A comparative analysis of college student spring break destinations an empirical study of tourism destination attributes

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE STUDENT SPRING BREAK
DESTINATIONS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TOURISM DESTINATION
ATTRIBUTES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry has become one of the fastest growing sectors in the world's economy, contributing 9.1% of world GDP and more than 260 million jobs worldwide (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). The U.S college student market has emerged as major segment within this sector, generating approximately $15 billion on annual domestic and international travel. Among the various travel patterns of college students, they are most highly motivated for spring break travel, with more than two million students traveling per season (Bai et al., 2004; Borgerding, 2001; Reynolds, 2004).

This research, through surveying college students majoring in hospitality and tourism management, analyzed the significance of college student perceptions of key spring break destination attributes. A total of 281 usable responses were subjected to the Principal Component Analysis that generated six dimensions: Breaking Away, Sun and Beach, Safety and Hygiene, Psychological Distance, Price and Value, and Social Exploration, comprised of 24 key attributes that influence a college spring breaker's destination selection decision.

An Importance-Performance Analysis (Martilla & James, 1977) was conducted based on the respondents' assessment of attributes on five of the six dimensions. The results of the IPA allowed comparison of the top four most visited destinations identified by the respondents: Daytona Beach, South Beach Miami, Panama City Beach, and Clearwater Beach/ Tampa.

The study findings may provide valuable implications for destination service providers to improve their destination's appeal in this highly competitive and lucrative market. Future research on college spring break groups located in different geographic locations within the country is highly encouraged to better understand the general characteristics of this market.

DEDICATION

For my loving family, who have been through all the highs and lows in my life with me.

For all the professors who encouraged and provided their guidance to me,
pushing me to achieve my highest goals.

And for all my friends, scattered as you are, you kept me going when
I couldn't have done so myself.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, the tourism industry has become one of the fastest growing sectors of the world, contributing 9.1% of world GDP and more than 260 million jobs worldwide (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2011). As this industry continues to globalize, competition among destination service providers grow fiercer as destinations begin to compete domestically and internationally for potential travelers. Within the tourism industry, the U.S. college student market has emerged as a major segment, generating approximately $14.8 billion annually on domestic and international travel (Bai et al., 2004; Borgerding, 2001). In addition, U.S college enrollment reached 20.5 million in 2010 and continues to grow at the rate of about 100,000 students per year (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011). The combined spending and growing potential of U.S. college students has made this market a significant business segment for the tourism industry of the United States.

School vacations and extended holidays, mainly spring break and summer vacation, provide college students with many opportunities to travel over an extended period of time (Matilla et al., 2001). In particular, college students are most highly motivated for spring break travel, in terms of traveling patterns and spending behavior. More than two million U.S. college students travel per season with an average spring break expenditure of $1,200 per person, which is more than other high-spending tourists during similar lengths of trips (Bai et al., 2004; Federation of International Youth Travel Organizations [FIYTO], 2003; Reynolds, 2004).

1.1 College Spring Break Market

Spring break is students' week-long vacation from school for most universities in the United States, ranging between February and April. During this period, thousands of students from each college migrate from their campuses to a destination where they can rest, relax, have fun, explore, and satisfy other motives for spring break travel (Ryu et al., 2010; Klenosky, 2002). In 2003, $1 billion was spent by spring breakers in Florida and Texas alone. Out of the $1 billion, $170 million was spent by spring breakers in Panama City Beach, Florida, averaging $315 per student out of 540,000 college students that visited the destination; including airline and hotel bookings, spring breakers in Panama City Beach spent an average of $615 per student in 2003 (Reynolds, 2004).

The conventional spring break environment has developed over the past four decades into one characterized as an atmosphere that provides students with opportunities to indulge in unusual activities, where their personal rules and codes of conduct are temporarily suspended, enabling a situational disinhibiting effect on students (Sonmez et al., 2006). As a result, students do not expect each other to behave according to socially accepted norms in the spring break context. Popular spring break destinations are typically known for their ongoing party atmosphere, tolerance and slack enforcement for alcohol consumption, and a sexually suggestive environment (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1998; Mattila et al., 2001).

Daytona Beach, Florida became prominent as a spring break destination by attracting 300,000 students to its shorelines in 1981. Realizing the market potential of these spring break travelers, businesses such as Budweiser and AT&T began to give away free promotional items to spring break travelers as an incentive for them to visit and revisit Daytona Beach. Panama City

Beach, Florida reached its prominence as the nation's spring break capital in 1992 when it was able to attract 500,000 students to the destination. As a response to its great popularity, the Music Television Channel (MTV) decided to move its spring break headquarters to Panama City Beach in 1995 (Bai et al., 2004).

The existing literature of studies made to understand the college students' tourism behavior has been conducted on tourism information search (Park & Kim, 2010), online travel planning (Bai et al., 2004), travel motivations (Mattila et al., 2001), tourism destination image (Ryu et al., 2010; Sirakaya et al., 2001), tourism destination positioning (Pike & Ryan, 2004), tourism attribute selection (Klenosky, 2002), and tourism involvement (Josiam et al., 1999). In spite of the attempts by a handful of researchers to understand this market and the promising business potential of the college spring break market, studies focusing on this particular segment and context remain limited.

1.2 Need for Study

Among their various traveling patterns, college students are most motivated for spring break. They spend more during spring break on average than other higher-end groups over the same time duration (FIYTO, 2003). Furthermore, college enrollment has been increasing at an annual rate of approximately 100, 000 students, making the college segment a significant market force within the tourism industry. Despite the substantial economic impact of the college spring break market on destinations, little attention has been invested into differentiating this unique market segment from other youth traveler segments in the spring break context (Sirakaya et al., 2001), and further exploration is required to fully understand the spring breaker's tourism motivations,

behavior, and experience.

Beach towns in Florida have been one of the most successful destinations, in terms of revenue generation and visitation numbers, out of the many popular spring break destinations in the U.S. (Bai et al., 2004). In a survey conducted in 2003, Panama City Beach ranked as the top spring break destination in the U.S., followed by Daytona Beach (Reynolds, 2004). Due to the overwhelming popularity of Floridian beach destinations as spring break meccas for college students, a survey on the attitudes and perceptions of college students from the central Florida region towards local Floridian spring break destinations was deemed appropriate and opportunistic for the purpose of this research project.

The study results are expected to enhance the current body of literature on the spring break context by shedding light on key spring break destination attributes and generating useful information and recommendations for destination marketing organizations and service providers. The grounds for supporting this study were based on the considerable economic impact of the U.S. college spring break market and the fitting sample demographics in this research context.

1.3 Research Objectives

Due to the economic and growth potential of the U.S. college spring break market, further research on travelers in this context may prove beneficial to destination marketing organizations and service providers. For this reason, this study proposes to identify and analyze the importance of key spring break destination attributes indicated by college student respondents. Using the established theories of destination image and positioning, the push-pull theory, and travel motivation, this study attempts to establish the relationship of the college spring break market to

other travel segments and, consequently, contribute knowledge to the existing literature that pertains to the college spring break market. Toward this end, the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) were conducted in this exploratory study to examine student spring break travel motivations. The study also evaluates the performance attributes of major Floridian college student spring break destinations based on the results of the IPA. Practical business implications and recommendations derived from the study's findings are discussed in the end to suggest what destination service providers may do in order to better serve the college spring break market. The application and understanding of IPA results in the business environment may help host destinations perform better in meeting the students' needs and wants in the spring break context by optimizing the allocation of available (limited) resources according to students' perceptions of destination attribute importance.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Destination Image and Destination Positioning

Image, as defined by Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993), "represents a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with the place" and is "the product of the mind trying to process and essentialize huge amounts of data about a place." In the context of tourism management, destination image has been one of the most vigorously studied subjects for over four decades due to its "high practical importance for destination management, marketing, and branding" (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010).

Destination image is typically studied by collecting tourist evaluations of a specific destination and generating mean values from the survey results to create a holistic image of the destination perceived by the respondents (Dolnicar & Grabler, 2004). According to Pike and Ryan (2004), destination image is the key construct in destination positioning and plays a vital role in the destination choice decisions of a potential traveler (Sirakaya et al., 2001).

The abundance in literature on destination image resulted in a myriad of views on this concept. Different destination image characteristics were identified by researchers in their attempts to understand destination image. The many characteristics of destination image illustrate the complexity of a traveler's decision-making process, that take into account internal and external factors, such as traveler characteristics, social and economic factors, and the context of travel, influencing his or her perceptions on the importance and performance of destination attributes (Gursoy et al., 2010).

Other perspectives of destination image have also added an emotional component to its

characteristics, suggesting that image is "an expression of the knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts" that a traveler has of a destination (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977; Yilmaz et al., 2009). As Gunn (1988) also stated, travelers' formation of destination image consists of "accumulating, forming, deciding, visiting, sharing (experience), returning (home), and modifying the experience gained from the destination." Therefore, destination image can be formed if there is at least a small amount of knowledge about the destination, which often times carries an emotional element for each potential traveler (Yilmaz et al., 2009).

Researchers are currently unable to reach a collective agreement on the precise definition of *destination image* due to its complex, subjective, and elusive nature. However, a common consensus is that "destination image has a direct causal impact on travel behavior" (Bonn et al., 2005) and has been heavily investigated for the development of effective destination positioning strategies (Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). Destinations must favorably or positively position themselves from their competitors in order to be selected from the potential travelers' evoked set of alternatives (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

The rising level of competition and the explosion of viable destination spots have increased confusion among potential travelers today. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for destination marketing organizations to reach through the barriers of competing and substitutable products and services to appeal to their desired target segment (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Gunn, 1988). Hence, it is critical for destination marketing organizations and service providers to understand the image of their destination in order to plan and develop an effective marketing strategy that enables them to stand out amongst their competition.

As stated earlier, it is desirable for service providers to differentiate their destination favorably from competition in the minds of potential travelers in order to be considered in the final decision-making process (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). A destination also benefits from having powerful symbolic features that positively and significantly influence potential travelers' perception of their image (Hunter & Yong, 2007). In addition, according to Fakeye and Crompton (1991), "destinations with favorable images can be expected to prosper while those with less favorable images may never be able to achieve their fullest tourism potential." Therefore, destination service providers need and want to understand how potential travelers perceive their and their competing destinations' image.

This may be accomplished by a destination positioning strategy devised after the destination marketing organization has an adequate understanding of its image perceived by potential travelers and a frame of reference for comparison with its competition. This frame of reference allows potential travelers to contrast different destinations based on specific attributes (Lovelock, 1991). The destination positioning theory suggested by Ries and Trout (1986) is based on three propositions:

First, customers are bombarded with irrelevant or useless information on a daily basis.

Second, customers have developed a defense system in their minds against this clutter.

Third, the only way to cut through the clutter to reach the customer is to use a simple and focused message.

Destination service providers can make the best decision for their businesses only if they have a comprehensive understanding of their actual and potential tourists' image toward the destination. This knowledge helps them determine whether their key destination performance attributes need

to be maintained to sustain the image or to pursue certain changes in order to alter the existing image that is not desired. In other words, the major objective of any destination positioning strategy is to reinforce positive destination images potential travelers already hold, to correct negative destination images, and/or to create a new desired image in the traveler's mind (Pike & Ryan, 2004). This allows destination service providers to optimize the match between the "benefits provided by their destination with the benefits sought by the target market" (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bonn et al., 2005).

It is particularly challenging for destination service providers to effectively position their destination amongst the numerous choices in the market because most tourism products are intangible and often compete only via images (Pike & Ryan, 2004). As a result, it is common for potential travelers to evaluate a destination based on its holistic image when they have limited knowledge about it (Um & Crompton, 1992) and act on their perceptions—that are intertwined with personal motivations, interests, self-image, and other factors—rather than on facts (Chon, 1990). Furthermore, as stated by Stephchenkova and Mills (2010), "destination image has a relativistic and dynamic nature; it changes from person to person, with time, depending on the physical proximity of the destination to the potential traveler" and with respect to its competitors. It is a composite of a wide variety of factors affecting the total destination image; these factors may be controllable, semicontrollable, or uncontrollable and contribute to the overall image of a destination (Yilmaz et al., 2009).

Baloglu (2001) posits that the more knowledgeable people are about a destination, the more they tend to have positive images of it, which underlines the importance of familiarity as a key marketing variable in identifying and segmenting potential travelers. As Pike and Ryan argued

(2004), destination familiarity potentially minimizes travelers' perceived risk level with a reassured travel experience. Although the role of familiarity has not been widely discussed in the literature as an influential factor on destination choice, in a study by Sirakaya et al. (2001), familiarity with a destination was determined to be an indirect variable in the destination decision-making process; their study findings imply an indirect effect of familiarity on destination choice via image formation.

Due to this intangible nature of tourism products, awareness and sufficient information regarding a destination is a critical factor that influences tourism behavior, such as selecting destinations and attractions (Park & Kim, 2010). Physical and cultural distance, amongst other factors, greatly influence the accuracy of a destination's image in the tourists' mind (Sirakaya et al., 2001). Even though potential travelers can easily form images of a destination with a modest amount of knowledge of the place, reality becomes more distorted the further (physically) and the more different (culturally) the traveler is from the destination of consideration (Gartner, 1993). This is supported by Yilmaz et al. (2009), whose research on pre- and post-trip image variations indicated that the image of Turkey was different between tourists who visited Turkey for the first time and those who were repeat visitors. Likewise, the closer and more familiar travelers are with a destination, the more likely they will perceive the destination positively and the more accurate their image is of the actual destination, compared to those who know very little about the destination. Their study also demonstrated a positive relationship between the tourists' number of previous visits to a destination and their willingness to return and/or recommend the destination to others.

2.2 Travel Motivations and the Push-Pull Theory

An individual's travel motivations can be defined as a set of needs that impulse him or her to participate in a tourism activity (Gursoy et al., 2010; Pizam et al., 1979). These motivations have been defined to have internal and external components that combine to influence the final decision of a traveler. Fishbein (1967) proposed that a tourist's attitude towards a destination comprised of three components that play a part in the internal and external motivations that push a tourist to travel: cognitive (rational), affective (emotional), and conative (behavioral). Cognition is the sum of the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs of what is known about a destination for a potential customer that may be internal or external; affect is an individual's favorable, neutral, or unfavorable feelings towards a destination; and conation is the intent or action component of cognition and affect, identified as the propensity or likelihood for an individual to visit a destination within a specific time frame (Gartner, 1993; Pike & Ryan, 2004; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). Conation is also considered the behavioral outcome of the combined result of cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination. Most studies have treated cognitive and affective components together as image components, or in other cases, focused on cognitive components only (Yilmaz et al., 2009).

Beerli and Martin (2004) indicated in their study that the affective component of destination image is influenced by tourists' internal motivations, while their sociodemographic characteristics influence their cognitive assessment process of the destination image. The affective associations a tourist has of a destination image are more specifically defined as the attitudes held by the tourist towards the destination in regards to its image (Leison, 2001), while the cognitive perceptions are formed through tourists' pre-existing knowledge of the destination

and have a direct influence on the overall image of the destination (Stern & Krakover, 1993).

Whereas Fishbein's theory applies to goods and services in general, Dann (1977) identified two basic motivations for travel: anomie and ego-enhancement. Anomie is the "desire to transcend the feeling of isolation inherent in everyday life and to simply get away from it all" while ego-enhancement is "derived from the need for recognition obtained through the status conferred by travel." Dann's theory was supported by Krippendorf (1987) who believes relaxation and escape motivations are the two most important psychological drives that people experience before deciding to take a vacation (Jönsson & Devonish, 2008). This makes sense, particularly, in the spring break context since most college students consider spring break as an opportunity to get away from school and the unchanging patterns of everyday life. Spring break has a disinhibiting effect that allows students to participate in activities that often contradict their personal beliefs and helps students establish a certain status as one of those who went away over the break to have fun (Mattila et al., 2001; Sonmez et al., 2006). Other researchers have found that factors such as "meeting fellow travelers" and "engaging in sports activities" also play a part in the tourist's decision-making process (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). This also demonstrates the fact that people travel primarily to satisfy their social needs.

In another study by Dann (1981), he proposed a two-dimensional perspective that consists of socio-psychological motives (push factors) and destination attributes (pull factors) in shaping travelers' destination choices. Push factors are intangible and internal motivations within a tourist's mind that predispose him or her to travel away from home (attitudes, beliefs, and images) while pull factors are tangible and specific characteristics (time, destination attributes, perceived cost, and benefits sought) pulling tourists towards a destination (Jönsson & Devonish, 2008).

Push factors are the inherent travel motivations that provide the impetus for the traveler to make the trip, while pull factors are the extrinsic value of specific destinations attributes that determine the traveler's ultimate choice of destination, when the evoked set of destination choices all fulfill the traveler's internal motivations (Josiam et al., 1999). Examples of push factors include the desire to escape, the need for rest and relaxation, and social interaction. Destination attributes as pull factors may be the physical resources available at the destination, such as sunshine, beaches, and cheap accommodation, or tourists' perceptions and expectations of the destination (Smith, 1983; Sirakaya et al., 2001).

A destination's pull factors must meet the needs of a traveler's push factors before being considered by the traveler as a potential destination (Josiam, et al., 1999). Thus, push factors precede pull factors in a tourist's decision making process, because destination choices are evaluated *after* the traveler determines his or her internal motivation to travel that enables the traveler to satisfy his or her particular needs or wants at the destination that is ultimately chosen (Klenosky, 2002). The destination selected is the one that a traveler expects would satisfy his or her needs and wants the most, while taking multiple factors, such as travel time and cost, into account.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Development of the Research Instrument

This research collected survey data using a quantitative approach, which is common and appropriate for a study that involves measuring items on perceived importance and performance across a number of dimensions. Using a quantitative methodology also enables an examination of the relationships between these items (attributes) after they are grouped into separate dimensions (Wilkins, 2010). The Principal Component Analysis was utilized to examine the underlying relationships between the attributes in order to condense them into a smaller set of dimensions most representative of the information obtained through the dataset (Pallant, 2007).

Survey data was collected on the perceptions of importance and performance of destination attributes that were identified as influential factors in the decision making process for college students from the central Florida region when choosing a spring break destination. The pool of survey items were developed through a thorough literature review of traveler perceptions in general and spring break-specific contexts and a pilot study using the snowball sampling method on students from colleges in the central Florida region.

The attributes used in the survey were drawn from existing literature, some from the general context of destination image and positioning, and others that were focused on the college spring break context. Hobson and Josiam's study (1992) indicated that most students listed their primary reason for choosing a spring break destination to be the influence of friends and/or family living near the destination. Other destination-related attributes reported included having a good spring break party reputation, warm weather, good beaches, and affordable pricing

(Klenosky, 2002). Butts et al. (1996) reported similar attributes, such as, sunny climate, well-priced accommodations, good nightlife reputation, and recommendation from others, as factors that students consider when choosing a spring break destination. In Sirakaya and McLellan's study (1997), dimensions such as "trip cost and convenience," "perceptions of safe/secure environment," and "entertainment and drinking opportunities" were factors rated high in importance for college students when selecting spring break destinations. The studies used as references to develop the survey for this study measured the same destination attributes in general, but differed in their level of detail and scope, since hotel guests, theme-park visitors, college students, and other travel groups were selected as the sample for their studies. As a result, different attributes are measured based on the characteristics of each demographic group and/or travel context.

While many destination image and positioning studies measured the cognitive, affective, and conative components of perception (Lin et al., 2007), this study only examined pull (cognitive) and push (affective) factors that motivate student travelers for spring break vacation. Although students were asked about their revisiting intentions and likeliness to share positive word-of-mouth (conative factors) regarding the destination they visited for spring break, the study was not designed to analyze this component of travel motivation. This topic is therefore only briefly discussed in the conclusion section as an area that requires further research beyond the scope of this study.

The first set of survey questions investigated the general and spring break specific traveling experience of students and their demographic profile, such as the importance of spring break travel and the destinations they have visited over spring break. A set of categorical questions

were included to collect data on demographic factors, such as gender, ethnic background, and academic standing. Then the students were asked to rate the importance and performance of each destination attribute listed, using a Likert-scale of 1 to 5, 1 for very unimportant or very unsatisfactory and 5 for very important or very satisfactory, when traveling in the spring break context. In order to generate a valid sample from the collected surveys, students were asked to evaluate the performance of the destination that they most recently visited during spring break. The survey questions were clustered by closely related items to allow respondents to focus on a particular aspect of destination attributes.

Importance and performance measures were intentionally separated for the evaluation process; the first section asked students to evaluate the importance of each item for general spring break vacation expectations while the second section asked students to evaluate the performance of each item reflecting upon their most recent spring break experience. This deliberate separation allows the evaluation of select spring break destinations on their general appeal to the college spring break market when conducting the Importance Performance Analysis. Martilla and James (1977) also suggested that separating the importance and performance measures helps to minimize compounding and order effects (Oh, 2001).

The survey was administered to students enrolled in the college of hospitality management from a university located in the central Florida region during the time of study. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the collection of the most representative sample of college student responses from the central Florida region based on this convenience sample. Twenty pilot study surveys were distributed to evaluate the face validity of the surveys through snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling, or snowballing, is a non-probability sampling technique that uses existing study respondents to recruit future respondents from their acquaintances (Goodman, 1961). This sampling technique was used to solicit voluntary participation in the pilot study by college students enrolled in different colleges and majors around the central Florida region. The pilot study responses were used as a reference for minor improvements and corrections in the survey design and were later compared to the feedback from the final set of surveys administered. The statistical similarity of responses between the pilot study surveys and final surveys verified the appropriateness of the sampling frame (non-probability sample) and the validity of the study's findings that can be applied to a majority of college students attending school in the central Florida region.

3.2 Principal Component Analysis (PCA)

The use of the multivariate statistical technique of factor analysis has increased in the past decade in all fields of business-related research (Hair, 2010). This technique has been applied to many studies on a variety of topics in the tourism and hospitality industry, including tourism information search (Park & Kim, 2010), pre- and post-trip image variations (Yilmaz et al., 2009), tourism involvement (Josiam et al., 1999), tourism destination image (Sirakaya et al., 2001), destination motivational factors (Gursoy et al., 2010), and predicting tourism behavior (Lee, 2009).

Factor analysis is a technique particularly useful for analyzing complex and multidimensional underlying structures among variables of a dataset; since the more variables exist in a dataset, the more these variables are likely to correlate with one another. By using

factor analysis, the researcher can effectively extract the smallest number of variables that are most representative of the entire dataset.

The main purpose of factor analysis is to retain the nature and character of the original dataset while reducing their number to simplify subsequent multivariate analyses for prediction purposes (Hair, 2010). Through the application of factor analysis, highly correlated variables are grouped together, while variables that have little contribution to the explanation of the overall relationship of the dataset are eliminated from further statistical analysis. Thus factor analysis produces a condensed set of variables that are grouped in composite dimensions, with a minimum loss of information, while achieving data summarization and data reduction simultaneously (Hair, 2010). The dimensions are then investigated for their collective representation of an aspect of the research topic and applied to subsequent multivariate analysis techniques.

While the basic assumption of factor analysis is that there is some underlying structure in any set of variables (Hair, 2010), statistical correlation does not guarantee variable relevance. It is the responsibility of the researcher to investigate whether or not the generated dimensions have conceptual validity and are appropriate for the application of the factor analysis technique; the data must have a statistically valid structure that is supported by conceptual foundations.

3.3 Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)

The application of the Importance-Performance Analysis for measuring customers' perception on service attributes' importance and performance was first introduced by Martilla and James in 1977. They argued that customer satisfaction research overlooked the significance

of each service attribute to consumers, resulting in the issue of overspending in areas of little concern to consumers (Janes & Wisnom, 2003). The underlying assumption of this technique is that the level of customer satisfaction is mostly derived from the customer's expectations on each attribute and the perception of performance relative to its importance level (Chu & Choi, 2000). Once the customers' expectations are clearly identified, service providers have a better chance at anticipating and fulfilling the needs and wants of their customers, as opposed to merely responding when customer dissatisfaction occurs.

The IPA has been widely accepted by various academic disciplines and industries, because it has a simple, easily understandable construct, a meaningful and practical output, and is relatively inexpensive to conduct. It is a popular method used in the hospitality and tourism industry to evaluate service performance, to identify critical factors in customer satisfaction, and is a vital marketing tool for identifying key attributes for target markets (Ryu et al., 2010). Service providers are constantly looking for ways to measure service quality and customer satisfaction in order to gain a competitive advantage, attract and retain guests, while optimizing the allocation of available resources (Janes & Wisnom, 2003; Wilkins, 2010).

In a literature review by Janes and Wisnom (2003), they identified forty-two studies that implemented the IPA to evaluate the effectiveness and attractiveness of attributes provided by hospitality service providers. Results from the IPA allow service providers to identify their internal strengths and weaknesses and their external opportunities and threats in consideration of the performance of their competitors. Besides helping service providers identify the existence and the causes of key problems, IPA is also used to set priorities for service aspects in terms of resource allocation, allowing service providers to focus more attention on attributes considered

important to customers, and less on the ones regarded with lower importance.

Attribute importance is commonly regarded as a customer's overall assessment of the significance of an attribute for a product or service (Chu & Choi, 2000). Respondents are asked to evaluate the importance of an attribute and the actual performance of the service provider on the same attribute. One of the greatest advantages of this technique is its customizability. Service providers are able to design questionnaires based on their unique needs and service or product attributes, which allows them to narrow in on their specific strengths and weaknesses when soliciting responses from their customers (Martilla & James, 1977; Janes & Wisnom, 2003). Furthermore, the results can be graphically displayed on a two-dimensional visual plot partitioned into four quadrants: 1) Keep Up the Good Work, 2) Concentrate Here, 3) Low Priority, and 4) Possible Overkill. The axes that divide the four quadrants serve as the average acceptance level or benchmark for service performance and its corresponding importance level, derived from the mean ratings of importance and performance by survey respondents.

The first quadrant reflects high importance and performance levels that are above the mean. Service provides are performing well in the attributes perceived as important by its customers. Hence, practices focused on those attributes need to be reinforced for the continual success of the operation.

The second quadrant reflects high levels of importance but below average performance. Attributes falling in this quadrant require the most attention because there is a dire need to improve the performance level to match the importance level perceived by customers (Wilkins, 2010). The inability to meet customer expectations in this quadrant may turn the experience into a dissatisfier that turns customers away from all future business.

The third quadrant reflects low levels of both importance and performance. The attributes falling in this area are treated as low priority by management for its relative insignificance perceived by customers. Traditional customer satisfaction surveys rely solely on performance measures to gauge the service operation. Without evaluating the perceived importance of attributes relative to performance, management will be led to the erroneous belief that the low performance area needs to be improved to increase customer satisfaction. However, if the attribute is not important to the customer, unnecessary attention on this aspect of service wastes valuable resources that can be used more effectively to increase customer satisfaction in other areas of the service operation.

The last quadrant reflects levels of performance exceeding importance. This implies an overallocation of resources to the attributes in this quadrant, which can be remedied by relocating the resources from this quadrant to the attributes in the *Concentrate Here* quadrant.

The importance-performance matrix allows service providers to easily interpret what attributes are important to their customers and how they perform on them at the time of study. However, it is also very important to note that the IPA needs to be performed on a continual basis to better manage changing customer needs and attitudes toward a destination, in order for service providers to maintain a competitive edge against competitors.

In an industry as fast-paced as the hospitality and tourism industry, service providers cannot afford to become complacent with their leading performance and customer satisfaction ratings among competitors, and neglect to maintain a watchful eye for future opportunities and threats. A change in customer needs and attitudes may have a significant impact on the relative positioning of individual destinations (service providers) within a customer's evoked set of alternatives.

Figure 1 Sample Importance Performance Grid
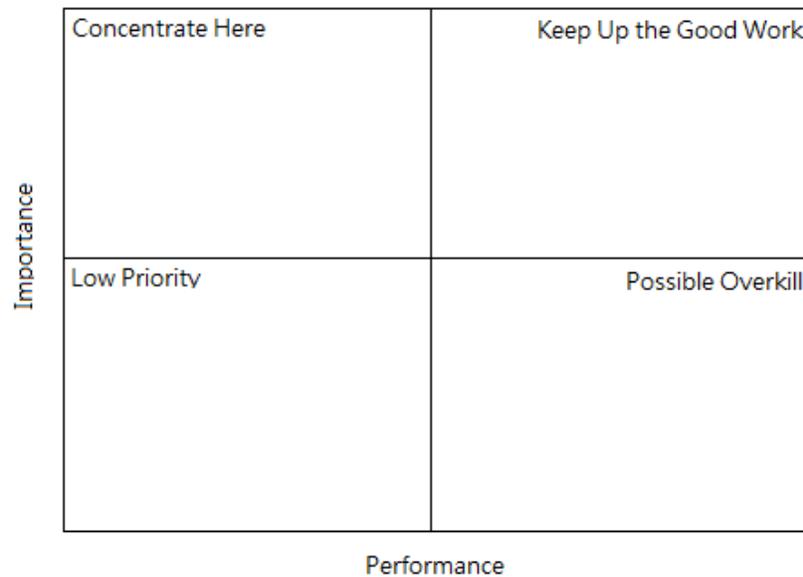
3.4 Sampling and Surveying

The survey was directly distributed to students in eight different classes between the Summer 2011 and Fall 2011 semesters, four in each, in order to secure an appropriate sampling size and distribution in the non-probability sample. The classes were selected for sampling purposes based on the permission provided by the instructors of the respective classes. As a result of directly distributing the survey to students in class, the overall response rate was 100%. This eliminated the potential disadvantage from nonresponse bias that weakens the results of many hospitality and tourism related studies (Pike & Ryan, 2004).

Out of 302 total responses, 281 usable responses were subject to data analysis, yielding a usable rate of 93%. The unusable responses either had significantly insufficient information (e.g. missing data) for practical consideration or were duplicates completed by students that were enrolled in more than one of the classes selected for sampling.

The sample size (281) is considered adequate for the data analysis requirements of this study because ten responses per attribute is considered acceptable and statistically valid when using the PCA, where 24 attributes were analyzed (Hair, 2010). The two semester frame allowed for discrepancies that may arise from differences such as time span from previous spring break vacation and student composition in terms of academic standing. Most importantly, the surveys collected from two separate sample groups at different points in time allowed for a generalizability test of the survey responses. A separate analysis was conducted on the surveys from each semester to confirm the consistency of the student response pattern, subject to minor variations, between the two sets of surveys collected from students.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 General Statistics of Sample

As college students were selected for the sample frame, academic standing was deemed more important than biological age as a demographic marker for the purposes of this study. The majority of the respondents were upperclassmen (i.e. in the last two years of their undergraduate degree); 50.9% of the respondents were in junior year standing and 34.9% were seniors. The higher proportion of upper level classmen in this study is desired because they have had more opportunities to go on spring break vacation in their college career compared to lower level classmen. The student responses averaged 2.2 spring break trips made per student and 95.2% reported having been on spring break at least once since entering college.

The majority of respondents were Caucasian (76.2%), followed by Hispanic (9%), African American (6%), and Asian (6%). In terms of gender, 29.5% were males and 70.5% were females, which adequately represents the traditionally female-dominant gender ratio of the college's hospitality school. Students were also asked about their relationship to the people in their spring break travel party. Most students indicated that they traveled with people in more than one relationship category during their most recent spring break trip: friends from college (50.9%), friends from outside college (40.6%), family (32.9%), and romantic partner (18.9%). The length of stay (in days) at the destination was three to seven (85.7%), one to two (7.7%), and more than eight (6.6%). A majority of these students have had one to three spring break travels (80.7%) followed by four to six (14.4%). About 5% of students reported never having a spring break vacation at the time the survey was collected (See Table 1).

Table 1 General Student Characteristics

Item	n	%
Gender		
Male	80	28.5%
Female	201	71.5%
Grade		
Freshman	6	2.1%
Sophomore	32	11.4%
Junior	143	50.9%
Senior	98	34.9%
Other	2	0.7%
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	214	76.2%
Hispanic	25	8.9%
African American	16	5.7%
Asian	16	5.7%
Other	10	3.6%
Religion		
Christian	136	48.4%
Catholic	60	21.4%
Jewish	25	8.9%
Other	36	12.8%
No Response	24	8.5%
# of Spring Break Trips		
0	13	4.6%
1	89	31.8%
2	76	27.1%
3	62	22.1%
4	23	8.2%
5	10	3.6%
6	7	2.5%

Daytona Beach (35.9%), South Beach Miami (28.1%), Panama City Beach (14.6%), and Clearwater Beach/Tampa (13.2%) emerged as the top four spring break destinations for college students in the central Florida region. However, when students were asked to name their most recent spring break destination, Panama City Beach (4.6%) was surpassed by Key West (7.5%) and Bahamas cruises (6.8%) in visitor counts. There is a possibility that most students visited Panama City Beach in their earlier years in college, resulting in the lower attendance numbers for the most recent trip. The overall Panama City Beach visitation numbers, however, remain higher than that of either Key West or Bahamas cruises. Therefore, Panama City Beach is retained in the destination mix for the IPA. This decision is supported by many studies in the past that have addressed Panama City Beach as the nation's spring break capital for its warm, sunny weather in spring and its tolerance for alcohol consumption on the beach (Bai et al., 2004; Josiam et al., 1999; Ryu et al., 2010).

Table 2 provides information on the average length of stay, average budget, and average number of people traveling together on their most recent spring break vacation to the top four destinations identified above.

Table 2 Spring Break General Information

Destination	Average Length of Stay	Average Budget	Average Number of People in the Party
Daytona	4.2	$342.17	9.3
South Beach	4.2	$260.83	5.3
Clearwater/Tampa	5.0	$325.00	5.0
Panama City	4.3	$363.00	4.8

Clearwater Beach/Tampa had the longest average length of stay of five days, followed by Panama City Beach (4.3), Daytona Beach (4.2), and South Beach (4.2). Students on average spent the most at Panama City Beach ($363) and the least at South Beach ($260.83). Daytona Beach received the largest traveling parties; the other destinations had around five people per party. The abnormally high average number of 9.3 people per traveling party to Daytona Beach is most probably skewed by two student responses that reported traveling with their fraternity or sorority group (parties of approximately thirty people) to the destination. Furthermore, these big traveling parties probably chose to visit Daytona Beach for its geographical proximity to the central Florida region. The convenient location of Daytona Beach in relation to the other three destinations becomes its competitive advantage in attracting college students, in terms of driving distance and traveling time.

Respondents were also asked to provide the sources of information from which they obtained the knowledge they needed or wanted for their spring break getaways. Potential travelers, including students, have frequently reported utilizing various external information sources to plan for their trips, including personal recommendations, past experience, communication media, and so on (Park & Kim, 2010). A critical aspect of a traveler's awareness of products and services is whether or not he or she has sufficient information regarding the product that is being considered for purchase. Increased knowledge on tourism related products has been proven to be substantially useful in risk reduction and uncertainty avoidance for potential travelers, due to the intangible nature of these products and services (Park & Kim, 2010). Prior experience with tourism products and services also influence customer expectations on future service encounters (Bai et al., 2004). Thus, the methods used to acquire information on

spring break destinations and the information students find may significantly influence college spring breaker behavior such as destination selection, spending budget, and length of stay.

In this study, prior experience and personal recommendations were most frequently reported as information sources that influenced the respondent's decision on where to go and what to do. A number of studies have also suggested that past experience and prior knowledge are major factors that influence purchase decision, behavior, and revisiting intension (Klenosky, 2002; Lee, 2009; Park & Kim, 2010). Third party websites, such as Travelocity and Expedia, destination websites, and other online sources also make up about one-fifth of the information source used (See Table 3). This substantial reliance on Internet sources is consistent with previous studies. Borgerding (2001) reported that the Internet was found to be the most effective method to reach college students based on the survey responses from his study and in a study conducted by Bai et al. (2004), where about 80% of college students reported that they prefer online travel agencies when making trip plans to destinations other than their home city (Park & Kim, 2010). Even with the widespread use of the Internet by college students, other traditional communication media such as magazines (print) and television commercials (broadcast) are still used by some students as information sources for deciding which destination to select for spring break.

Table 3 Spring Break Information Source

Destination	Prior Experience	Recommendation	DMO	Internet	Print	Broadcast
Daytona	70.3%	78.4%	5.4%	18.9%	16.2%	18.9%
South Beach	76.3%	84.2%	2.6%	28.9%	5.3%	21.1%
Clearwater/Tampa	77.3%	77.3%	0.0%	22.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Panama City	60.0%	70.0%	0.0%	30.0%	10.0%	20.0%

4.2 Principal Component Analysis Results

The data collected was statistically analyzed using SPSS 19.0 for Windows. The survey originally contained 42 attribute items related to the performance of a spring break destination. In an effort to identify the naturally occurring, rather than perceived, dimensions of performance, all items were investigated for their statistical significance using the PCA. It was conducted to uncover the simplest underlying structure of attribute correlations, with no cross-loading or low loading attributes, to simplify data interpretation. After several runs, the cleanest rotated component matrix was generated from an orthogonal rotation method of 24 attributes clustered into six dimensions with communality values between .420 to .862 and an average of .666 between attributes (See Appendix A). Inspection of the rotated component matrix revealed all attributes with loadings of .502 or above, except the "ability to find adventure" (.420) and "uniqueness of the destination" (.478) attributes that did not exceed the practically significant value of .5 and above.

Contrary to some previous studies, the opportunity to relax and the opportunity to do or try drugs were excluded from this study for their statistical insignificance in correlation with other attributes (Mittila et al., 2001; Sonmez et al., 2006). Communality values exceeding .5 indicate that attributes fit well with each other in the data set and the elimination of attributes with low communalities tends to increase the total variance explained (Hair, 2010). Less than half (18) of the initial 42 attributes had no loadings on any dimension, demonstrating the heterogeneity of the survey items. Each of the 24 attributes showed strong loadings in only one dimension, reflecting that there was minimal overlap among dimensions, and that each dimension was independently structured (Chu & Choi, 2000).

The PCA identified six dimensions that exceed the eigenvalue of 1.0, explaining 66.59% of

cumulative variance: Breaking Away, Sun and Beach, Safety and Hygiene, Psychological

Distance, Price and Value, and Social Exploration. The six dimensions were chosen through an

exploratory factor analysis and an examination of the reliability of the attributes under each

dimension; reliability indicates the degree of internal consistency between the attributes, or

whether or not they measure the same underlying construct. Pallant (2007) suggested that the

Cronbach Alpha coefficient value (reliability) should be above .5 to establish statistical

significance. All of the six dimensions have Cronbach Alpha values higher than .7, establishing

statistical validity sufficient for practical purposes (See Appendix A).

Two additional statistical measures were used to help assess the factorability of the data: the

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The

KMO measure tests whether or not the partial correlations among the attributes of a dataset is

appropriate for factor analysis. The value is recommended to be higher than .6, on a scale of 0.1

to 1.0, to indicate the appropriateness of factor analysis; the KMO measure of this study

was .763, exceeding the recommended value. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is used to

determine whether the attributes within a dimension correlate highly enough to provide a

reasonable basis for factor analysis (Park & Kim, 2010). Its value reached statistical significance

at .000, which is recommended to be under .05, qualifying the data as appropriate for factor

analysis (Hair, 2010).

Out of the 24 attributes extracted from the PCA, twenty (five dimensions) were used in the

IPA. The four attributes that were eliminated, named under the "Psychological Distance"

dimension, asked respondents to evaluate the importance of their experience or prior knowledge

about the destination, their familiarity with the destination, the cultural similarity of the destination with their home destination, and the similarity of the standard of living of the destination with their home destination. Although these attributes ranked high in importance for college spring breakers when choosing a destination, they could not be evaluated in terms of performance standards. As a result, they were left out from the IPA. Table 4 presents the 24 attributes retained in the order of its mean value of ratings on importance items along with their respective performance measures.

Surprisingly, the respondents considered their health concern as most important when choosing spring break destinations, followed by the right price, and so on. When the attributes are grouped into their respective composite dimensions, "Safety and Security" ranked as students' top criterion in determining destination choice, and "Price and Value" as the second (See Table 5). A more detailed analysis of the PCA results using the IPA technique is discussed in the next section.

Table 4 Attribute Importance and Performance Mean Values

Attribute	Importance Ranking	Number of Responses	Importance Mean	Performance Mean
Health at destination	1	281	4.50	4.25
Right price	2	281	4.44	4.24
Safety at destination	3	281	4.37	4.03
Ability to find adventure	4	281	4.28	4.23
Cleanliness of destination	5	281	4.27	3.82
Good monetary value	6	281	4.22	4.23
Security at destination	7	281	4.21	3.97
Access to beaches	8	281	4.16	3.95
Chance to learn new things	9	281	4.12	3.90
Quality of nightlife	10	281	4.10	3.87
Quality of beach & water sports	11	280	4.10	3.96
Good nonmonetary value	12	280	3.94	4.28
Uniqueness of destination	13	281	3.88	3.67
Warm climate	14	281	3.79	4.24
Sun, surf, sand available	15	281	3.70	4.00
Socializing opportunities	16	281	3.68	3.87
Partying opportunities	17	281	3.55	3.81
Drinking opportunities	18	281	3.48	3.93
Availability to well-known night club	19	281	2.97	3.25
Similarity of standard of living	20	280	2.92	-
Familiarity to destination	21	281	2.86	-
Experience or prior knowledge	22	280	2.83	-
Cultural similarity	23	281	2.77	-
Opportunities for sexual activity	24	251	1.98	2.84

4.3 Importance-Performance Analysis Results

The mean factor scores for overall importance and destination-specific perceived performance are presented in Table 5 and graphically depicted in Figure 2. The x-axis crosshair is plotted at the overall mean of attribute importance (3.72), while the y-axis crosshair is plotted at the overall mean for attribute performance of the four destinations (3.92). The first letter initial of each destination and the respective dimension number is used to indicate each data point on the IPA plot.

Table 5 Factor Means

Factor	Importance	Performance			
		Daytona	South Beach	Tampa	Panama City
1. Breaking Away	3.31	3.44	3.97	3.41	4.21
2. Sun & Beach	4.07	4.37	4.36	4.70	4.08
3. Safety & Hygiene	4.31	3.86	3.88	4.50	3.35
4. Social Exploration	3.93	3.58	4.03	3.52	3.88
5. Price & Value	4.20	4.13	3.97	4.21	3.70
6. Psychological Distance	2.84	-	-	-	-

The sixth factor, "Psychological Distance," was analyzed for its cognitive importance rating but is not included in the IPA because its attributes did not strictly have a performance criterion for the respondents' evaluation. It may be important to note that this dimension ranked lowest in overall importance compared to the other five performance-evaluated dimensions. Student respondents may have rated low on importance for the "Psychological Distance" dimension because most students chose to travel domestically during spring break. Nevertheless, it should

be remembered that all attributes regarding the destinations were retained through the PCA and thus are important to student satisfaction, they are simply perceived as less important when compared to other destination attributes (Oh, 2001).

Figure 2 Importance Performance Grid
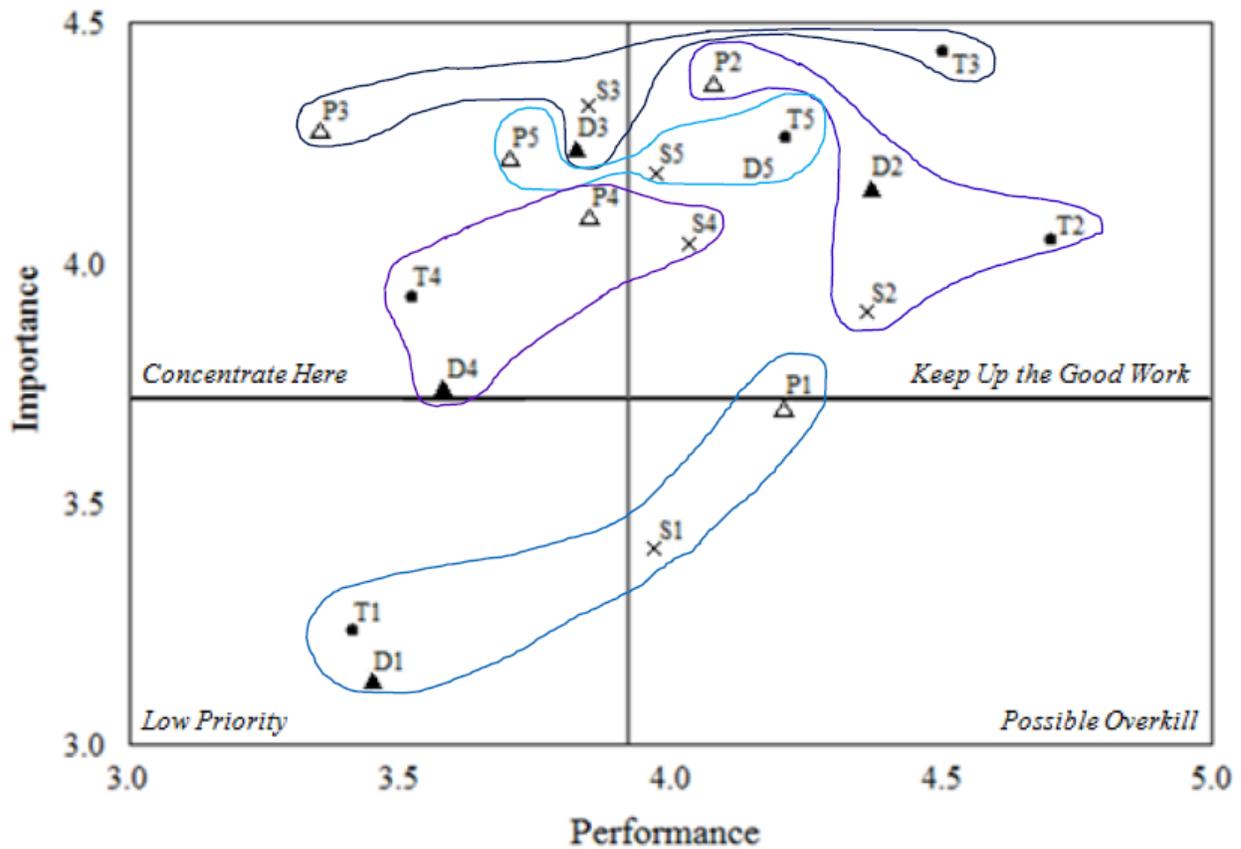
Note: P=Panama City Beach, S=South Beach, D=Daytona Beach, T=Clearwater Beach/Tampa, 1=Breaking Away, 2=Sun and Beach, 3=Safety and Hygiene, 4=Social Exploration, 5=Price and Value

Before discussing the performance of individual destinations, it is important to note that at the overall performance mean of 3.92 for all four destinations exceeds the overall level of importance (3.72) perceived by these college spring breakers. This may imply that these four destinations on average are meeting the general expectations of college spring break travelers.

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Dimension 1 named "Breaking Away," featuring five attributes—availability of well-known night club, quality of nightlife, partying opportunities, drinking opportunities, and opportunities for sexual activity—ranks the lowest among all five dimensions in importance (3.31) for respondents, with a Cronbach Alpha of .871, suggesting a valid internal consistency, and an eigenvalue of 4.798, explaining 20% of total variance. This relatively low level of importance of this dimension places destinations either in the *Low Priority* or *Possible Overkill* quadrant.

However, it can reasonably be assumed that most students might have not been honest in their responses to the corresponding questions asking about the importance and performance of a destination offering good opportunities for drug and sexual activities. As mentioned, the surveys were administered by the pen and pencil method in classroom settings where students are surrounded by their fellow classmates. Respondents may have the concern that their responses have a chance of being seen by other students. With this potential issue in mind, students either chose to provide a dishonest response, resulting in the mean of 1.98 in attribute importance and 2.84 for perceived attribute performance for sexual opportunities (See Table 4), or opt out from responding to the question; out of the 281 usable surveys, 30 surveys carried no response to this item on importance and 76 surveys were left blank on the corresponding performance question, with the response rates of 10.7% and 27.0%, respectively. It is therefore reasonable to suspect the existence of report bias in the responses. Prior research suggests that under the circumstance of report bias, underreporting is more likely to result than overreporting the frequency of problematic behavior (Midanik, 1988; Mattila et al., 2001).

In a study conducted by Sonmez et al. (2006) on college student binge drinking and casual sex activities on spring break, over 21% of males reported "having sex with someone new during

their previous break on the day they met them" (5% for females) and that spring break destination choice was based primarily on its potential for alcohol and sex, with 74% (males) and 31% (females) reporting an importance for sexual opportunities. Furthermore, spring breakers revealed that they expect to be in a "break-loose," "have fun" mood, to be pressured sexually by their peers, and to have sex with someone new if situational conditions encouraged the behavior. Other spring break motives reported in this study included opportunities for trying drugs, escaping from stress and boredom, finding adventure, meeting new people, finding romance, and "fitting in." Therefore, despite the survey results of this study, existing literature (Sonmez et al., 2006; Mattila et al., 2001) supports the inclusion of all attributes within the Break Away dimension when performing factor analysis and data interpretation.

All four destinations are performing extremely well in dimension 2 "Sun and Beach," ranked third in importance (4.07), which contains four attributes: quality of beach and water sports, availability of sun, surf, and sand, accessibility to beaches, and warm climate, with an eigenvalue of 4.039 that explains 16.82% of total variance. This dimension has a Cronbach Alpha of .861. Students who did not choose a destination for the typical sun and beach spring break were not included in the evaluation for the IPA. As a result, dimension 2 of all four destinations fall into the quadrant of *Keep Up the Good Work*.

Dimension 3 "Safety and Hygiene" is the most important dimension of all (4.31) and contains four attributes: safety, security, health, and cleanliness at the destination, with a Cronbach Alpha of .841 and eigenvalue of 2.278 that explains 9.49% of total variance. Due to this dimension's high rating in importance, all destinations but Clearwater Beach/Tampa fell into the *Concentrate Here* quadrant, indicating a need for improvement. Panama City Beach in

particular is performing the poorest with a mean rating of 3.35 (See Table 5). The reasoning

underlying the high importance of this dimension is that college students expect spring break

partying and alcohol consumption to "get messy." With students getting drunk and sick from

drinking, it is not surprising that their counterparts expect service providers to act quickly and

efficiently on the situations that arise. Inability to perform up to par in this aspect may result in a

serious dissatisfier for future spring breakers. Regardless of how well a destination performs in

other aspects that are also important for college students, failure to meet their minimum

expectations on "Safety and Hygiene" will turn all potential spring breakers away.

The fourth dimension, "Social Exploration" includes four attributes: chance to learn new

things, socializing opportunities, uniqueness of destination, and ability to find adventure.

Dimension 4 has a Cronbach Alpha of .557 with an eigenvalue of 1.591 that explains 6.6% of

total variance. In their study in 2003, Echtner and Ritchie also discovered that social needs is an

important travel motivator for people. This dimension clusters near the center of the IPA grid,

with South Beach in the *Keep Up the Good Work* quadrant, while the rest of the destinations are

in *Concentrate Here.* It is interesting to note that the low importance rating for Daytona Beach

almost puts this dimension in *Low Priority*.

The last dimension, "Price and Value," ranks second in importance (4.20) and is comprised

of three attributes: good monetary and nonmonetary value and right price, accounting for 5.37%

of variance, and an eigenvalue of 1.289 and Cronbach Alpha of .767. Although identified as a

less important factor than hygienic concerns for college spring breakers, other studies have

suggested that the perceived cost of vacation is of great importance to potential student travelers

and that destination service providers must market their vacation as a bargain representing good

value to this market segment (Sirakaya et al., 2001). Of all four destinations, only Panama City Beach is underperforming in this dimension while the other three need to *Keep Up the Good Work*.

By considering the overall performance of each individual destination, Clearwater Beach/Tampa is determined to be the strongest performer in the college spring break market. It has the highest ratings in terms of performance for "Sun and Beach," "Safety and Hygiene," and "Price and Value," the dimensions that are considered most important by these spring breakers when evaluating a destination. More importantly, since all four destinations are performing well in the "Sun and Beach" dimension, destinations appear to have to compete in the "Safety and Hygiene" and "Price and Value" dimensions in order to gain a competitive edge over other destinations with homogeneous product and service offerings. However, Clearwater Beach/Tampa needs to work on improving the "Social Exploration" dimension, while leaving "Breaking Away" as it is in the *Low Priority* quadrant.

South Beach is the second best performing destination as a whole. It is meeting expectations for "Price and Value" and is best performing in terms of offering "Social Exploration" opportunities to the spring breakers. It is performing slightly below average in "Safety and Hygiene," but still higher compared to Daytona Beach and Panama City Beach.

Daytona Beach is the average performer, doing well in "Price and Value" but performing under expectations for "Safety and Hygiene" and "Social Exploration." However, Daytona Beach has the comparative advantage of being the closest drive for the majority of students attending colleges in the central Florida region.

Finally, Panama City Beach seems to place last in this destination-competition set. It is also performing well in the "Sun and Beach" dimension, but is ranked the lowest in performance among the four. It is overperforming and outperforming all other destinations in the "Breaking Away" dimension, which may indirectly suggest why it is such a popular spring break destination for college students. Panama City Beach is very laidback on its laws and regulations regarding alcohol consumption; for example, drinking is permitted on beaches (Mattila et al., 2001). However, in terms of "Safety and Hygiene" and "Price and Value," Panama City Beach is performing the worst, with these dimensions falling in the *Concentrate Here* quadrant. Not only are these two dimensions the two competing areas for destinations vying the college spring break market, if it does not perform well in hygienic practices, Panama City Beach may be turning away many potential college spring break travelers by performing below par.

Based on the evaluation of the survey results, Clearwater Beach/Tampa should work on keeping its lead as a spring break destination. Clearwater Beach/Tampa and South Beach seem to possess a valued competitive edge compared with Daytona Beach and Panama City Beach in the "Price and Value" and "Safety and Hygiene" dimensions. On the other hand, Daytona Beach needs to continue to maximize its benefit in an advantageous location, while Panama City Beach has plenty of room for improvement in all dimensions. Panama City Beach cannot simply rely on its long-standing spring break destination reputation to continuously draw college spring breakers in. The widespread use of the word of mouse may potentially pull Panama City Beach from the number one spot in the college spring break market.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This study was set up to understand the underlying relationships between destination attributes that college students consider when planning for their next spring break vacation. This goal was achieved by identifying and analyzing the importance and performance of select spring break destination attributes based on student survey responses, and graphically depicting the results on a two-dimensional grid. The major finding of this study is that college students consider factors such as health, safety, security, and cleanliness as most important when choosing a spring break destination. The price and value of goods and services offered at the destination rank second in importance, and then the features of warm weather, beach, and water sports available, third.

Using the Principal Component Analysis, this study categorized 24 destination pull-attributes into six dimensions: Breaking Away, Sun and Beach, Safety and Hygiene, Psychological Distance, Price and Value, and Social Exploration. The application of the Importance Performance Analysis technique in this study has helped to group the destination selection dimensions onto a grid of four identifiable quadrants for better understanding of how students perceive each destination's performance. The IPA grid allows service providers to identify their strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of college students and to prioritize attributes by students' perceived level of importance, which will also improve destination service providers' understanding of factors that increase spring breakers' satisfaction levels. The dimension "Psychological Distance" was left out of the IPA because the attributes did not have a

clearly defined performance criterion appropriate for students' evaluation.

The resulting IPA grid has illustrated that Clearwater Beach/Tampa is performing the best, taking the lead in "Sun and Beach," "Safety and Hygiene," and "Price and Value." In contrast, Panama City Beach is lagging behind other destinations, performing the worst in "Sun and Beach," "Safety and Hygiene," and "Price and Value." Although Daytona Beach is not particularly strong in any of the dimensions, it receives the highest visitation numbers from college spring breakers from the central Florida region due to its convenient location easily accessible for students. Students have a greater flexibility, when choosing to visit Daytona Beach, in terms of time of travel (within a day), due to its physical proximity that saves on traveling distance and time consumed.

The study findings suggest that destination service providers are more likely to perform better than comparable destinations if they are able to identify the push and pull factors that motivate college spring break travelers to select a particular destination for their vacation (Josiam et al., 1999). By understanding the changing needs and wants of their target market, destination service providers will be able to better serve and satisfy their customers. In the context of this study, in order to appeal to the U.S. college student market, destination service providers and marketers need to focus on the safety, security, hygiene, price and value aspects of their goods and services. Through the use of online social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and even the newly emerging Pinterest, service providers will be able to track and manage changing student demands in a timely and efficient manner. The positive impacts of their efforts will be maximized if they apply this understanding when designing marketing communication media to promote their destination to college spring break travelers, such as

allocating more time and resources to online promotional vehicles.

5.2 Marketing Implications

Over time, it has become increasingly difficult for destination service providers to cut through the competing noise and position their destination favorably in the minds of potential travelers (Pike & Ryan, 2004). A destination's image is critical to the survival of destination service operations because many travelers' selection of a destination are based on their holistic view of the overall destination, rather than on its specific attributes (Um & Crompton, 1992; Sirakaya et al., 2001; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010). It is therefore important for destination service providers to develop an effective positioning strategy that is spontaneous to changing needs and wants; failure to position competitively in the customers' minds places destinations at a significant disadvantage (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991).

The study results may provide important practical implications for destination service providers that allow them to better address specific customer needs in order to gain a competitive advantage over others serving similar market segments (Janes & Wisnom, 2003). Based on the survey results, strategies can be developed from the current destination image in the mind of customers by deciding which desired image of the destination should be reinforced through effective means of marketing communication (Dolnicar & Grabler, 2004).

As identified above, the results of this study have indicated that "Sun and Beach," "Safety and Hygiene," and "Price and Value" are the dimensions that are considered most important for the respondents. Consequently, the four destinations identified by the respondents need to work on their respective areas that require improvement as presented by the study results. For example,

Tampa needs to continue to market the three dimensions that it performs exceedingly well in while it needs to find ways to improve on the "Social Exploration" dimension. On the other end of the spectrum, Panama City Beach would probably benefit by continuing to market itself as the most spring break friendly destination with lax rules on alcohol consumption and work on the areas that are underperforming, perhaps one dimension at a time. Depending on the focus of the marketing message, these destinations can design radically different marketing communication tools to reach out to their desired market group in a creative manner.

Another strategy that destinations can implement is to uncover people's undiscovered push factors for travel motivation rather than appealing to the pull factors of destination attributes. Destinations should be able to market how each of the customer's unsatisfied needs can be met by the service providers in order to draw a customer in, rather than focusing on tangible destination attributes that may not address a customer's actual need or desire. For example, knowing that most students come to Panama City Beach because of its spring break friendly environment, this is the selling point that the destination should be marketing, rather than tangible destination attributes such as warm weather and sunny beaches because it is not an aspect where the destination can distinguish itself from others competing for this market segment.

In order to capture the lucrative and growing college student market, destination service providers are highly recommended to focus their communication efforts toward this segment through online sources on the Internet. It is not only the major tool for information search for most college students, but the online market is able to attract a large base of customers and represents great economic value for service providers. This study found that at least 20% of

students used some type of online source to plan or get information for their spring break vacation. In addition, they depend around 60-80% on recommendations and personal experience, the remaining people also use print and broadcast communication channels as sources of information. Another study has also indicated that college students' receptiveness to online promotions and discount deals overpower the traditional channels of destination marketing such as recommendations and positive word of mouth (Bai et al., 2004). Furthermore, online travel planning seems to be the preferred choice of vacation planning and purchasing for college students. As many as 54% of students have reported having purchased travel tickets online and will probably continue to use the Internet more often than traditional channels of distribution to plan vacations (Bai et al., 2004).

It is also important for destination service providers to keep in mind that different college students often rate several attribute-dimensions at similar levels of importance, which indicates that the importance of one attribute may be a function of multiple motivational forces (Klenosky, 2002). In other words, people may have multiple different reasons for valuing the same attribute or dimension (Sirakaya & McLellan, 1997). For these reasons, a destination positioning strategy should be implemented to effectively and consistently communicate the desired image of the destination to potential customers in a way that is meaningful to them, and deliver on their promises.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, this study used convenience sampling on college students in a single college campus located in central Florida and respondents were not randomly

selected. The nature of the sample therefore limits the external validity of the study results compared to the average U.S. college student population. While some destination choices may overlap, college students from other regions of the U.S. may consider different potential destination sets, which make the results of this study less generalizable for those students. However, the study results are expected to represent the general student population of the college selected for sampling purposes and are applicable to a great number of students attending colleges in the central Florida region.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the surveys administered were lengthy, taking students approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Student participants may have been prone to provide answers in haste due to the lack of concentration and patience, possibly resulting in problems such as accidental skipped questions and inaccurate responses.

The results from the study alone cannot be used to assess whether the four destinations indicated in the surveys truly compete against each other for the same target market. The four destinations used in the study were identified by the spring breakers who presumably consider these in the same competition set when planning for their spring break travel. Further research is required to examine the true relationship between this destination-competition set.

The time constraint on this research project also permits fewer survey responses than preferred. In order to establish higher external validity of the study results, it is necessary to sample different student populations (e.g. different colleges or different majors) based on the influences of geographic location, academic standing, and the number of times students have been on spring break travel, to name a few.

The use of the Principal Component Analysis in combination with the Importance-Performance Analysis has enhanced the validity of the results generated from IPA and is a common method used by hospitality and tourism industry studies today (Janes & Wisnom, 2003; Park & Kim, 2010; Pike & Ryan, 2004). As previously mentioned, the purpose of PCA is to retain the nature and character of the original attributes while reducing them to simplify subsequent multivariate analysis (Hair, 2010). By using the PCA as a preliminary step to derive meaningful attributes and dimensions to incorporate into the IPA, the extension to evaluate PCA-derived dimensions has enhanced the suitability of the IPA for the comparison of destination attributes. Despite the IPA's popularity and ease of application, with the help of the PCA, there are several conceptual and practical issues of this technique commonly overlooked by researchers and service providers alike. Among the downfalls of the IPA enumerated by Oh (2001), two have been deemed pertinent and thus worthy of discussion for this study.

First of all, many IPA studies have not considered the potential correlation between importance and performance. As implied by Martilla and James (1977), perceived importance has a significant implication on customer satisfaction in a manner that establishes importance and satisfaction as antecedents of performance perceptions. The relationship between importance, satisfaction, and performance suggests that importance may present some additive or interactive effect on perceived performance. It is possible that a customer's evaluation of performance is influenced by the perceived importance of an attribute; the customer may have preconceived ideas about an attribute even before actually experiencing the service or product. In other words, the more important the attribute is to the customer, the more likely the customer will be inclined to evaluate performance positively and the less important the attribute is to the customer, the less

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likely the customer will evaluate performance favorably. Customers have a higher awareness for the quality of products and services that they consider important while often overlooking attributes of less significance to them, and therefore are unable to provide an accurate evaluation of the attribute's performance.

For this study, the importance and performance measures of the dimension "Breaking Away" potentially exhibit this underlying relationship. As discussed previously, students' responses to the question on opportunities for sexual activity are questionable in their level of honesty. At the same time, it substantiates the positive correlation relationship suggested above. This dimension included attributes on quality of night life (4.10), availability of well-known club (2.97), partying opportunities (3.55), drinking opportunities (3.48), and sexual opportunities (1.98). Specifically, the mean importance rating for sexual opportunities was as low as 1.98, and 2.84 for performance while other attributes in the same dimension were rated higher, on both performance and importance items (See Table 4). However, while many dimensions were clustered in the quadrants *Keep Up the Good Work* and *Low Priority*, that exemplify this underlying positive correlation relationship, seven out of twenty dimensions clustered in *Concentrate Here*. This phenomenon potentially frees the researcher from the concern for the predetermined bias discussed above; it seems that respondents were trying their best to provide the most objective feedback. Regardless, this type of between-attributes correlation in importance and performance potentially undermines the validity of practical suggestions implied from the IPA results.

In addition, the goal of IPA is inconsistent with the strategic philosophy of hospitality firms today. Service providers are always trying to "go above and beyond" customer expectations and

"wow" the guest, because customer satisfaction theories suggest that perceptions of high service quality are achieved when services delivered are better than what customers expect (Oliver, 1997). Yet, IPA views this performance as better-than-wanted, or *Possible Overkill*, where resources should be redirected to an area of greater need (i.e. *Concentrate Here*). This poses a potential misclassification of attribute performance according to IPA concepts, because most intangible service attributes provided by hospitality firms are their points of competitive advantage that distinguish them from competitors. More importantly, extra performance in service usually yields higher customer satisfaction without the overuse of resources, such as politeness and courtesy. Also, service providers are given a false sense of security falling into the *Keep Up the Good Work* quadrant when those attributes are the areas that require special attention not only in maintaining the performance standards, but also in improving them because they are the potential areas where a hospitality firm can establish its points of difference and create a sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, performance that exceeds importance may actually be desirable for a service provider, especially when the extra effort does not require a corresponding amount of resource input.

Since the spring breakers' perceptions of destinations in this study were limited to Daytona Beach, South Beach Miami, Clearwater Beach/Tampa, and Panama City Beach, caution needs to be practiced when applying the findings of this study to other spring break destinations. College students in other parts of the nation may have a different evoked of destinations set based on their geographic locations, such as the Midwest or Northeastern universities. Despite the limitations of this study in is this regard, existing literature lends support to the validity and generalizability for a number of the study results. The sample has reported an emphasis on

destination attribute dimensions such as "Safety and Hygiene" and "Price and Value," which are consistent with prior study findings on the college spring break market. Even though college students located in different geographic regions may have different preferences for spring break destinations, they look for the same attributes in whichever destination they chose to visit. Therefore, while the research findings specific to central Florida college students may not be applicable to the general U.S. college market, some concepts and foundations may still be utilized as the basis for future research in this travel context.

Further research using the IPA to assess various college spring break markets and spring break destinations is highly encouraged to better understand the different variables and factors present for the general characteristics of this market. It is recommended that future research conducted on college students in the spring break context include conative components of travel motivation and behavior. The time constraint of this study prevented a more in depth analysis on the study sample in this concept.

The overall goal of this study is to enhance the understanding of the role spring break destination attributes play for the college spring break market when evaluating destination options. Ultimately, the research findings are expected to offer insightful implications for destination positioning strategies in the college spring break markets; the present study is a step towards that end.

Appendix A: Factor Loading and Reliability Test

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Dimensions	Factor Loading	Factor Communalities	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative % of Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Breaking Away (5)			4.798	19.993	19.993	0.871
Partying Opportunities	0.904	0.862				
Drinking Opportunities	0.813	0.748				
Availability of Well-Known Night Club	0.801	0.676				
Quality of Nightlife	0.784	0.666				
Opportunities for Sexual Activity	0.632	0.502				
Sun & Beach (4)			4.039	16.828	36.822	0.861
Quality of Beach and Water Sports	0.851	0.785				
Accessibility to Beaches	0.849	0.790				
Availability of Sun, Surf, and Sand	0.844	0.757				
Warm Climate	0.704	0.553				
Safety & Hygiene (4)			2.278	9.493	46.314	0.841
Security at Destination	0.870	0.785				
Safety at Destination	0.847	0.773				
Health at Destination	0.793	0.651				
Cleanliness of Destination	0.688	0.557				
Psychological Distance (4)			1.987	8.278	54.593	0.806
Past Experience/Prior Knowledge of Destination	0.848	0.758				
Level of Familiarity with the Destination	0.789	0.576				
Cultural Similarity	0.749	0.710				
Similar Standard of Living	0.701	0.715				

Dimensions	Factor Loading	Factor Communalities	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative % of Variance	Cronbach's Alpha
Price & Value (3)			1.591	6.628	61.221	0.767
Good Monetary Value	0.827	0.726				
Right Price	0.807	0.694				
Good Nonmonetary Value	0.749	0.627				
Social Exploration (4)			1.289	5.373	66.593	0.557
Chance to Learn New Things	0.802	0.667				
Uniqueness of Destination	0.603	0.478				
Socializing Opportunities	0.529	0.507				
Ability to Find Adventure	0.427	0.420				

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