and many interesting cultural heritage & relevant events (mean = 4.06). The climate and local cuisines are considered having the poorest performance, which are scored 3.10 and 2.81, respectively.

[Table 1. about here]

[Table 2. about here]

Significance tests and Gap analysis

As IPA is mainly based on the comparison of differences in the average between importance scores and performance scores, it is necessary to test the significances of the differences (Kinnear and Gray, 2000). Firstly, the normality of the data was tested to identify the suitable significance-testing tool for this paper. The results from the Shapiro-Wilk test were demonstrated in Table 3. The Shapiro-Wilk test is a well-known test of normality. It is believed that the Shapiro-Wilk test is appropriate for both small and large sample sizes (Mecklin, 2007). If the Sig. value of the Shapiro-Wilk test is greater than 0.05, the data is normally distributed. Otherwise, the data is not normally distributed. It was found in this paper that both the data of importance scores and performance scores were not normally distributed, which means that significances of differences should be identified through nonparametric tests.

[Table 3. about here]

[Table 4. about here]

As a result, unlike studies, which adopted a two-sample t-test (e.g. Tonge and Moore, 2007), the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used in this research to find out the significances of differences. If the significance level is equal to or less than 0.05, the difference between the importance scores and performance scores could be concluded as statistically significant (Pallant, 2013: 240). Again, as shown in Table 4, five attributes (21, 15, 10, 14, 9), which found no statistical significances between their importance scores and performance scores, were excluded from the IPA. The rest of the attributes were placed in the IPA grid according to their mean scores (see Figure 4).

Also, the gap value for each attribute was calculated by subtracting the mean for importance from the mean for performance. A statistically significant negative gap indicates managerial attention is needed because the importance mean is greater than the performance mean. In

contrast, a statistically significant positive gap indicates that no extra management is needed. Negative gap values were found in eleven statistically significant attributes, while positive gap values were identified in seven statistically significant attributes. The most significant negative gap was identified in the wide variety of local cuisines attribute (gap value = -1.18), followed by good climate (gap value = -0.98).

It is worth noting that the gap value analysis exists as a secondary tool instead of a dominant tool in this paper to explore marketing insights. For instance, the greater the positive gap found in an attribute does not mean the greater this attribute's marketing influence. Attribute 8 good experience of sports culture and attribute 11 exciting nightlife and entertainment were placed in the Possible Overkill quadrant which means they are considered less important to Chinese students. Thus, such results are useful because they can be used to inform marketing to a particular group of tourists.

[Figure 4. about here]

Figure 4. IPA Grid (note: the number in the grid aligns with the destination image attribute number outlined above, and the location of each attribute corresponds with Table 4).

Concentrate Here quadrant

The second objective of this research is to explore favorable/unfavorable and significant/insignificant destination image attributes among a particular group of people. As we can see in Figure 4, items above the line were where management attention should be concentrated. The distance of each item above the 45% line represents the size of the discrepancy between importance means and performance means, in other words, the gap values. It is believed that the greater the gap value, the greater the managerial intervention is required (Abalo et al., 2007). Combined with the results from gap analysis, attributes "A wide variety of local cuisines" (gap value = -1.18), "Good climate" (gap value = -0.98), "Convenient transportation" (gap value = -0.82), and "Safe place to travel" (gap value = -0.64) are considered as the attributes that need attentions most, followed by "Good value for money" (gap value = -0.5) "Good quality of infrastructure" (gap value = -0.41), "Standard hygiene and cleanliness" (gap value = -0.34), "Convenience to obtain travel information" (-0.22), and "Satisfactory quality of services" (- 0.19).

Keep Up Good Work quadrant

Five attributes were identified in the Keep Up Good Work quadrant. These were "Many interesting cultural heritage & relevant events", "Good opportunities for cultural activities", "Good experience of royal family culture and relevant attractions", "Good experience of film tourism" and "Good shopping opportunities". These attributes were rated as both important and with good performance (mean > 3.00). Besides, these attributes indicated their sustainable nature as they have a higher performance score than importance score (Ziegler et al., 2012). Hence, the items located in this quadrant could be utilised as the promotion or branding materials to enhance the positive image.

Competitive Attributes quadrant

Two of all the attributes, "Natural beauty" and "Unpolluted/unspoiled environment", were located in the Competitive Attributes quadrant since their scores were higher than 4.00 in terms of both importance and performance means. It indicated that Chinese students rated these two attributes as "important" or "very important" and "agree" or "strongly agree" with

their good performance.

Possible Overkill quadrant
Two items, "Good experience of sports culture" and "Exciting nightlife and entertainment", were placed in the Possible Overkill quadrant. It indicated that Chinese students agreed that the UK offered good experience of sports culture (performance mean = 3.55) and Exciting nightlife and entertainment (performance mean = 3.52), but these two aspects were considered as less important (importance mean = 2.88 and 3.01 respectively). As a result, the marketing strategy which focuses on these two aspects would be less effective for Chinese students.

Low Priority quadrant
The items which have a higher performance score than importance score, and at the same time both of their performance score and importance score were below 3.00, would be placed in the Low Priority quadrant. Based on the results of the data, there were no attributes identified in this quadrant.

Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations

There is certainly a need to analyse cognitive image when analysing destination image to highlight links to soft power, as cognitive image helps us understand appeal and attraction that is non-coercive. In some regards, and what is important for tourism stakeholders to consider is, this means the control of the image is based on the travellers' perceptions and their insight can be tested as a way of identifying what is important to them. This is also why it is important to assess destination image with homogenous groups as the appeal and attraction will likely differ based on a range of cultural elements and what a specific consumer-base wants.

This paper employed the IPA approach to explore these images. Through the exploration of the destination image forming process, it was found that exploring the destination image of UK of Chinese students can help destination marketers:

- To identify the most critical and favorable attributes of UK in Chinese students' perspectives, then launch effective marketing strategies accordingly
- To upgrade the weak elements in the country image to boost tourists' travel experience which would contribute to a more positive image

Of the 23 attributes examined in this paper, no attributes were found in the Low Priority quadrant. Although two attributes were identified in the Possible Overkill quadrant, their magnitude in relation to the marketing strategy for Chinese students is rather limited. On the other hand, two attributes located in the Competitive Attributes quadrant can be seen as the key strengths of the UK with regard to Chinese students' images of the country. It is interesting that these two attributes are both related to the environmental aspect of the UK, covering natural and man-made environment. Of the five attributes found in the Keep Up Good Work quadrant, four were identified as statistically significant attributes. It is worth noting that three out of these four attributes are closely linked with British culture and its tangible and intangible heritage. As discussed in the previous section, the culture and heritage are assets and resources that the UK has conserved and can be utilised to enhance Chinese students' images of the UK. More than 60% of (14 out of 23) the examined attributes fell into the Concentrate Here quadrant. Of the 14 attributes, 10 were statistically

significant. Unlike the statistically significant attributes found in the Competitive Attributes quadrant or the Keep Up Good Work quadrant, it is rather difficult to find any commonality amongst these 10 attributes. However, it could still be stated that essential components of tourism such as local cuisine and transport are key attributes in this quadrant. They are the attributes significant to improve the images of the UK for Chinese students, but more efforts need to be made to achieve this objective. Unfortunately, the attribute like good climate is the one which is beyond the control of destination marketers. The points summarised in this paragraph are main academic findings of this paper.

In addition, this paper could also offer useful insights to practitioners in the fields of tourism and education. More concretely speaking, this paper clearly shows the areas the DMO for the UK as a whole (e.g. Visit Britain) and British organisations for international educational opportunities (e.g. British Council) should focus on to enhance the images of the UK amongst Chinese students. By doing so, the UK will be able to retain its popularity amongst Chinese students as a country to study at university level.

While some important outcomes have been achieved through this study, there were several limitations that need to be recognised. First, the data collection was conducted; adopting convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, and the sample size was relatively small. It is hoped that future research could be conducted using a probability sampling method and acquire more findings that can be generalised. Third, positioning analysis requires a frame of reference with competing destinations. Future researches could compare the destination image of the UK with the images of the UK's main competitors such as France or Germany to generate more concrete and specific ideas about the UK's positioning strategies.

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