

Service quality at theme parks

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of the customer's attitude to a product is essential for the market analysis. This type of analysis can identify the factors that contribute to a higher level of customer satisfaction, through its contribution to planning of effective marketing strategies. Service quality information can be used by marketing professionals to manage consumer expectations or for implementing quality improvement, which lead to higher overall customer satisfaction, brand reputation and product sales. A modified Importance – Performance Analysis (IPA) model was used for a sample of 655 E-Da World theme park visitors in Kaohsiung, Taiwan where the gap between importance and performance was evaluated. The findings indicate that managers of E-Da theme park should focus on safety and value for money since they to have high importance and low performance. The research findings indicate that IPA is an effective model and has the potential to become a valuable strategic management and decision-making tool. This paper contributes to the literature by extending the use of importance-performance model for theme park management decision making

Keywords: Service quality, Theme Park, Importance- Performance Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Service quality has become a common term among scholars and managers since the emergence of the service-based economy as an important part of the world economy. There have been a lot of studies on service quality in attempt to define and evaluate this concept (Martilla and James 1977, Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. 1988, Lages and Fernandes 2005, Tsang, Lee et al. 2012). If good service quality information is useful for service improvement and more effective marketing strategies, then the question arises as how to precisely identify the decisive elements that match customer satisfaction and must be frequently taken into consideration by managers and researchers.

The theme park industry has been a very competitive sector for a long time now as the market is filled with a lot of operators (Martin and Mason 1987, Grönroos 2000) and new studies suggest the focus on pricing or number of attractions is no longer an effective strategy for theme parks to draw more customers (Tsai and Chung 2012). Today it is claimed that, theme parks should concentrate on providing high quality service to satisfy customers' expectation (Birenboim, Anton-Clavé et al. 2013). To do this it is important for theme parks to constantly measure their service quality which will allow them to better understand customer's attitude and direct their strategies more effectively.

This paper has two objectives: (i) to identify key attributes that influence theme park choice from visitors' perspective and (ii) to investigate service quality of a theme park in Taiwan. The findings will be applied to improving service quality which will serve as the basis for theme park stakeholders to improve their service strategies in response to customer needs. In this study we are trying to answer three important questions:

Firstly, what is the expectations of them parks visitor? Secondly, is there a gap between the perceptions and expectations? Finally, which strategies should theme park managers follow to achieve the desirable level of service quality?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality

Since the 1970s, the world has seen a shift toward service-based economy (Lages and Fernandes 2005). The service sector has grown at ever-faster pace and more companies are now concentrating on selling services rather than goods (Szymanski 2001). Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. (1988) claimed that organizations able to ability to satisfying customers with their services can improve profitability. This fact raises a need for insights into service quality and the development of analysis tools that help companies or researchers understand how to improve their performance. Lewis and Booms (1983) defined service quality as a measure of how well the service provided satisfies customer expectations. Therefore, a quality service must consistently meet customer expectations. However, it is not an easy task to evaluate service quality precisely. Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. (1985) suggested that there are three key characteristics of services that organizations and scholars need to take into consideration if they want to have a thorough measure of service quality. These characteristics are intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability (Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. 1985, Schneider and White 2004, Tsang, Lee et al. 2012).

The role of managing service quality has become critical for theme parks because of the rapidly changing environment in which they operate. There have been many studies and findings for the theme park industry on this topic (Dzeng and Lee 2007, Heo and Lee 2009, Tsai and Chung 2012, Tsang, Lee et al.

2012). For example, Moscardo and Pearce (1986) claimed that historic theme parks can help domestic tourists to have more knowledge about their history and culture. In terms of strategic and marketing perspective, there are also lots of findings. (Roest, Pieters et al. 1997) found out the difference in benefits between singles and families with young children. In their 2009 study, Heo and Lee (2009) found a significant relationship between customer dissatisfaction and long waiting time and congestion. Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is also popular tool for service quality management which has been performed and studied by many scholars on theme parks and other types of parks (Tonge and Moore 2007, Coghlan 2012, Taplin 2012).

Analyzing visitor behavior is another useful way to help theme park managers to understand how their customers use the various elements of park, such as rides, cafes, restaurants, etc (Narayan and Prasad 2008) and also to know if the placement and combination of elements match visitors' expectation (Vassiliadis, Priporas et al. 2013). Yalowitz and Bronnenkant (2009) suggested that theme parks can improve the resource allocation if staff are placed on activity of high demand to serve customers' demand in the shortest possible time. Park managers can also consider using different means to make visitors stay longer at profit-making places and at the same time identify which activities are least engaging for visitors (Tsai and Chung 2012).

Findings from previous studies show that visitors share some common features: visitors usually choose to go to theme parks at weekend or during a long vacation and remain there for between 3 and 4 hours (Yalowitz and Bronnenkant 2009, Tsai and Chung 2012). As Birenboim, Anton-Clavé et al. (2013) said , visitors spend 50% of their time on rides, 24% on attending show, 19% on dining in restaurants and 3% on

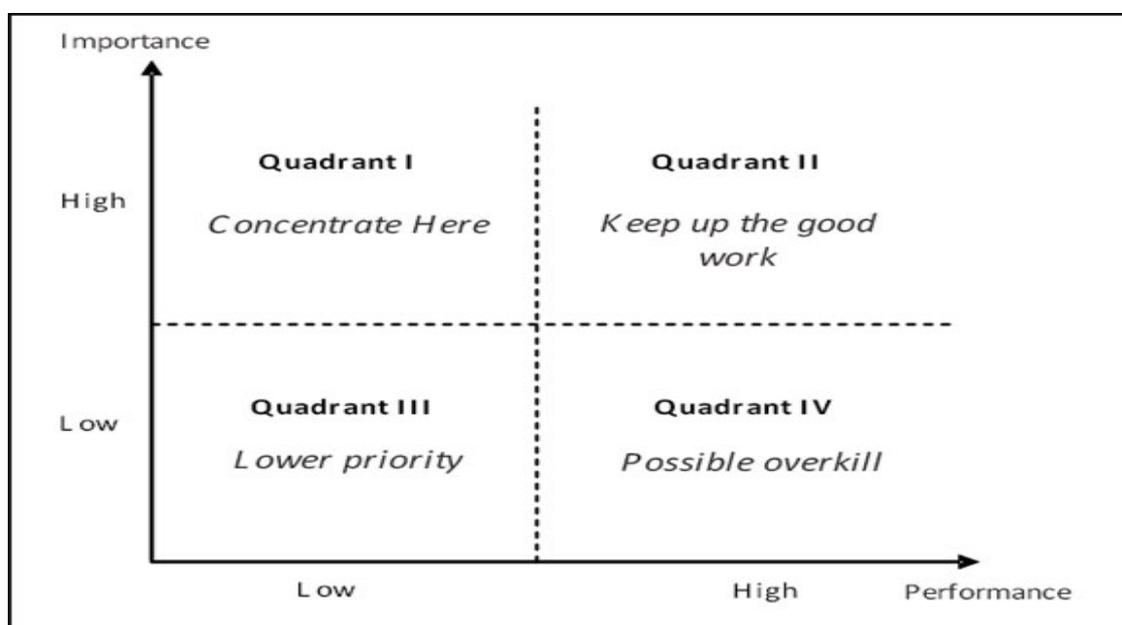
shopping while only 2% of time is for games. The movement of visitors is higher during morning and when the place is crowded in peak seasons (Alexander, MacLaren et al. 2012, Vassiliadis, Priporas et al. 2013). Significant problems are that people tend to gather at certain places while other area nearby are left vacant at the same time (Tsai and Chung 2012) And the importance of weather conditions since----visitors prefer going to theme parks on non-rain days (Joo, Kang et al. 2012).

There have been various attempts to measure the quality of service. One of the most popular approaches is the “SERVQUAL” model which includes five dimensions of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. 1985, Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. 1988) tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al. 1988). However, the applicability of SERVQUAL model has been questioned by many researchers as they believe it is too generic (Boulding, Kalra et al. 1993). In an attempt to modify the SERVQUAL model to make it more applicable, Tsang, Lee et al. (2012) introduced a modified SERVQUAL model called THEMQUAL. In this model, the authors changed one dimension in the standard SERVQUAL and added one more dimension to the model. Six dimensions of THEMQUAL model are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and access, assurance, empathy and courtesy. Another instrument to measure the quality of service is the “SERPVAL” model introduced by Lages and Fernandes in 2005. This multi-item tool has four constructs which are living communication, peaceful life, social recognition and social integration (Lages and Fernandes 2005).

Another instrument to evaluate service quality is Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) model was pioneered by Martilla and James (1977) and has been applied widely by many organizations and researchers in order to the strongest performance factors in customer satisfaction (Enright and Newton 2004,

Zhang and Chow 2004, Vassiliadis, Siomkos et al. 2006) . The IPA model seeks to identify two areas of customer attributes: the importance to customers and performance level in delivery. Through the analysis of the mean performance and mean importance for specific attributes managers can gain a better understanding of the factors that (i) are performing well, (ii) are underperforming, (iii) are low priority and (iv) are at risk of overinvestment (Coghlan 2012). These four classifications can be shown in the importance – performance grid. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Importance performance grid



The wide acceptance and application of IPA technique is because this method stands out as an easy-to-use and effective technique for companies to find out which factors to focus on and develop their marketing strategies (Hansen and Bush 1999). Tyrell and Okrant (2004) said that IPA is useful for facilitating communication between managers and establishing organizational focus. From findings of importance - performance analysis companies can make better decisions on setting improvement priorities, continuing investment on the best factors to ensure customer satisfaction and identifying areas of “possible overkill” or

“acceptable” disadvantage where competitive weakness is not a major factor in gaining customer support (Matzler et al., 2004).

In terms of tourism management, many useful findings have been discovered by scholars using the traditional and modified IPA technique. For example, factors such as cost, security, accommodation and quality of food have been proven as critical for the growth of rural tourism (Wade and Eagles 2003, Hall, Kirkpatrick et al. 2005, Deng 2007, Gopal, Shilpa et al. 2008) . Fotiadis and Vassiliadis (2010) have also claimed that scenery/natural attractions, cost and friendliness of local people play an important role in quality service. In addition they) found that the greatest positive gap lies on attributes “nightlife”, “safety” and “quality of food”. A negative gap was determined for “scenery/natural attraction”, “cost” and “transportation” when assessing the IP model for a????.

Taplin (2012) used a modified IPA technique called Competitive Importance-Performance Analysis (CIPA) along with the standard IPA to observe and provide insights for the management in an Australian wildlife park.. From the traditional IPA results, Taplin (2012) found out that there is a significantly positive difference in the attribute “having a rest” while the attribute “seeing wildlife/birds/plants” gave the greatest negative gap. However, the correlation between performance and importance under CIPA gave different result (Taplin 2012); in a particular significantly larger positive gaps are found in the attributes “information concerning attractions at the park” and “knowledgeable staff”. On the basis of this, Taplin (2012) suggested that CIPA should be employed along with IPA in order to provide companies thorough insights about their performance and their position versus competitors. Using an IPA iMikulic and Prebezac (2008), Coghlan (2012) discovered that reef tourism segment of people could be divided into six

categories include: frustrates, dissatisfies, hybrids, satisfiers and delighters. In addition, Coghlan (2012) proposed that there are some attributes which cannot be controlled by operators although they significantly influence performance evaluation, such as. weather, coral quality and marine biodiversity. It is questionable whether such factors should be included in managerial oriented results of IPA.

According to our knowledge of the area, many studies examined service quality in theme park, but none of them used the Importance-Performance analysis to evaluate service quality in a theme park in Taiwan. Therefore, IPA model shall be used as the analysis tool in this paper to provide service quality information on E-Da theme park. Importance Performance Analysis has been widely accepted and applied among researchers and many organizations. For theme parks, this type of analysis is a good choice compared to other techniques thanks to its ease of application and effectiveness in specifying important performance factors that generate customer satisfaction (Enright & Newton, 2004; Zhang & Chow, 2004; Vassiliadis et al., 2006). This is especially important because service quality information is critical in decisions about quality improvements or marketing strategy. Based on strategic recommendations presented in IPA data, theme parks can set clearer organizational focus on specific performance factors and develop better marketing strategies.

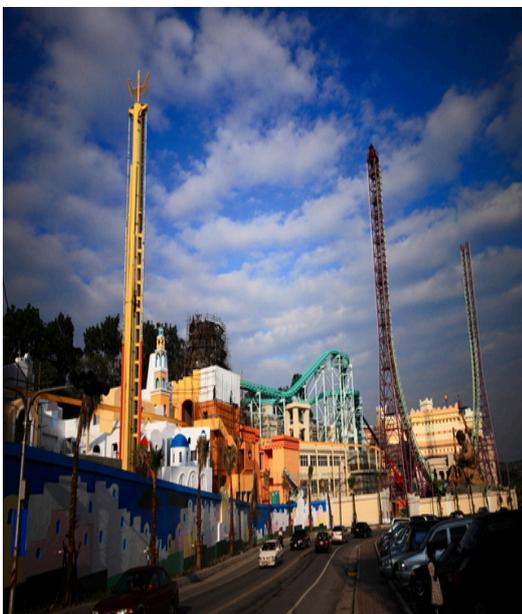
METHOD

E-Da Theme Park

E-Da Theme Park is a part of E-Da World, a new shopping and entertainment district located north of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The essential theme of the park is based on the use Greek mythology which differentiates E-Da theme park from others. In this theme park, customers can visit three zones featuring

the Trojan horse, the Greek ancient temple, and the Aegean Sea Village. Lying next to the theme park is E-Da Mall, a large outlet mall. In this center, visitors can choose to buy products from 300 famous brands as well as enjoying a range of family and children entertainments including movies, games, ice-skating, baseball, ferris wheel and even go-kart racing. To evaluate visitor's behavior and service quality in E-Da theme park in a questionnaire was developed based on Taplin's, 2012 work as well as other examples from the literature.

Figure 2: A view of E-Da theme park



There are three parts in the questionnaire. The first part consists of demographic questions on visitors such as gender, family status, educational Level, income and residence. The second part investigates customers' experience and satisfaction level on theme parks in general. The third part directly involves visitors' experience and satisfaction with E-Da theme park using the standard IPA instrument.. The questionnaire was distributed on December 2012 by a face-to-face method. The questionnaire was distributed on 689 people but 655 are suitable for analysis.

RESULTS

Reliability and validity analysis

Total value of reliability analysis were 0.919 for the 53 questions of our questionnaire and the alpha reliability values for the importance and performance items were 0.960 and 0.961 respectively (Table 1).

The Cronbach Alpha statistical test is applied to check the reliability of the evaluation tool scale used in the paper. The α coefficient was set higher than the minimum value of 0.70 ($0.80 > 0.70$). This value has been widely recognized for the alpha coefficient (Nunnally 1978, Cortina 1993, Netemeyer, Bearden et al. 2003).

As shown in Table 1, the subscales coefficient was above 0.70 which is acceptable for the limit of internal consistency.

Table 1: Reliability analysis

Reliability Statistics		
	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Total	.919	53
Importance	.960	22
Performance	.961	22

In this paper, the content validity is built on the literature review and experts' opinions (McTavich 1997, Malhorta and Birks 2006). Information acquired from questionnaires sent to five experts who are managers of the theme park appears to be a useful evaluation tool to analyze customers' behavior.

Demographic Characteristics

Results from the survey show that 65.2% of respondents are female and 34.8% are male. In terms of family/marital status, 75.1% of the sample are single and 22.6% are married. Divorced and widowed only account for a small percentage, 1.9% and 0.5% respectively. The study also revealed that only 11% of respondents earn an income higher than 50,001 NTD per month, while 270 (41.2%) people have less than 20,000 NTD per month for their incomes and 147 (22.4%) respondents earn between 20,001 and 30,000 NTD per month. Regarding educational level, it can be said that respondents are highly educated with almost 80.0% of them hold a college, university or master degree. Specifically, 10.0% of the samples have a postgraduate degree, 69.7% of respondents are educated at tertiary level and 18.1% of them have a secondary educational level. The study also pointed out that most of these park visitors come from other places. One fifth of them come from the capital city, Taipei (21.4%). People from Kaohsiung city account for 32.6% of visitors and there are respondents from cities near Kaohsiung such as Chiayi (5.4%) and Tainan (10.1%). The rest of respondents live in other cities in Taiwan (30.5%).

General Theme Park Impression

Information from survey shows that 65.6 percent of visitors were the first time visitors, 12.7 % had been in the theme park once before and 9.2 percent previously visited the place twice. Most of visitors were accompanied with their friends (58.5 percent) or family (27.3 percent) or their companion (10.4 percent). Only 3.5 percent said that they went to the theme park alone. Another aspect found in the survey is the amount of time people spend in E-Da theme park. The majority of visitors (63.8 percent) only spend a few hours in the theme park. There are 32.9 percent of respondents replied that they stayed from 1 to 3 days in

E-Da World. Only 3.3 percent of respondents chose to spend more than 4 days in the complex. Overall 62.3% of them went to the theme park at weekends. For the means of transport, 25.3 percent of people mentioned using the bus while there are 47.4 percent of respondents drove cars to the theme park.

Importance Performance Analysis

We used 22 items on our modified performance scale and the same 22 items on our importance scale. We based our research instrument design on the examples from the literature from which we created the list of attributes shown in Table 3. Using our importance scale we wanted to investigate importance of service quality in theme parks. Initially we requested respondents to evaluate theme parks in general and not E-Da theme park specifically using a 7 point Likert-type scale (7- Very important, 6 - Almost totally important, 5- Important, 4- Average, 3- Not so important, 2- Almost totally not important, 1- Totally unimportant. For our performance scale we wished to find out the performance of service quality at E-Da theme park and therefore asked the respondent to evaluate that theme park using a 7 point Likert-type scale (7-Great Performance, 6-Almost great performance, 5-Good performance, 4-Average, 3-Not so good performance, 2-Poor performance, 1-Very poor performance).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics

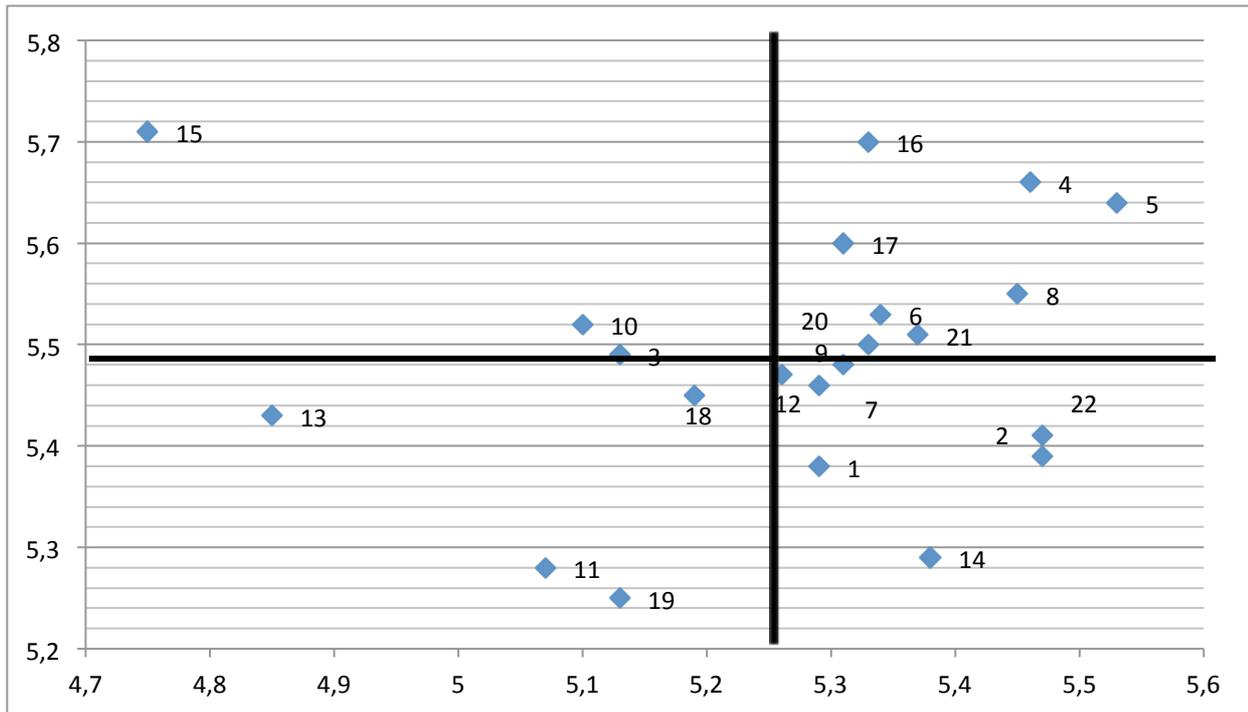
	N	%		N	%
Gender			Income		
Male	228	34.8	<20.000	275	42.0
Female	427	65.2	20.001 – 30.000	150	22.9
Total	655	100	30.001 – 40.000	102	15.6
			40.001 – 50.000	56	8.6
Family Status			50.001 – 60.000	28	4.2
Single	492	75.1	>60.000	45	6.8
Married	148	22.6	Total	655	100
Divorced	12	1.9			
Widower	3	0.5	Residence		
Total	655	100	Kaohsiung	214	32.6
			Tainan	66	10.1
Educational Level			Tainpei	140	21.4
Primary	18	2.8	Chiayi	35	5.4
Secondary	119	18.1	Other	200	30.5
Tertiary	457	69.7	Total	655	100
Postgraduate	62	9.4			
Total	655	100			

As we can see at table 3 the three most important variables for visitor in theme parks in general are safety (5.71), transportation (5.70) and well-maintained facilities (5.64). The three least important variables are souvenirs (5.25), educational experiences (5.28) and scenery (5.29). As we can see on the performance scale E-da theme park has a very good performance on cleanliness of premises (5.53), on shopping facilities (5.47) and availabilities of toilets (5.47). The three least important variables are safety (4.75), friendliness of staff (4.85) and educational experiences (5.07).

Table 3: Importance Performance Analysis

No	Variable	Mean Importance	Mean Performance	Gap
1	Sit and rest	5.38	5.29	0.09
2	Availabilities of toilets	5.39	5.47	-0.09
3	Quality food and beverage for sale	5.49	5.13	0.36
4	Well maintained facilities	5.66	5.46	0.19
5	Cleanliness of premises	5.64	5.53	0.11
6	Signposts for directions throughout the theme park	5.53	5.34	0.19
7	Information concerning attractions at the theme park	5.46	5.29	0.18
8	Knowledgeable staff	5.55	5.45	0.10
9	Spending time with family/friends	5.48	5.31	0.17
10	Value for money	5.52	5.10	0.42
11	Educational experiences	5.28	5.07	0.21
12	Doing something different	5.47	5.26	0.21
13	Friendliness of staff	5.43	4.85	0.58
14	Scenery	5.29	5.38	-0.09
15	Safety	5.71	4.75	0.96
16	Transportation	5.70	5.33	0.37
17	Many different games	5.60	5.31	0.29
18	Kindergarten with supervisor	5.45	5.19	0.26
19	Souvenirs	5.25	5.13	0.12
20	Parking	5.50	5.33	0.18
21	Hospitality facilities (Hotels, etc)	5.51	5.37	0.14
22	Shopping facilities (Malls, Supermarket, etc)	5.41	5.47	-0.06

Figure 3: Importance Performance Matrix



As we can see in Figure 3 managers of E-Da theme park should take extra care on several variables. They should first focus on the two attributes, which seem to have high importance and low performance; safety and value for money. Managers should create a safer environment for the visitors and examine ways to make the visitors feel that they are getting what they paid for. There are four cases where both performance and importance are low, as well, there are five cases where importance is low and performance is high. These cases are sit and rest, scenery, availabilities of toilets and shopping facilities.

CONCLUSIONS

The increasingly important role of service-based economy has raised a need for more thorough knowledge of service quality and analysis techniques that can help organizations and researchers to find out how to improve their performance. It is essential in providing a quality service that it meets customer expectations.

For the theme park industry, the effective management of service quality has become an important task as

they have to face intense competition from other entertainment services. A good understanding of visitor's behavior could be a decisive factor to help theme parks improve their management and marketing of attractions, thus, improving customer satisfaction. It has been said that customer tastes and preferences must be taken into account when parks provide their services (Martin and Mason 1987).

Following a review of the literature and consideration of Taiwanese visitors' characteristics, a modified Importance-Performance Analysis was used as the methodological tool for the analysis of the study. There are a number reasons why the IPA model was chosen for data analysis.

Results from the study showed that the three factors visitors were most concern about are safety, transportation, and well-maintained facilities. This verifies the finding from other researches that the satisfaction of visitors is directly correlated with security, safety and quality (Pikkemaat and Schuckert 2004, Tsang, Lee et al. 2012). In order to have a more representative view of theme parks in Taiwan, it would be useful to employ the same research on all competitors and make a comparison between results obtained from those studies.

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