# Oman's Position in U.S. Tourists' Mind: The Use of Importance-Performance Analysis on Destination Attributes

Mohammed Gamil Montasser, Angelo Battaglia

*Abstract*—Tourism is making its presence felt across the Sultanate of Oman. The story is one of the most recognized phenomena as a sustainable solid growth and is considered a remarkable outcome for any destination. The competitive situation and challenges within the tourism industry worldwide entail a better understanding of the destination position and its image to achieve Oman's aspiration to retain its international reputation as one of the most desirable destinations in the Middle East. To access general perceptions of Oman's attributes, their importance and their influences among U.S. tourists, an online survey was conducted with 522 American travelers who have traveled internationally, including non-visitors, virtual-visitors and visitors to Oman. This research involved a total of 36 attributes in the survey. Participants were asked to rate their agreement on how each attribute represented Oman and how important each attribute was for selecting destinations on 5-point Likert Scale. They also indicated if each attribute has a positive, neutral or negative influence on their destination selection. Descriptive statistics and importance performance analysis (IPA) were conducted. IPA illustrated U.S. tourists' perceptions of Oman's destination attributes and their importance in destination selection on a matrix with four quadrants, divided by actual mean value in each grid for importance (M=3.51) and performance (M=3.57). Oman tourism organizations and destination managers may use these research findings for future marketing and management efforts toward the U.S. travel market.

*Keywords*—Analysis of importance and performance, destination attributes, Oman's position, U.S. tourists.

## I. INTRODUCTION

OMAN is one of the emerging destinations in the Middle East region. However, it has not been successful in capturing and sustaining the US travel market, despite the large number of Americans traveling internationally with their high disposable income according to the international standard. In 2013, 61.6 million Americans traveled internationally [1], but very few U.S. tourists visited Oman (47,493 tourists) [2], which represents only (0.07%) of the international outbound U.S. tourists and (3.5%) of the international inbound tourists visited Oman.

The U.S. tourists were ranked as one of the world's top source markets by international tourism expenditure, and there is a need for Oman to recognize its competitive position for

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the U.S. tourists. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the position of Oman's attributes with their corresponding importance for U.S. tourists and the attributes' influences in terms of destination selection. In any type of business, it is important to not only have an awareness of how customers perceive the product or service attributes but also recognize their importance for the customers [3].

The marketing strategy of Oman focuses on building awareness about Oman in selected regional and international tourism source markets. This requires educating both the travel and tourism trade, and tourists, about the Sultanate, its regions, natural and physical resources, attractions, visitor experiences as well as the unique attributes and converting this interest into a commitment to travel to Oman. It sounds easy, but Oman competes with many hundreds of destinations, experiences and alternate value propositions. In practice, good marketing focuses on understanding the key markets and their segments' needs and to use the most effective promotional networks and cost-effective channels to market a consistent destination values. Good destination marketing is squarely focused on projecting culture and experiences effectively, and doing this in a way that is 'true to brand'.

Previous researches conducted about destinations only focused on how travelers perceived their travel destination based on their knowledge and/or experiences with the destination by identifying its attributes [4], [7]. Reference [8] is a research on tourism destination competitiveness in Asia Pacific concentrating on Hong Kong, Singapore and Bangkok. However, there were no recent research studies about Oman that focused on its competitive position. Though Oman has many great attributes, American travelers may not recognize them nor consider them as important features when selecting destination. Thus, for Oman as a destination, there is a need to recognize its competitive position for the U.S. travelers.

IPA technique introduced by [3] has been widely used among researchers and practitioners to identify competitive position for products and services in tourism and hospitality industry [9], [14]. IPA technique measures both importance and performance of attributes that provides substantial information for effective marketing and management plans [3], [12], [13], [15].

In most IPA studies, product or service attributes are treated as favorable for consumers [4], [9], [11], [13], [14], [16]. Several attributes, such as adventure activities and ecotourism, may be identified as favorable by some travelers. Thus, it is critical to classify how destination attributes impact

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individuals' process of destination selection.

## II. Literature Review

To date, several researchers have identified several destinations' attributes in their studies [4], [7]. These research studies verified the attributes based on different target groups of travelers. In [6], the authors targeted visitors and repeat visitors from thirteen countries that had largest numbers of arrivals during that period, in which the majority of participants were from countries in Asia. Reference [10] shows both domestic and international travelers. The research also included visitors and non-visitors from the U.S. and 32 other countries and majority of international travelers participated in this study had never visited GCC countries. References [4], [6] identified both positive and negative attributes for the destination.

In [6], the authors reported three strongest positive attributes for international travelers including beautiful architecture and buildings, interesting customs and culture, and numerous cultural and historical attractions; while [4] stated the top three attributes for both domestic and international travelers consisting of cultural sightseeing (i.e., mountains, markets, crafts and festivals, beaches and food). Table II shows the set of attributes that were used in each study and the targeted population. While [10] suggested that, it is possible that perception of destination vary by tourists' country of origin. In [4], the findings showed that the international travelers and locals hold several different perceptions, such as shopping, beaches, nightlife and entertainment. They reported that international travelers emphasized these attributes more than locals. They also found that perceived attribute importance were different between these two groups. For example, freedom from diseases and terrorism were rated as the two most important attributes for international travelers in terms of destination selection while these attributes were less important for the locals. As mentioned, the results from [4], [6] suggested different stronger attributes because they targeted different groups of travelers.

One of the important factors affecting travelers' perceptions of destination attributes is the degree of destination's familiarity [16], [18]. The familiarity with a destination varies based on amounts of previous knowledge and/or experiences of the destination [19]. Indirect and direct experiences influenced travelers' perceptions of destination at different stages [19]; indirect destination experiences or when travelers receive verbal information about the destination affect travelers' destination perceptions even before they travel; while direct tourism experiences adjust travelers' destination perceptions when they actually visit the destination.

Availability of information from various sources allows any individuals to recognize attributes of a destination, whether or not they have visited the destination [20], [22]. Different groups of travelers may vary their perceived destination attributes based on information and/or experience they received [20], [22]. Non-visitors who received only non-commercial information with no actual experience at a destination usually have only general knowledge of it.

In [23], the authors stated that travelers who had no direct experience tended to have unrealistic idea about the destination. On the other hand, even though they have not been to the destination, travelers who have received commercial information about it possibly are more familiar with the destination. Reference [22] suggested marketing materials including verbal and visual messages help non-visitor to recognize destination attributes even before visiting the destination.

With today's technologies, travelers with interest of a destination would seek for more information and be able to visualize the closer-to-realistic features and attributes of the destination. Thus, this group of travelers may be more familiar with a particular destination than those with only general knowledge. Unlike secondary information, visitors who have direct experience perceive actual destination's features and traits; they improve their familiarity with the destination. References [24], [26] stated that after visiting a destination, visitors tend to report more positive destination attributes than those negative ones. Repeat visitors may aware of more destination attributes since they become more familiar with the destination than first-time visitors [6]. Therefore, as mentioned, the degree of familiarity with a destination depends on amounts of previous knowledge and/or experiences of the destination [27]-[28].

### A. IPA

IPA is an evaluation technique for consumers' perceptions of a product or service attributes by measuring their importance and performance [3]. Knowing the attribute importance or performance alone already provides useful managerial implications. The combined measurements of both importance and performance of the destination attributes allow researchers and practitioners to be able to identify the competitive position of products/services; these generate useful insights for marketing and management plans [29], [31]. IPA has also been used as a tool to classify the priorities for improvement of products/services. The authors of [32], [34], [35], [37]-[39] have suggested useful recommendations and provided valuable action plans to help in enhancing the destination's competitiveness. Attribute importance can be explained as perceived worth/value of a product's/service's traits or features in terms of purchasing-decision while attribute performance consider on how consumers, when consuming the product/service, perceived those qualities [3]. The original IPA approach measures attribute importance and performance and present the results in an Importance-Performance Matrix as shown in Fig. 1 [3].

Since there are a set of attributes for a product/service, to use IPA approach, two questions should be asked for each attribute: (1) "How important is this feature?"; and (2) "How well did the (product/service) perform?". These questions measure attribute importance and performance on a Likert scale. Each mean of attribute importance and performance is used as a center point for each axis to divide the matrix into four quadrants. Each quadrant has a different interpretation as

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following: (as shown in Fig. 1)

- *Quadrant I:* *"Concentrate Here"* consists of attributes with high importance and low performance, indicating the weaknesses of the product/service [3]. There is a need of immediate attention on these attributes for improvement in order to help increase its competitiveness [29].
- *Quadrant II:* *"Keep Up the Good Work"* contains attributes with both high importance and performance, representing strengths of the product/service [29]. These attributes should be consistently maintained for the product/service to remain competitive [3].
- *Quadrant III:* *"Low Priority"* consists of attributes with both low importance and low performance, indicating minor weaknesses of the product/service [3]. However, the product/service manager should not be overly concerned for these attributes because of low importance [29].
- *Quadrant IV:* *"Possible Overkill"* contains attributes with high performance but low importance [3]. These attributes may have minor competitiveness for the product/service due to its low performance [29].

The product/service manager may consider re-allocation of resources and effort to other attributes with higher importance and lower performance than these attributes. IPA has been adopted for use in a number of research projects across many fields, including tourism and hospitality businesses [29]. Several researches applied the IPA approach with destination studies for various purposes including assessing DI, identifying competitive positioning of destinations, and evaluating travelers' satisfaction after visits [39], [41].

### III. METHODOLOGY

The range of Oman's destination attributes specifically for U.S. travelers had not previously been identified. Thus, in this research, two preliminary studies were conducted to develop a set of Oman's attributes for western travelers. Researcher had personal interviews with travelers (n=56) who just finished their trips in Oman. Inductive and deductive analyses were used to extract a set of Oman's attributes for western travelers from primary sources of information (or actual experiences). The content analyses of secondary sources of information about Oman tourism were also conducted. The secondary sources of information used in this research were movies (n=2), major travel websites (n=4), and travel guide books/magazines (n=6). The extracted attributes from the two studies were combined and a set of 36 destination attributes was selected for use in this studies.

The questionnaire for this study included three main sections. The questions' order was determined to avoid confusion and question order effects [42]. In the first section, travelers were asked to rate their agreement on their perceptions of 36 Oman's attributes using a 5-point Likert scale. The scales ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the following section, travelers were asked to rate their perceived importance of 36 Oman's attributes and their influences in terms of destination selection.

These questions were put side-by-side in which perceived importance items used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 5 (extremely important); while the influences of 36 Oman's attributes on destination selection were rated by travelers as positive, neutral or negative influence. The last section included survey questions about travel experience, and travel interest, as well as the participants' demographic information. Screening questions, including "Are you a citizen of the United States?". "Are you 18 years or older?" and "Have you traveled outside of North America (i.e., United States, Canada, and Mexico)?" were used to filter the non-target sample. Two filtering questions about respondents' experience and knowledge of Oman were used to ensure that the sample included non-visitors, virtual-visitors, and visitors of Oman.

Prior to the survey, a pilot study was conducted with 20 U.S. residents in Oman. The survey instrument was revised based on the pilot test results for the clarification and suitability of the questions. An Instructional Manipulation Check (IMC) question was added into the questionnaire to help screen out respondents who did not read and/or follow the instructions and possibly increase the reliability of the dataset. The target population of this study was U.S. international travelers from across the country, who have traveled outside North American region and were 18 years of age and older. Data were collected through an online research company [43] using a link to a questionnaire created using Qualtrics (Qualtrics Survey Software).
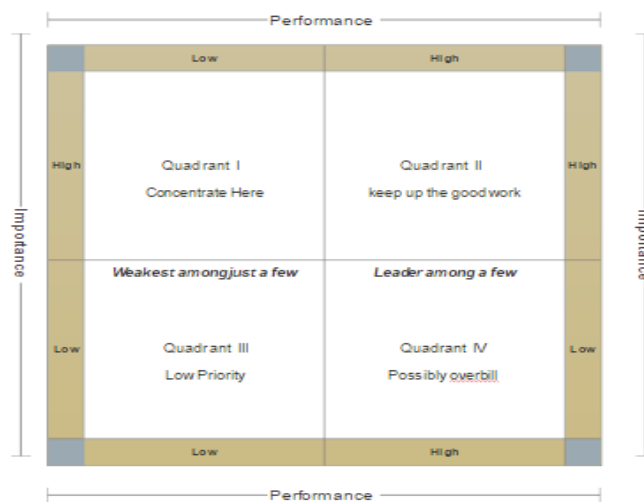


Fig. 1 Importance-Performance Matrix (IP Matrix)

The total number of U.S. international travelers in the online research company was 522 individuals (actual respondents). The online research company then randomly distributed the questionnaires to the target sample of U.S. international travelers via emails. The expected number of respondents for this study was 600 consisting of a similar number for non-visitors, virtual-visitors, and visitors to Oman (approximately 200 per group). The online survey company was instructed to stop the survey when the quota was met for

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each group.

The analyses included two major components, descriptive statistics and IPA. Data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 23.0 (2015, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. The frequencies of responses related to the types of visitors, demographic profiles, perceived importance and performance of Oman's attributes and their influences in terms of destination selection were calculated. The IPA was used to identify each attribute's competitive position regarding its importance and performance as perceived by the participants. Multiple analyses were conducted based on overall U.S. travelers, visitors, virtual-visitors, and non-visitors. The central point in each grid was determined using the actual mean values as recommended by [3]. The attributes were allocated to different quadrants based on their mean values of perceived importance and performance. The IPA matrixes of U.S. travelers, visitors, virtual-visitors, and non-visitors were compared to identify any differences in the attributes' locations on the four quadrants.

## IV. Results

A total number of 522 out of 600 travelers completed the questionnaire successfully. IMC questions screened out 78 respondents who did not read/follow the instructions. The 522 respondents divided into three segments; non-visitors (n=173), virtual-visitors (n=174) and visitors (n=175) to Oman. There were male (n=315) and female (n=207) participants. Most of respondents (47%) were at the middle age range (aged 25-44 years old). There were 106 participants (20.3%) preferred to not answer about their income while 99 respondents (19%) indicated their annual household income between $100,000 and $149,999. The majority (53.8 %) of the respondents were White/Caucasian.

The 522 respondents resided across the U.S. including 172 from the Western region, 129 from Southern region, 84 from Mid-Western region, and 137 from the Northeastern region. Most of the respondents are employed as Full-time (n= 173) in public sector (33.1%) and (n=145) in private sector (27.8%). Only 48 are self-employed (9.2%). The majority of respondents (59.2%) are Bachelor's degree holders, while only (7.4%) has post-graduate degrees (Master and Ph.D.). As for the marital status, 166 respondents (31.8 %) are single, while the majority of respondents (291) are married (55.7%). 203 respondents have no children (38.9%), while there are only 5 respondents reported that they have 5 or more children under 18 years old in their household. Table I shows the respondent profile of this study.

## V. Analysis of Importance-Performance of Oman's Destination Attributes

The IPA of Oman's destination attributes rated by U.S. international travelers were plotted on the IPA matrix. The central point in each grid was determined by actual mean values (3.51 for attribute importance and 3.57 for attribute performance) as recommended by [3].

Fig. 2 shows the relative positions of Oman's attributes from overall U.S. travelers' perspectives in different quadrants including Quadrant I, "Concentrate Here"; Quadrant II, "Keep Up the Good Work"; Quadrant III, "Low Priority"; and Quadrant IV, "Possible Overkill". Each number in the IPA matrix represents different attributes of Oman, as shown in Table III. The influence of each attribute in terms of destination selection also classified based on its mean value as positive (M>2.10), neutral (1.90<M<2.10) and negative (M<1.90) influences. The results showed that most of attributes were rated as positive influence while only few were identified as neutral and negative influences. The attributes with neutral influence included "family and children friendly destination" (M=1.93), "Nightlife and adults entertainment" (M=2.01), and "Risk of acquiring disease" (M=2.02) while the attributes with negative influence consisted of "Quality golf courses" (M=1.84), "Friendly destination for ecotourism" (M=1.80), "Easy access to alcoholics" (M=1.24) and "Crowded and traffic jam" (M=1.39). Fig. 3 illustrates the details of the perceived importance and performances of Oman's attribute- from different categories of U.S. travelers' perspectives. The central points of importance and performance in each IPA matrix were also determined by the actual mean values of all attributes: visitors (Importance: 3.42; Performance: 3.68), virtual visitors (Importance: 3.61; Performance: 3.64), and non-visitors (Importance: 3.50; Performance: 3.38).
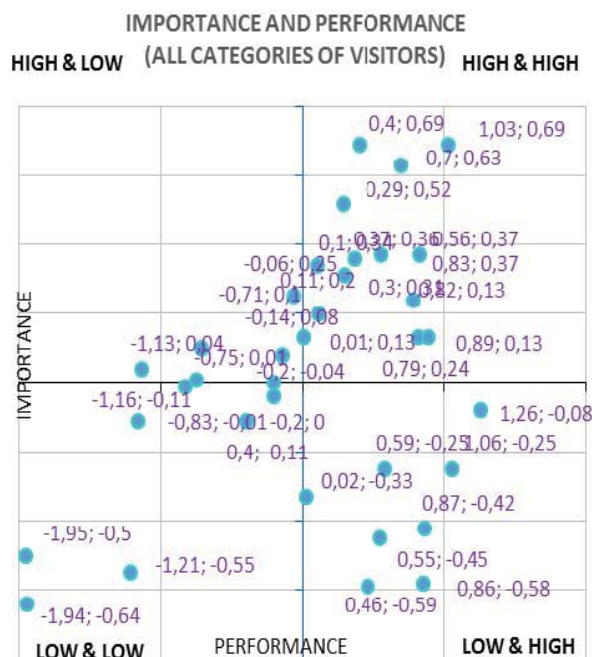


Fig. 2 IPA Matrix of Oman's Attributes for All U.S. Travelers

The results showed that there were attributes located in every quadrant. Quadrant II "Keep Up the Good Work" contained the highest number of attributes (n=15), while Quadrant III "Low Priority", and Quadrant I "Concentrate Here" had fewer items (n=10 and n=7, respectively). Quadrant IV "Possible Overkill" had only four items. The comparison

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of IPA matrices based on types of visitors illustrated visual differences in the distribution of attributes in the ranges, especially in the scale of performances. The items from the visitors' and virtual visitors' matrices were widely distributed, while the non-visitors' matrix showed a narrow distribution of items.
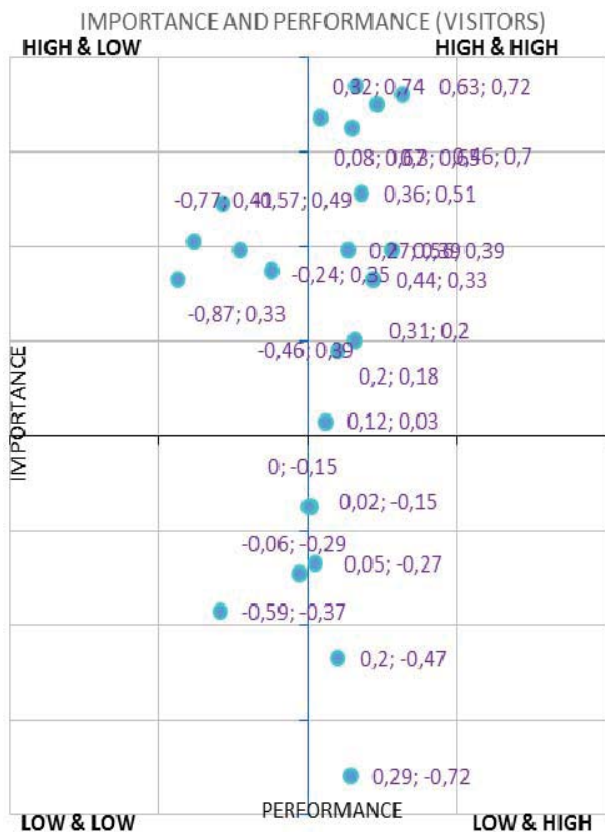


Fig. 3 IPA Matrix of Oman's Attributes for visitor category of U.S. Travelers

**Quadrant I "Concentrate Here"**: Seven items fell into this quadrant, indicating high importance and low performance ratings. All of these items were clearly rated in relatively high importance. The three most important attributes in this quadrant included "safe place to travel" (4.67±0.57), "stable political situation" (4.44±0.76), and "cleanliness" (4.15±0.81). These attributes were identified because they had positive influences towards destination selection, with the exception of "risk of acquiring disease" which was seen as neutral or no influence.

Respondents rated the items in this quadrant with relatively lower performances than the other attributes in Quadrant II and IV. The three items with the lowest performances were "lack of pollution" (2.98±0.81), "risk of acquiring disease" (2.99±0.86), and "efficient local transportation system" (3.12±0.68). Considering the IPA matrices for the different types of visitors, "safe place to travel" for visitors (3.77±0.79) indicated good performance among the other attributes, as it was located in Quadrant II. Other items were all located in the same quadrant with regard to the different types of visitors.
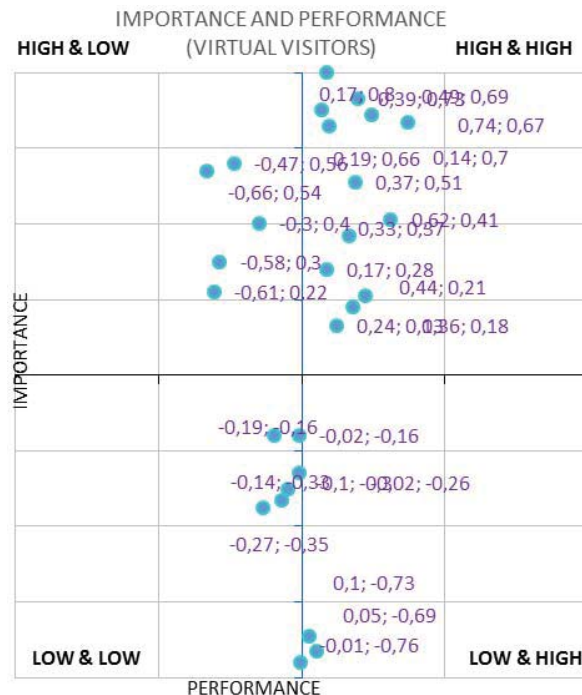


Fig. 4 IPA Matrix of Oman's Attributes for virtual visitor category of U.S. Travelers
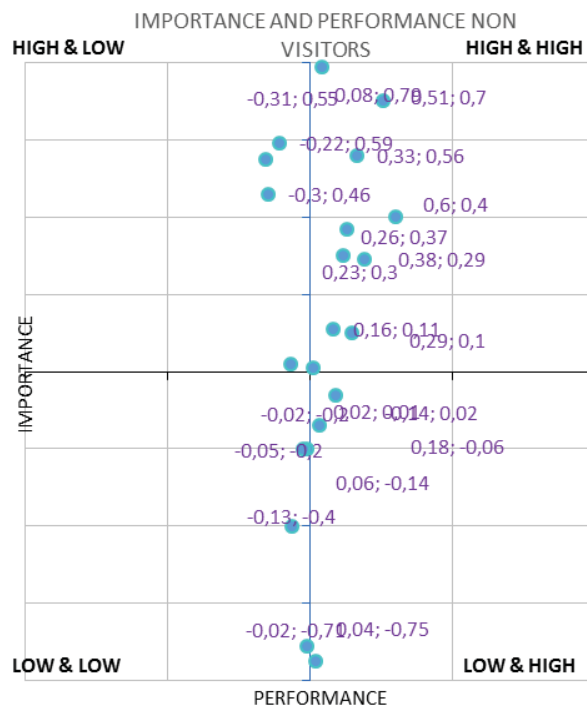


Fig. 5 IPA Matrix of Oman's Attributes for non-visitor category of U.S. Travelers

**Quadrant II "Keep Up the Good Work"**: Fifteen items fell into this quadrant, resulting from high ratings for both importance and performances. Participants clearly rated these attributes as relatively high importance. The three most important items were "scenic and natural beauty" (4.55±0.58), "cultural and historical attractions" (4.33±0.72), and "good

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value for the money" (4.32±0.68). All of these attributes were identified, as they had positive influences towards destination selection. Respondents rated these items with relatively high performances. The top three with the lowest performances were "scenic and natural beauty" (4.26±0.71), "interesting customs and cultures" (4.26±0.61), and "cultural and historical attractions" (4.20±0.66). Considering the IPA matrices for different types of visitors, "opportunity for adventure" for non- visitors (3.44±1.05) indicated a relatively low importance among attributes. Non-visitors also rated the performances of "good value for the money" (3.29±0.57) and "opportunity for adventure" (3.56±0.66) lower than they considered other attributes. Thus, for non-visitors, "good value for the money" and "opportunity for adventure" were located in Quadrants 1 and 4, respectively.

**Quadrant III "Low Priority"**: Ten items fell into this quadrant, resulting from low ratings for both importance and performances. All of these items were clearly rated in relatively low importance. The three least important attributes were "easy access to alcoholics" (1.20±0.63), "quality golf courses" (1.60±1.01), and "friendly destination for ecotourism" (1.69±1.08). Items in this quadrant included the attributes with positive, neutral, and negative influences on destination selection. Five attributes were identified, as they had positive influences on destination selection, while "nightlife and adults' entertainment" and "family and children friendly destination" were rated as neutral or no influence. The other attributes, including "friendly destination for ecotourism", "quality golf courses", and "easy access to alcoholics", were seen as negative influences for destination decision. Respondents rated these items with relatively lower performances than the other attributes in Quadrants II and IV. The three attributes with the lowest performances were "family and children friendly destination" (3.02±0.76), "quality golf courses" (2.93±0.61), and "easy access to alcoholics" (2.87±0.93). Considering the IPA matrices for the different types of visitors, "modern cities" (3.70±0.81), "adult-oriented destination" (3.73±0.85), and "nightlife and adults entertainment" (3.72±0.96), with relatively high performances rated by visitors, were located in Quadrant IV. Respondents who were non-visitors rated the importance of "language barriers" (3.52±0.94) relatively high among other attributes, thus, it was placed in Quadrant I.

**Quadrant IV "Possible Overkill"**: Four items fell into this quadrant, resulting from low rating importance and high rating performances. All of these items were rated in relatively low importance: "opportunity for shopping" (3.25±1.13), "romantic places for newlyweds or couples" (2.73±1.31), "crowded and traffic jam" (2.66±1.25), and "beautiful diving and snorkeling sites" (2.61±1.34). Respondents identified these attributes, as having positive influences towards destination selection, except "crowded and traffic jam" which was seen as a negative influence. Respondents rated these items with relatively higher performances than the other attributes in Quadrants I and III: "opportunity for shopping" (3.65±0.75), "romantic places for newlyweds or couples" (3.58±0.76), "crowded and traffic jam" (3.67±0.87), and

"beautiful diving and snorkeling sites" (3.61±0.82). Considering the IPA matrixes for different types of visitors, visitors rated "romantic places for newlyweds or couples" (3.61±0.79) and "beautiful diving and snorkeling sites" (3.66±0.88) lower in performances, compared to the other attributes, while virtual visitors rated "opportunity for shopping" (3.63±0.75) lower in performances among the other items. Non-visitors rated the performance of "crowded and traffic jam" (3.36±0.75) lower than the other attributes. Hence, these items were located in Quadrant III for these particular groups. Tables II shows all of the attributes' importance and performances based on overall travelers; visitors, virtual visitors, and non-visitors.

## VI. Discussion

This study measured Oman's position from U.S. travelers' perspective in terms of destination selection, using quantitative methods. Unlike other researches done on tourists' perceptions of Oman, all respondents in this study were U.S. international travelers. This study was considered the first research that based on Western travelers, while the others focused on Asian and Australian travelers. References [4], [5] used a convenience sample and only focused on non-visitors from Australia; therefore, the attributes studied in this research were only from indirect experiences.

References [6], [7] included first-time and repeat visitors in their study. However, these participants were approached at a Muscat International Airport, which may have been the point where they just began or finished their trip. Thus, they may not have final ideas about Oman, which could be considered incomplete primary information (i.e., actual experience). In [3], the participants included both visitors and non-visitors, in which over 70 % of the participants were non-visitors from 33 different countries (which were not disclosed). In addition, these research studies only focused on the attribute performance but showed no interest in attribute importance. Unlike the other research mentioned above, this study attempted to identify Oman's position specifically from U.S. travelers, considering both attribute importance and performance. Moreover, this study includes all types of travelers regarding Oman (visitors, virtual visitors and non-visitors). Therefore, in this study, it can be said that the destination attributes were studied based on the overall perception from U.S. international travelers. The results from the IPA provided the important set of attributes that Oman's Ministry of Tourism (MoT) and destination organization managers should concentrate on in order to capture the U.S. market. These attributes were found to be important for U.S. travelers when considering a destination but were not performing well when compared to other attributes. Thus, these attributes possibly were weaknesses of Oman as a destination, which were the most important aspects for MoT and destination organization managers. This group of attributes requires improvement to help increase Oman's competitiveness position [29]. The set of attributes required immediate attention from MoT and destination managers included "cleanliness", "stable political situation", "safe place

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to travel", "availability of English signs and directions", "efficient local transportation system", and "lack of pollution". Destination organization managers should also consider working with local organizations, other government bodies and public authorities to develop appropriate plans and enhance these features of Oman. The implementation plan may be achieved by working from both the destination development and its marketing authorities.

References [19], [22] found that travelers compare their actual experiences to their expectations, which may alter. Reference [3] suggested that only when their expectations were met or exceeded, would travelers be satisfied with their trip. Thus, if marketing promoted these attributes well, but travelers did not experience what they expected, they would not be satisfied and may not return to the destination. The second most important aspect for the MoT and destination management to consider when working with the U.S. market is the need to maintain Oman's strengths as a destination. It could be done by consistently maintaining the attributes with high importance and great performances [3]. These attributes were "scenic and natural beauty", "cultural and historical attractions", "good value for the money", "friendly people", "pleasant climate", "availability of quality accommodations", "opportunity for learning experience", "interesting customs and cultures", "restful and relaxing places", "beautiful architecture and buildings", "beautiful beaches and islands", "a variety of cuisines", "traditional festivities", "opportunity for adventure", and "a variety of outdoor activities". Several attributes represented minor competitiveness due to their low importance and high performance, and possibly implied that the MoT and destination marketers had an ineffective allocation of resources and efforts. These attributes included "opportunity for shopping", "romantic places for newlyweds or couple", and "beautiful diving and snorkeling sites".

Although the markets specifically attracted to these features are limited, performance in these areas is very important to the niche market. However, the first priority for the MoT should be to attract a larger target market group. To attract overall American international travelers, reallocating resources and efforts from these relatively low importance attributes to those attributes listed, as weaknesses of Oman may be necessary. After start improving Oman's weaknesses, the MoT may focus on this niche market. Few attributes, such as "modern cities", "language barriers", "adult-oriented destination", "quality health and wellness services", and "easy access to Oman" were found to be minor weaknesses for Oman but due to their low importance, these attributes were not considered to be threats to competitiveness [3]. So, MoT should not be overly concerned and it is necessary to allocate resources and efforts to develop or promote these attributes [29]. All attributes mentioned above were found to be positive influences for destination selection.

Concerning the other attributes with neutral and negative influences on destination selection, only "crowded and traffic jam" were rated in high performance and contained a negative impact on destination selection. However, they were not important in terms of destination selection; thus, the MoT may

not need to be overly concerned. Even though "risk of acquiring disease", which obviously had negative influences on destination selection, was considered to be a highly important attribute, Oman was seen as low performing. "Easy access to alcoholics", as a negative feature, was considered to be of low importance and performance. Therefore, these attributes may not be found to be serious for the MoT. Both "nightlife and adult entertainment" and "family and children friendly destination" were rated as low importance and performance. They also had no influence on destination selection. Although our survey participants' characteristics of mostly not having children may have affected this question, the IPA revealed that the MoT should not be overly concerned or allocate resources and efforts to improve these attributes. Finally, both "friendly destination for ecotourism" and "quality golf courses" were found to be negative influences on destination selection, while they were rated as low importance and performance. This indicated that the MoT should ensure that they are not putting too many resources and allocations toward these. Although these items may be seen as positive for certain groups of U.S. tourists, the MoT should not consider putting all these characteristics at the forefront of their marketing emphasis areas for the U.S. market. In summary, this study suggested that in order to capture the U.S. market, the first priority for the MoT is to improve the travel environment-related attributes, which were considered to be destination weaknesses for the case of Oman. The MoT must also maintain the destination's strengths in order to be competitive, while ensuring effectiveness and the efficient use of resources and efforts.

## VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Oman's destination attributes for U.S. travelers consisted of multiple positive, neutral and negative features in terms of destination selection. The strongest attributes representing Oman as a destination found in this study were related to recreational attractions and cultures while the identified weaknesses were travel environment-related attributes. To focus on overall U.S. international travelers, this study included U.S. visitors, virtual visitors and non-visitors to Oman. The IPA approach allowed researchers to identify Oman's position from U.S. travelers' perspective. Researchers also did not assume how individual attribute influence travelers in terms of destination selection and included the influence factor onto the IPA matrix. Due to the fact that this research involved a total of 36 attributes in the survey, the use of IMC techniques helped screen out a number of participants who did not read and follow the instructions in the questionnaire. These resulted in a better quality and validity of the data collected, and possibly, increasing the reliability of the dataset.

The findings of this study were limited to the specific market of U.S. international tourists, and Oman as a destination. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to other market segments or different destinations. Moreover, this study has focused on only one destination, and one segment Future research may consider to compare the competitive

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positions among a group of destination competitors. Alternatively, researchers may collect data from travelers with different origins and compare the destination's positions among the groups. This study offers implications for practitioners, including destination marketers and managers, with a research idea, when they aim to identify their destination's position for a particular market. It is also important to keep tracking on how destination's position has changed over the years. It may indicate success or failure in destination marketing and management for short-term and long-term goals. This study was able to provide meaningful information for the MoT on U.S. market segment. For U.S. travelers, there is a need for immediate attention in improving and promoting good travel environments in Oman, as they are weaknesses of Oman. The MoT should also maintain attributes with high performance, such as recreational and culturally related features because they were considered to be Oman's strengths. In addition, MoT always needs to ensure effective and efficient allocation of resources and marketing efforts to improve and sustain the strengths of its destination.

APPENDIX

TABLE I
RESPONDENT PROFILE

| Variable | n | % | Variable | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Type of visitor** | | | **Ethnicity / Race** | | |
| Visitors | 175 | 33.5 | White / Caucasian | 281 | 53.8 |
| Virtual visitors | 174 | 33.3 | African American | 27 | 5.2 |
| Non-visitors | 173 | 33.1 | Hispanic | 32 | 6.1 |
| **Gender** | | | Asian | 58 | 11.1 |
| Male | 315 | 60.3 | Native American | 95 | 18.2 |
| Female | 207 | 39.7 | Pacific Islander | 5 | 0.9 |
| **Age range** | | | Other | 8 | 1.6 |
| 18-24 years old | 79 | 15.1 | Prefer not to answer | 16 | 3.0 |
| 25-34 years old | 107 | 20.5 | **Region of residence** | | |
| 35-44 years old | 138 | 26.4 | West | 172 | 33.0 |
| 45-54 years old | 94 | 18.0 | South | 129 | 24.9 |
| 55-64 years old | 81 | 15.5 | Midwest | 84 | 16.1 |
| 65+ years old | 23 | 4.4 | Northeast | 137 | 26.2 |
| **Employment status** | | | **Marital status** | | |
| Employed Full-time (public) | 173 | 33.1 | Single | 166 | 31.8 |
| Employed Part-time (public) | 36 | 6.9 | Engaged | 42 | 8.0 |
| Employed Full-time (private) | 145 | 27.8 | Married | 291 | 55.7 |
| Employed Part-time (private) | 69 | 13.2 | Divorced | 14 | 2.7 |
| Self-employed | 48 | 9.2 | Widow | 9 | 1.7 |
| Freelancer | 17 | 3.2 | **Education level** | | |
| Unemployed | 13 | 2.5 | Secondary school certificate | 68 | 13.0 |
| Other | 21 | 4 | Higher Diploma | 106 | 20.3 |
| **Annual Household income range** | | | Bachelor's Degree | 309 | 59.2 |
| Under $25,000 | 7 | 1.3 | Master's Degree | 35 | 6.7 |
| $25,000 - $49,000 | 57 | 10.9 | Ph.D. Degree | 4 | 0.7 |
| $50,000 - $74,000 | 49 | 9.4 | **Children under 18 years old in household** | | |
| $75,000 - $99,000 | 64 | 12.3 | None | 203 | 38.9 |
| $100,000 - $149,000 | 99 | 19.0 | 1 | 139 | 26.6 |
| $150,000 - $199,000 | 47 | 9.0 | 2 | 92 | 17.6 |
| $200,000 - $299,000 | 37 | 7.1 | 3 | 61 | 11.7 |
| $300,000 or greater | 56 | 10.7 | 4 | 22 | 4.2 |
| Prefer not to answer | 106 | 20.3 | 5+ | 5 | 0.9 |

TABLE II
ATTRIBUTES AND MOST REPRESENTING NUMBERS

| Code | Attributes | All | Visitors | Virtual visitors | Non-visitors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Location in IPA matrix (Quadrant) | |
| 1 | Beautiful architecture and buildings | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 2 | Interesting customs and cultures | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | Cultural and historical attractions | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 4 | Friendly people | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 5 | Scenic and natural beauty | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 6 | A variety of cuisines | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 7 | Availability of quality accommodation | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 8 | Variety of outdoor activities | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 9 | Opportunity for adventure | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 10 | Restful and relaxing places | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 11 | Modern cities | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 12 | Beautiful beaches& islands | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 13 | Beautiful diving and snorkeling sites | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 14 | Family / children friendly destination* | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 15 | Adult-oriented destination | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 16 | Safe place to travel | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 17 | Opportunity for shopping | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 18 | Nightlife and adults entertainment* | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| 19 | Stable political situation | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 20 | Lack of pollution | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 21 | Risk of acquiring disease* | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 22 | Language barriers | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| 23 | Cleanliness | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 24 | Pleasant climate | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 25 | Efficient local transportation system | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 26 | Quality golf courses** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 27 | Friendly destination for ecotourism** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 28 | Good value for the money | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 29 | Opportunity for learning experience | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 30 | Quality health and wellness services | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 31 | Easy access to alcoholics** | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 32 | Traditional festivities | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 33 | Romantic places for newlyweds or couples | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 34 | Crowded and traffic jam** | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 35 | Easy access to Oman | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 36 | Availability of English signs and directions | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

* Neutral influence;
** Negative influence in terms of destination

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TABLE III
ATTRIBUTES MEANS CALCULATIONS OF ALL U.S. TRAVELERS

| Code | Performance | Importance | Performance (Mean 3.50) | Importance (Mean 3.57) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 3.8 | 3.88 | 3.8 | 3.88 |
| 2 | 3.9 | 4.26 | 3.9 | 4.26 |
| 3 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 | 4.2 |
| 4 | 4.33 | 3.94 | 4.33 | 3.94 |
| 5 | 4.53 | 4.26 | 4.53 | 4.26 |
| 6 | 3.61 | 3.77 | 3.61 | 3.77 |
| 7 | 4.29 | 3.81 | 4.29 | 3.81 |
| 8 | 3.51 | 3.7 | 3.51 | 3.7 |
| 9 | 3.44 | 3.82 | 3.44 | 3.82 |
| 10 | 3.87 | 3.93 | 3.87 | 3.93 |
| 11 | 3.3 | 3.53 | 3.3 | 3.53 |
| 12 | 3.79 | 4.09 | 3.79 | 4.09 |
| 13 | 2.37 | 3.61 | 2.37 | 3.61 |
| 14 | 2.29 | 3.02 | 2.29 | 3.02 |
| 15 | 3.3 | 3.57 | 3.3 | 3.57 |
| 16 | 4.76 | 3.49 | 4.76 | 3.49 |
| 17 | 3.36 | 3.65 | 3.36 | 3.65 |
| 18 | 2.67 | 3.56 | 2.67 | 3.56 |
| 19 | 4.56 | 3.32 | 4.56 | 3.32 |
| 20 | 3.96 | 2.98 | 3.96 | 2.98 |
| 21 | 4.36 | 2.99 | 4.36 | 2.99 |
| 22 | 3.52 | 3.24 | 3.52 | 3.24 |
| 23 | 4.37 | 3.15 | 4.37 | 3.15 |
| 24 | 4.32 | 3.7 | 4.32 | 3.7 |
| 25 | 4.05 | 3.12 | 4.05 | 3.12 |
| 26 | 1.56 | 2.93 | 1.56 | 2.93 |
| 27 | 1.55 | 3.07 | 1.55 | 3.07 |
| 28 | 4.39 | 3.7 | 4.39 | 3.7 |
| 29 | 4.06 | 3.94 | 4.06 | 3.94 |
| 30 | 3.1 | 3.46 | 3.1 | 3.46 |
| 31 | 1.18 | 2.87 | 1.18 | 2.87 |
| 32 | 3.6 | 3.91 | 3.6 | 3.91 |
| 33 | 2.75 | 3.58 | 2.75 | 3.58 |
| 34 | 2.79 | 3.67 | 2.79 | 3.67 |
| 35 | 2.34 | 3.46 | 2.34 | 3.46 |
| 36 | 4.09 | 3.32 | 4.09 | 3.32 |
| *C. 1* | | *C. 2* | | |
| Mean | 3.496 | Mean | 3.5694444 | |
| Standard Error | 0.152 | Standard Error | 0.06452013 | |
| Median | 3.7 | Median | 3.595 | |
| Standard Deviation | 0.914 | Standard Deviation | 0.38712083 | |
| Sample Variance | 0.835 | Sample Variance | 0.14986254 | |
| Kurtosis | 0.244 | Kurtosis | -0.770521296 | |
| Skewness | -0.951 | Skewness | -0.111361698 | |
| Range | 3.58 | Range | 1.39 | |
| Minimum | 1.18 | Minimum | 2.87 | |
| Maximum | 4.76 | Maximum | 4.26 | |
| Sum | 125.8 | Sum | 128.5 | |
| Count | 36 | Count | 36 | |

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