

Measuring service quality and customer satisfaction of the small- and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) industry: lessons from United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Syed Zamberi Ahmad, Norita Ahmad and Avraam Papastathopoulos

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to delve upon customer satisfaction and service quality within small- and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) by using a modified SERVQUAL model.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Data for the study were collected from a sample of 253 guests of varying nationalities who stayed at SMSHs of one-to-three-star ratings in the UAE. Moreover, 15 face-to-face interviews were conducted. The influence of the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model on visitors' satisfaction was explored using structural equation modelling.*

Findings – *The results indicated that three out of the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, namely, tangible, responsiveness and assurance, have significant positive impact on visitors' satisfaction of the SMSHs Industry. The remaining two dimensions of SERVQUAL, reliability and empathy, have no significant impact on visitors' satisfaction.*

Originality/value – *This study provides a major contribution in that it offers the potential to examine a vastly under researched area of customer satisfaction and service quality of SMSHs in a developing country.*

Keywords *Customer satisfaction, SERVQUAL model, Service quality, Hotel industry, Small- and medium-sized hotel*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

The UAE boasts itself as the Middle Eastern region's most popular travel destination with about 14.1 million international tourists in 2015, and a predicted 18.8 million tourists in 2022 (Khaleej Times, 2014). According to The World Travel and Tourism Council Report (WTTC) (2016), in 2015, travel and tourism was responsible for AED64.9bn of the UAEs Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which was 4.2 per cent of the country's total GDP. The amount is expected to rise by an estimated 5.7 per cent per annum from 2016-2026 to AED 118.1bn, a total of 5.5 per cent of the country's GDP, by 2024. Dubai's successful bid to host the Expo 2020 will be a major factor for the predicted influx of tourists from European and ASEAN countries within the years 2014-2026. In addition to that, the efforts of the UAE Government in promoting tourism alongside the country's reputation as a premier shopping destination, business hub, avenue for events and luxurious leisurely activities, will also contribute to its tourism industry.

With the increasing number of tourists, the demand for the hotel industry in the UAE was expected to grow as well. To accommodate the tourists, the hotel industry has been growing at a rapid rate throughout the recent years. It is estimated that there will be over 160,000 hotel

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rooms by 2020 (Smith, 2013). The rapid growth in the hotel industry within the UAE provides evidence of the booming economy and tourism. Furthermore, it also indicates the extensive competition that the hotels have in their fight for larger market share (Ahmad, 2014). For hotels to remain competitive, they have to differentiate themselves by providing value-added products. Essentially, the survival of hotels in this competitive environment lies within the delivery of superior quality to produce customer delight. In general, most small- and medium-sized hotels (SMSHs) have, more or less, similar services, appearances, facilities and rooms (Chen and Chen, 2014). To stand out, SMSHs need to understand, meet or exceed visitor expectations through the offering of high quality services (Wu and Ko, 2013).

There are many studies on the performance of hotels with regard to customer satisfaction and service quality (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Wu and Ko, 2013; Kandampully *et al.*, 2011); however, most of these studies look at the higher end of the market, i.e. four- and five-star hotels (Lai and Hitchcock, 2016; Dedeoğlu and Demirer, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Wu and Ko, 2013; Mohsin and Lockyer, 2010; Su and Sun, 2007). Yet within the UAE, over 50 per cent of the hotels comprise privately owned, less than 100 rooms, and city-based hotels; essentially a market of SMSHs (Ahmad, 2014). As a result of the findings, it is evident that research in service quality and customer satisfaction for hotels outside of the upper-scale range needs to be conducted. Crick and Spencer (2011, p. 472) argue that hospitality service quality researchers need to “recognise the nuances of each sector” within the broader hospitality and tourism industry. Bhanugopan (2004, p. 179) emphasised that:

One main thing they have not highlighted is the variance in the degree of the quality of service from one ethnic or cultural group to another; also from the degree of developments in the particular nations, either developed or developing nations.

To fill the gap in the literature, this research inspects hotel guests' expectations towards customer satisfaction and service quality within SMSHs in the UAE. Grobelna and Marciszewska (2013) stated that the hotelier, through knowledge of the service attributes that are likely to influence choice intention, could improve service quality. If attention is not given to the likely attributes, it could result in a negative evaluation of the hotel by the customer, who is likely to not return to the hotel again. The findings from this exploratory research will be essential for formulating effective and appropriate designs for business and service strategies, which could be used to achieve greater hotel guest satisfaction. This research puts itself apart from other research through its distinct setting – the UAE, a developing, emerging and modern country in the heart of the Arab world. Even though the UAE is classified as a high-income country, overall, it is still a developing country (United Nation, 2018). As SMSHs are so diverse and non-standardised, it makes it difficult to apply generic studies from other studies forgone in the area of customer satisfaction and service quality. As such, this study has provided practical advancements in the hotel sector, in particular to those in the developing country, such as the UAE, through the examination of customer perceptions of service quality from the lens of SMSHs.

This paper is organised as follows. First, the introductory section provides background of the study and describes the characteristics of SMSHs in the UAE. Then, a relevant literature review in the area of service quality is presented. The methodology and data collection of this study are explained next, proceeded by the findings of the empirical analysis. Finally, the conclusion and managerial implications are introduced, and limitations and future direction are brought to light.

Literature review

Characteristics of small- and medium-sized hotels in the UAE

Ahmad (2014) and Ahmad and Saber (2015) have identified the characteristics that set SMSHs in the UAE apart from those in the hotel sector of other countries. The two studies have shown that SMSHs in the UAE are relatively new, have been established for less than

10 years and are generally family or individually owned. In addition to that, some SMSHs maintain generational family traditions by having an average of 30 hotel rooms (Medlik and Ingram, 2000). According to Briggs *et al.* (2007), these SMSHs are predominantly ran by eager amateurs. By amateur, it alludes to the owners having not received formal hospitality and tourism education. Essentially, these owners believe in the practice of running the hotel business and not in the theory behind it. Moreover, most SMSHs have an average of 30 staff with over 32 per cent having less than 10 employees. The employees are generally expatriate workers from a myriad of developing countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The local Emiratis are often not appealed to the work of the sector due to the long working hours, low pay and lack of awareness (The National, 2014). Ahmad (2014) found that the initial sources of main capital for these SMSHs were derived from personal savings, family/relatives, private loans, government grants and bank loans. In conjunction with that, minimal educational background, limited capital for expansion, low profitability and low skill levels of employees with high staff turnover hinder effective development and expansion of the business. SMSHs have low entry barriers with highly segmented demand that attracts enthusiastic entrepreneurs to establish them in the business. As a result, the sector is highly competitive with an inconsistent service delivery.

In terms of marketing and promotional methods, the majority of SMSHs in the UAE believe that word-of-mouth with the use of the internet, brochures and travel agencies are essential in attracting domestic and international visitors (Ahmad and Saber, 2015). Given the low price range of the SMSHs, their target audience are the low- and middle-class consumers such as students, general business travellers and tourists (Chan *et al.*, 2009). These SMSHs are often recognised for their welcoming approach, special attention and focus on individual guests (Medlik and Ingram, 2000). In addition, the architecture of SMSHs is likely to be adapted to the local surroundings. For instance, the interior design will usually reflect on the personal taste of the hotelier with a standard room unit, basic amenities and impersonal professional trends (Hassanien *et al.*, 2010). SMSHs can be a great value for money as they provide acceptable accommodation, with low tariff, convenient location and relatively limited services or facilities (Bortherton, 2004).

Traditional service quality

Service quality has been an essential topic of research over the years in a plethora of disciplines due to its important impact on business performance, profitability, customer satisfaction, customer retention and service guarantee (Sohail, 2003). Service quality can be measured by the amount of delivered services that meet customer expectation (Santos, 2003). One of the most commonly used research models of perceived service quality is the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), also referred to as the Gaps Model. The model comprises of 22-item scale items, which are used to assess customer expectations and their perceptual experience of service quality, along a broad spectrum of services such as healthcare, banking, telecommunication, higher education, airlines, tourism and hospitality. The items are grouped into five categories, as the following:

1. *Reliability*: This is the ability of personnel to perform the promised service dependably and accurately in a timely manner. It is regarded as the most important determinant of perceptions of service quality;
2. *Tangibles*: This is the extent to which physical facilities, equipment, appearances of personnel and communications materials affect the image perceived by the consumers;
3. *Responsiveness*: This is employees' willingness to aid customers and offer prompt service. This dimension is particularly prevalent where customers have requests, questions, complaints, issues and problems;

4. *Assurance*: This is the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. This dimension may be of particular concern for customers of health, financial and legal services; and
5. *Empathy*: This relates to the caring, personalised attention and services provided to the customers. Small service companies are better placed for treating customers as individuals than their larger, invariably standardised, counterparts.

SERVQUAL has been modified, extended and tested by various scholars (Knutson *et al.*, 1990; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Stevens *et al.*, 1995) and has been recognised highly in academic and practitioner circles (Etemad-Sajadi and Rizzuto, 2013). Even though it is known for its comprehensive conceptualisation, it has also been the subject of extensive criticism. Some of the critics point to the theoretical base of the disconfirmation model (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), the dimensionality (Dahiyat *et al.*, 2011), methodological and measurement flaws (Babakus and Boller, 1992), the purpose (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), the feasibility (Newman, 2001) and the format (Carman, 1990). Shortcomings concerning convergent and discriminant validity have also been noted (Clemes *et al.*, 2007; Buttle, 1996). These criticisms led to many industry-specific tools such as LODGSERV (Knutson *et al.*, 1990) and DINESERV (Stevens *et al.*, 1995). LODGSERV is a 26 lodging specific items designed to measure consumer's expectation in the lodging industry. However, the application of LODGSERV is quite limited and not as popular among hospitality tourism researchers as it was used only in a limited number of studies (Heung and Wong, 1997; Mok and Paton, 1999; Lockyer, 2003). DINESERV is a 29-item index that was proposed to measure service quality in restaurants (Stevens *et al.*, 1995). In addition, Cronin and Taylor (1992) developed an alternative model of service quality known as SERVPERF. SERVPERF is claimed to be more parsimonious than SERVQUAL, with half the questions and better in explaining the service quality construct (Jain and Gupta, 2004). However, SERVQUAL is superior than SERVPERF in terms of diagnostic power in pinpointing service quality shortcomings (Jain and Gupta, 2004).

Despite a number of controversial and debated methodological issues, the model remains the most widely applied framework and possibly the leading available model in measuring service quality (Etemad-Sajadi and Rizzuto, 2013). Indeed, Woodall (2001) considers that "service quality has effectively become SERVQUAL and vice versa". It gave practitioners and researchers a fleeting insight into the service quality performance and provides a clear view of the company's competitiveness on the contemporary market. Hundreds of studies have spawned across the industry in response to the articulation of service quality constructs and its association to SERVQUAL measurements. Hence, this study contributes to useful insights for academics and researchers in implementing the SERVQUAL model in hotels perspective.

Service quality in hotels

As an instrument, SERVQUAL has become the principal model for measuring service quality in a hotel setting (Kandampully *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2007; Mey *et al.*, 2006). A selection of the defined service quality was often based on either the visitor perception or hotel management perspective (Chand, 2010; Briggs *et al.*, 2007). For example, Tsang and Qu (2000) provide examples of various studies that suggest that guests' expectation of service quality in the Chinese hotel industry was consistently poorer than their expectations. Along these lines, it is evident that many studies of service quality have been conducted in hotels around the globe. To further identify the most essential attributes that are associated with the UAEs characteristics, the review of other studies that target the analysis of service quality in the hotels of developing countries will be forgone, such as those in China, Malaysia, Turkey, Mauritius, Papua New Guinea and Northern Poland.

Kandampully *et al.* (2011) used SERVQUAL model to study the service quality gap of 1,450 guests who had stayed at a hotel for more than six night in Mauritius. The results showed that service quality had influenced corporate image, which in turn influenced customer loyalty. It can be implied that a desirable image leads to customer preference and satisfaction. Juwaheer (2004) used a modified SERVQUAL model to measure different dimensions of service quality in different categories of beach hotels in Mauritius. The study included the collection of data from 423 hotel guests, and the findings showed that the service quality in these hotels was derived principally from factors such as reliability, staff outlook and accuracy; room attractiveness and décor; and hotel surroundings coupled with environmental norms. Chen and Chen (2014) found that there was a large positive correlation between the hotel's corporate image and the quality of service provided. The researchers highlighted that to foster a positive corporate image of hotels and promote the re-patronage desire of customers, hotel management should take active actions to maintain long-term relations with customers. In a similar study done by Akbaba (2006), 234 hotel guests in the west coast of Turkey were surveyed. It was discovered that the most important factor in predicting visitors overall service quality was tangibles, followed by understanding and caring, adequacy in service supply and assurance and convenience. The study concluded that the SERVQUAL model remains to be a useful tool in measuring service quality in the hotel sector; however, it needs to be further adapted for the specific service environments and for the cultural context. In another study, Tsang and Qu (2000) used the gap analysis study adapted by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) to study the hotel industry in China and found that the overall service quality was below tourist expectations. The study showed that the biggest gap between expectations and perception of tourists was due to physical facilities, staff skills and performance, and price and value. Similarly, Bhanugopan (2004) applied the SERVQUAL model in the hospitality industry in Papua New Guinea. The results showed that majority of the perceived qualities were related to tangible elements, financial competence and reliability. Fah and Kandasamy (2011) conducted an analysis of the implementation of SERVQUAL for 300 hotel guests at Pulau Langkawi, an island located in the West Coast of Malaysia. The study identified three dimensions that were significant towards service quality: tangibility, responsiveness and empathy. Grobelna and Marciszewska (2013) applied SERVQUAL dimensions in a study of hotels in Northern Poland and found that the hotels under study lacked responsiveness, empathy and quality in reliability. SERVQUAL dimensions are generally perceived to be a robust scale for measuring service quality across service sectors. To evaluate a particular industry's service quality, careful evaluation and modification need to be made to the scale items based on an industry's specific needs (Mohsin and Lockyer, 2010). Hsieh *et al.* (2008), for example, revised the measurement items of the SERVQUAL dimensions as a way to capture the essence of service quality in a better light at a hot spring hotel in Taiwan. Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) and Ekinci *et al.* (2003) changed the dimensions of SERVQUAL for their study on the hotel services in the UK and Malaysia, respectively. They discovered that guests were often inclined to choose an accommodation by hospitality-specific factors such as the location, service quality, reputation, facilities, security, internal and external appearance and price.

It is interesting to see that studies of hotel service quality using the SERVQUAL model often brought mixed outcomes. Some scholars considered the SERVQUAL model as a reliable instrument, while others believed that there are specific hotel service dimensions that are missing within the original SERVQUAL scale (Qu and Yung-Sit, 2007). It is therefore essential to tailor the SERVQUAL scale to a sector's specific needs, nation or culture. Despite the existence of studies that modified and tested the SERVQUAL model in various hotel settings, majority of the research was conducted in Western developed societies, thus leaving a gap in developing societies. The debate on service quality is far from completion and there are still opportunities for a potential contribution to service quality literature (Samen *et al.*, 2013). As a result, the purpose of this research is to test and report

SERVQUAL scale results in developing nations and extend the research to include SMSHs. As such, we proposed the following:

- H1.* Tangible factors have a positive influence on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs.
- H2.* Reliability factors have a positive influence on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs.
- H3.* Responsiveness factors have a positive influence on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs.
- H4.* Assurance factors have a positive influence on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs.
- H5.* Empathy factors have a positive influence on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs.

Research methodology

This study examines the hospitality and tourism industry, specifically the SMSHs sector in the UAE. The UAE is set to transform itself to become world's top tourist destination by 2020. According to The World Travel and Tourism Council, the UAE has generated around Dh86.3bn in visitor exports in year 2014. The number is expected to grow by 1.4 per cent in 2015, supported by some 14.8 million international tourist arrivals. The arrivals is forecast to total more than 37 million by 2025, generating expenditure of Dh129.5bn – an increase of 4 per cent annually ([The Gulf News, 2015](#)). The target population was visitors who stayed in one- to three-star hotel categories throughout the country, specifically SMSHs located in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Fujairah and Ajman. These locations were intentionally selected as they represent the major SMSHs segments in the UAE. These five Emirates also serve as centres of culture, economic, administrative activity, business, education and politics and has the greatest number of SMSHs in the country with the highest annual occupancy.

Research design

In this study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. A sequential study has been designed, where quantitative research is performed, followed by qualitative research. The use of mixed-methods is considered beneficial in obtaining rich and valid results ([Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011](#); [Kitchell, 1995](#)). Given the exploratory nature of this study, a multi-method approach was deemed suitable for the application of the SERVQUAL scale in the context of a developing country. The advantages of the quantitative technique are that it allows information to be collected from a large number of respondents, and the findings can be expressed in numerical terms ([Kitchell, 1995](#)). On the other hand, qualitative technique helps researcher explore more detailed information on certain issues, particularly in situations such as traditional exploration ([Molina-Azorín et al., 2015](#)). It also offers other advantages such as bringing researchers close to the marketing situation, understanding how and why respondents view a particular issue and providing wealth of in-depth information ([Carson et al., 2001](#)). The choice of methodology is consistent with the objective of the study and is similar to those used by [Subramaniam et al. \(2016\)](#), [Wu and Ko \(2013\)](#), [Wilkins et al. \(2007\)](#) and [Briggs et al. \(2007\)](#) in their studies of hotel service quality in Taiwan and Scotland.

Data were collected through survey questionnaires that were written in English. The UAE has over 200 nationalities, with expatriates constitutes about 90 per cent of the population ([The UAE Government, 2018](#)). With this diversity, English is widely spoken, particularly in the hospitality industry. In addition, as the target respondents are international visitors, we chose to write the questionnaire in English. A letter of permission to explain the purpose of this study was sent to the owners, general managers and managers of 128 SMSHs in the five emirates stated above. However, only 59 hotels agreed to participate; 36 three-star, 13 two-star and 10 one-star hotels. Follow-up calls were made to those who declined to participate in this study. Among the possible reasons for the decline was hotel's policy that did not allow research studies by external parties, cultural issues, privacy security and of

the guests. This was consistent with [Ahmad \(2014\)](#), who noted the challenges in conducting studies in an Arab society due to lack of participants, limited public information and supporting statistical data from the government.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed on the spot to a convenience sample of visitors staying in these hotels on different days of the week and at different times of the day between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. as this is a standard check-out time for many SMSHs. Convenience sampling is very common in service quality/customer satisfaction research mainly due to random sampling requirements for population homogeneity and high costs associated with locating chosen population items ([Semeijn et al., 2005](#)). Potential respondents were asked if they would be interested to participate in a survey dealing with SMSHs services quality. If the hotel visitor gave a “yes” answer, the survey investigator would ask the potential respondent questions related to services provided by the hotel. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants’ names and contact information were not requested to protect their privacy. The survey took approximately 20 min to complete, and each was accompanied by a cover letter that briefly explained the objectives of the study. To minimise bias caused by poor service, prospective respondents were approached and interviewed prior to conducting their intended/check-out transactions. From the 350 questionnaires distributed over three-month period, only 253 questionnaires were deemed completed (after the screening of missing and inappropriate data) that could be used for further analysis. This represents 72.3 per cent of usable responses.

The questionnaires used in this study were adopted from the SERVQUAL scale originally developed by [Parasuraman et al. \(1988, 1991\)](#) that has been widely adopted in service quality research ([Tsang and Qu, 2000](#)). Despite several conceptual and empirical concerns ([Ladhari, 2009](#)), SERVQUAL proved to be robust and reliable measure of service quality. After an extensive review of relevant literature on service quality measurements in the hospitality and tourism industry ([Juwaheer, 2004](#); [Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2007](#); [Kandampully et al., 2011](#); [Subramaniam et al., 2016](#); [Ren et al., 2016](#); [Chen and Chen, 2014](#)), 31 hotel service attributes, instead of the original 22-item SERVQUAL questionnaire ([Parasuraman et al., 1988](#)), were identified and developed in this modified version of the SERVQUAL questionnaire. Selected items were refined and paraphrased in both wording and contextual applications as appropriate to make them more applicable to the hotel industry context in the UAE. The modified questionnaire was eventually subjected to pilot testing with a total of 15 SMSHs visitors to avoid biases or ambiguities from survey questions such as design, length, wording and orders through content revisions. The feedback received from this process was rather ambiguous; thus, only minor changes were made. For instance, technical jargons were rephrased to ensure clarity and simplicity. A five-point Likert-type scale format ranging from “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (5) was used in the questionnaire, which comprised three sections. The first section contained demographic profiles of the respondents including gender, travel purpose (business or vacation), age, continent, marital status, frequency of check-in to SMSHs per year, length of stay and education background. The second section was to examine the respondents’ perceptions of service quality provided by the SMSHs that they stayed in, and finally, the last section was to examine the respondents’ overall level of satisfaction with their SMSHs stay.

In addition to the survey, data were also collected through the interview with the hotel guests. The interview questions were developed based on a review of the existing hotel service quality and customer satisfaction literature ([Subramaniam et al., 2016](#); [Jani and Han, 2014](#); [Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012](#); [Lashley, 2008](#); [Back, 2005](#); [Ekinici et al., 2003](#); [Tamagni et al., 2003](#)), which aimed to examine how visitors associate the level of service quality adopted by SMSHs. Adjustments were made to the questionnaires after an initial review by the hospitality faculty members and the hotel visitors. The questions were then pre-tested on subject experts and no further changes were made. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with visitors at the restaurants and hotels’ lobby, and each interview

took about 35–45 min. All interviews were conducted in person. Among the primary question posed to the respondents was: “How satisfied were you with the services of the hotel you had stayed?”, “What constitutes an ideal quality of services to you in the context of SMSHs?” In total, 15 visitors were interviewed. With participants’ verbal permission, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviewees were ensured anonymity of responses by disguising their names. The transcripts and notes were read through to obtain a general sense of information and overall meaning. An inductive approach was used where the researchers manually reviewed and coded the transcripts independently. The coding process involved assigning keywords, grouping codes, highlighting quotes that supported the codes, with different coloured markers, and segmenting the sentences and phrases into categories. Based on the results of the coding process, themes and detailed descriptions were generated.

Findings and discussion

Demographic profile of respondents

Table 1 shows the demographics of the respondents ($n = 253$). The majority of the respondents were female (59.6 per cent) and the remaining were male (43.1 per cent). The highest proportion of the respondents (61.7 per cent) was in the age group of 26–45 years. Majority of respondents (70.8 per cent) were married, and more than 62 per cent had tertiary education. Respondents from Asia, Africa and European continents accounted for more than 72 per cent, while respondents from South and North America were 16.2 per cent and from Australia/New Zealand continent were 11.5 per cent. Over 52.6 per cent of the respondents were first-time visitors to the UAE, followed by two to four times (26.5 per cent), five to seven times (13.4 per cent) and more than seven times (7.5 per cent). The respondents reported a variety of travel purposes to UAE. Most respondents (34.8 per cent) were on a shopping trip, followed by 27.7 per cent on leisure/holiday trip and 16.9 per cent for business trip. The most frequent length of hotel stay by the respondents was for one to three nights (27.3 per cent), four to six nights (50.2 per cent) and the remaining 22.5 per cent stayed more than seven nights. Two of the respondents from Asia mentioned that the choices of SMSHs were based on location of the hotel, which was near the city, shopping centres and easy access to public transportation. Three interviewees emphasised on the services offered by the SMSHs. According to them, “Even though location of SMSHs is important, the type of services offered is also crucial in the selection process” (Interview informants 7, 8, 13). It was also noted that attributes related to the price of the room were also important to the visitors. Several respondents claimed that a room price is crucial in their decision process, as they would like to save their money for shopping activities and side seeing. As for SMSHs room reservation, the common methods that respondents reported were “book over the internet” (40.3 per cent), “use a travel agent” (27.7 per cent), “call the hotel directly” (14.6 per cent) and “use a hotel directory” (10.3 per cent). The remaining of the respondents reported that they used “other methods” (7.1 per cent) to book hotel accommodations, such as “friends/relatives makes the reservation,” “package deals” and “walk-in customers”.

Confirmatory factor analysis and the structural model fits

The structural model includes the set of dependence relationships linking the constructs in the proposed theoretical model. The hypothesised model proposed the direct impact of each service quality dimension on overall visitors’ satisfaction. The impacts were assessed through the standardised coefficients of the structural equation modelling. Regarding the adequacy of the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS 24 using maximum likelihood estimation was applied, and the next step estimated the structural model. The fit indices for both the measurement and the structural model are all acceptably high (>0.90). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) met the required acceptable value below 0.08 (Browne and Cudeck, 1992; Byrne, 2010; Hair *et al.*, 2010;

Table I Demographic profile of visitors staying at SMSHs in the UAE

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency (n = 253)</i>	<i>(%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	109	43.1
Female	144	59.6
<i>Age</i>		
19-25	22	8.7
26-35	36	14.2
36-45	69	27.3
46-59	87	34.4
60 and over	39	15.4
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	59	23.3
Married	179	70.8
Divorced/widowed	15	5.9
<i>Education background</i>		
No school education	8	3.2
Primary school	25	9.9
High school	57	22.5
University graduate	109	43.1
Postgraduate	39	15.4
PhD	9	3.6
Others (certificate/diploma)	6	2.3
<i>Continent</i>		
South America	23	9.1
North America	18	7.1
Asia	68	26.9
Africa	63	24.8
Europe	52	20.6
Australia/New Zealand	29	11.5
<i>Frequency of check-in (per year)</i>		
First time	133	52.6
2-4 times	67	26.5
5-7 times	34	13.4
More than 7 times	19	7.5
<i>Travel purposes</i>		
Pleasure/holiday	70	27.7
Business	43	16.9
Shopping	88	34.8
Visiting friends, families and relatives	25	9.9
Others (transit, conference, sports, health etc.)	27	10.7
<i>Length of stay at the hotel</i>		
1-3 nights	69	27.3
4-6 nights	127	50.2
7-9 nights	36	14.2
10 nights or above	21	8.3

Medsker, Williams, and Holahan, 1994). Chi-square is large and statistically significant, as is almost invariable in large sample sizes (Watson *et al.*, 2013, p. 163). The above indices are shown in Table II.

Hypotheses testing

Five path coefficients were estimated to test the hypothesised, causal relationships in the model. The reliability and empathy factors on visitors' satisfaction at SMSHs were low

Table II Model fits					
Model	χ^2	Df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Measurement model	616.295	439	0.976	0.972	0.040
Structural model	1,096.708	449	0.911	0.902	0.076

Notes: TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation

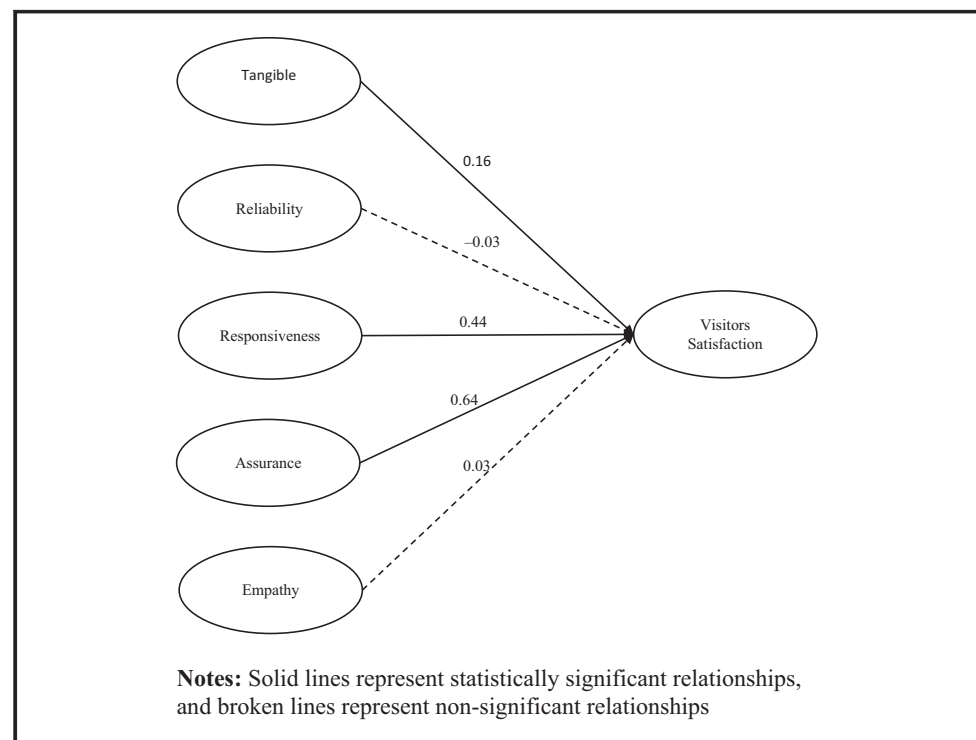
($\beta_{\text{ReL}} = -0.035$ and $\beta_{\text{Emp}} = 0.028$) and non-significant ($P_{\text{ReL}} = 0.357$ and $P_{\text{Emp}} = 0.469$). Therefore, *H2* and *H5* were not supported.

Conversely, tangible, responsiveness and assurance factors have positive effects on visitors' satisfaction ($\beta_{\text{Tan}} = 0.16$, $\beta_{\text{ReS}} = 0.443$ and $\beta_{\text{Ass}} = 0.641$, $p_{\text{Tan}} < 0.001$), supporting *H1*, *H3* and *H4*. The assurance factor was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.641$), followed by responsiveness ($\beta = 0.443$) and tangible ($\beta = 0.16$). The aforementioned dimensions explained 63.5 per cent of the variance in visitors' satisfaction with SMSHs. The proposed structural model and results of hypothesis testing are shown in Table III and Figure 1.

Table III Structural equation modelling results				
Hypothesis	Std. β	S.E	Sig	Outcome
H1: Tan $\rightarrow$ Vis_Sat	0.160	0.032	**	H1: Supported
H2: ReL $\rightarrow$ Vis_Sat	-0.035	0.031	$p > 0.05$	H2: Not supported
H3: ReS $\rightarrow$ Vis_Sat	0.443	0.029	**	H3: Supported
H4: Ass $\rightarrow$ Vis_Sat	0.641	0.030	**	H4: Supported
H5: Emp $\rightarrow$ Vis_Sat	0.028	0.028	$p > 0.05$	H5: Not supported

Note: ** $p < 0.001$

Figure 1 Confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation model. Path coefficients are standardized regression coefficients



Construct validity

To model the causal relationships between the five SERVQUAL constructs and the visitors' satisfaction construct, we applied structural equation modelling analysis using AMOS 24. The model was tested against the obtained measurement data to determine suitability. All scales' items that were used had factor loadings that exceeded 0.5 and were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), with the exception of items *Tan5* (employees of the hotel appear neat and tidy), *Tan6* (the hotel has clear signage), *Tan7* (the hotel has favourable decoration in keeping with its image and price range) and *Sat6* (convenient locations), where loadings fell below the cut-off criterion. Our analyses also indicated average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the threshold of 0.5 (Table IV) and composite reliability values greater than 0.7. Regarding the scales' internal consistency, all Cronbach reliability alpha coefficient scores were higher than the 0.7 threshold. Therefore, the scales used were considered reliable and could be used for further analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The confirmatory factor analysis supported the measurement model for the five service quality dimensions. All items loaded on their respective latent constructs (Table IV). The standardised factor loadings ranged from 0.631 (*Tan4*) to 0.943 (*Ass4*), and all *t*-values were statistically significant. Table IV contains a complete list of all items associated with each construct. Discriminant validity of the dimensions were tested by comparing AVE values to squared correlations between the constructs (Chin, 2010; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The square root of the AVE values was larger than the inter-construct correlation coefficients, supporting the discriminant validity of the measures. All constructs exhibit sufficient convergent and discriminant validity (Table V).

Tangibles

The tangibles dimension is one of the important predictors of overall service quality. Tangibility in the SMSHs sector may be reflected in physical attractiveness of the hotel, the degree of modernity of its equipment and facilities, furnishings, materials associated with the service (i.e. pamphlets) and the appearance of its employees (i.e. dress codes) (Tamagni *et al.*, 2003). Overall, the assessments of the respondents with respect to the tangibles dimension were mainly favourable. From Table IV, we can see that the highest perceptions scores of the respondents were for Item 8 "the hotel facilities function properly" ($M = 3.99$), followed closely by "The hotel has visually appealing buildings and physical facilities" ($M = 3.89$). The respondents also valued "the atmosphere is comfortable and appropriate for purpose of stay (beds, chairs, rooms)" ($M = 3.68$), "the hotel has modern-looking equipment (air conditioner, furniture, elevator etc.)" ($M = 3.60$) and "appliances in hotel room are maintained well (soap, shampoo, towel, etc.)" ($M = 4.34$). However, despite the high score given to overall hotels' equipment and facilities, several visitors expressed their unpleasant experiences and provided critical insights on the quality of physical equipment in some SMSHs.

One of the visitors who stayed in a two-star SMSH stated, "A kettle in my room did not work properly; and one or two plugs were malfunctioning" (Interview informant 8). This is supported by other responses such as "My shower did not work. When I turned my electric shower on cold water came out" (Interview informant 15). This implies that owners/managers of the SMSHs should properly ensure that their hotel is not only appealing and attractive, with up-to-date, clean and comfortable equipment, but also ensure that the basic instruments are as it could create memorable experiences. A SMSH operator should be well aware that visitors also tend to examine the very basic amenities of the hotel rooms. The quality of these basic amenities of accommodation is important and could become a primary concern for visitors experience with SMSHs. Ren *et al.* (2016) suggest that for budget hotels, cleanliness, comfort and maintenance matter the most for the customers.

Table IV Summary of measurement scales

Constructs	Items	α	Mean	SD	Standardised factor loading	Sig.
Tangible	Tan1: The hotel has visually appealing buildings and physical facilities	0.869	3.89	0.723	0.802	<0.001
	Tan2: The hotel has modern-looking equipment (air conditioner, furniture, elevator etc.)		3.60	0.846	0.749	<0.001
	Tan3: The atmosphere is comfortable and appropriate for purpose of stay (beds, chairs, rooms)		3.68	0.829	0.759	<0.001
	Tan4: Appliances in hotel room are maintained well (soap, shampoo, towel, etc.)		3.52	0.990	0.631	<0.001
Reliability	Tan8: The hotel facilities function properly	0.919	3.99	0.687	0.862	<0.001
	Rel1: The hotel provides the services as they were promised		3.89	0.844	0.764	<0.001
	Rel2: The hotel provides flexibility in services according to guest demands		4.04	0.786	0.799	<0.001
	Rel3: The hotel is dependable		4.09	0.826	0.878	<0.001
	Rel4: The hotel performs the services right the first time		4.14	0.774	0.893	<0.001
	Rel5: The hotel is able to solve problem and cooperate		4.09	0.766	0.746	<0.001
	Rel6: The hotel employees are skilful in performing their tasks		4.15	0.774	0.690	<0.001
Responsiveness	ReS1: Employees provide efficient and prompt service	0.924	3.72	0.893	0.795	<0.001
	ReS2: Employees are always available when needed		3.97	0.826	0.876	<0.001
	ReS3: Employees always treat guests in a friendly manner		4.00	0.824	0.881	<0.001
	ReS4: Employees made me feel like an important person		4.06	0.861	0.862	<0.001
	ReS5: Employees respond effectively to my complaints		4.09	0.791	0.797	<0.001
Assurance	Ass1: Employees instil confidence in guests	0.937	4.15	0.744	0.799	<0.001
	Ass2: The hotel provides its guests a safe and secure place		4.15	0.827	0.835	<0.001
	Ass3: Employees are polite, professional and friendly		4.06	0.815	0.899	<0.001
	Ass4: Employees have in-depth occupational knowledge		4.03	0.811	0.943	<0.001
	Ass5: Employees provides tour advise		4.17	0.788	0.825	<0.001
Empathy	Emp1: Employees give guest individualised attention to makes them feel special	0.940	3.83	0.872	0.824	<0.001
	Emp2: Employees of the hotel understand the specific needs of the guests		3.96	0.851	0.888	<0.001
	Emp3: Service time provided by the hotel is convenience to the guests		4.01	0.900	0.906	<0.001
	Emp4: It is easy to access to the hotel (transportation, accessibility, car parking area, etc.)		4.07	0.845	0.884	<0.001
	Emp5: Employees having flexible rules with guests		4.00	0.852	0.804	<0.001
	Emp6: Employees inspire trust and confidence		4.06	0.864	0.754	<0.001
Visitors' satisfaction	Sat1: I am satisfied with my decision to stay at SMSHs	0.930	4.08	0.770	0.855	<0.001
	Sat2: My choice of SMSHs as a service provider was a wise one		3.88	0.914	0.750	<0.001
	Sat3: I think I did the right thing when I chose to stay at SMSHs		4.11	0.801	0.908	<0.001
	Sat4: I feel that my experience staying at the SMSHs has been enjoyable		3.99	0.847	0.884	<0.001
	Sat5: Value for money accommodation		4.16	0.808	0.888	<0.001

Reliability

Reliability is defined as the ability to perform the service dependably and accurately (Dabholkar *et al.*, 1996). Thus, reliable service performance has to meet customers' expectation. Visitors often focus on the importance of SMSHs staff interactions to describe their feelings and expectations about the reliability dimension. Survey results showed that the dominant factor regarding the reliability dimension was "hotel employees are skilful in performing their tasks" ($M = 4.15$), followed very closely by the "the hotel performs the services right the first time" ($M = 4.14$). The visitors perceived "dependability of the hotel" and "the ability of the hotel to solve problem and cooperate" of the same importance ($M =$

Table V Correlations and squared correlations among the dimensions

Constructs	Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Visitors' satisfaction	AVE	CR	M ^a	SD ^b
Tangibles	1						0.584	0.874	3.74	0.67
Reliability	0.132	1					0.637	0.913	3.86	0.71
Responsiveness	0.571	0.097	1				0.711	0.925	3.97	0.74
Assurance	0.575	0.066	0.836	1			0.743	0.935	4.11	0.71
Empathy	0.169	0.035	0.017	0.046	1		0.714	0.937	3.73	0.78
Visitors' Satisfaction	0.605	0.056	0.826	0.853	0.070	1	0.738	0.933	4.04	0.73

Notes: ^aThe measures were summated and then divided by the number of items for each respective measure; ^bSD, standard deviation; all correlations significant at the $p < 0.01$ level

4.09). Reliability dimension also suggests that the hotel should be more flexible in services according to guest demands ($M = 4.04$). They should be able to solve complaints and entertain any queries from the customers and provide services as they promised ($M = 3.89$). In addition, they should give individualised attention to their visitors to make them feel special and comfortable.

As communicated by the respondents, “the room is ready on time upon check in and I get the late check out until 2 p.m. as requested” (Interview informant 4); “we stayed at this hotel during a 13-day tour of the Arabs countries. All in all, the hotel was not bad: price was cheap, bigger room with 2 double beds as advertised, clean, some features were worn out but you expect that as most people who stop here are probably staying here for one or two night” (Interview informant 8).

Consistent with the finding of [Kandampully et al. \(2011\)](#), hotel employees should always ensure that every contact with the visitors resulted in a positive experience for the customers. [Yoon and Suh \(2003\)](#) further asserted that hotel staffs should be “performers” rather than workers. [Grobelna and Marciszewska \(2013\)](#) who studied service quality in one-to-five-stars hotels in Northern Poland found that reliability was among the important factors in customer satisfaction on service. They further suggested that the hotel staffs should perform tasks as promised, resolve problems promptly and take good care of the customers to achieve high levels of satisfaction among its visitors.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is the willingness to help visitors and provide prompt service as required. It is essential for the SMSHs employees to be willing to assist visitors by providing them with prompt services that exceed or meet their expectations. Respondents appeared prudent in the responsiveness perspective. For the item “employees respond effectively to my complaints”, the mean score was 4.09, followed by “employees made me feel like an important person” ($M = 4.06$); “employees always treat guests in a friendly manner” ($M = 4.04$); “employees are always available when needed” ($M = 3.97$); and “employees provide efficient and prompt service” ($M = 3.72$). This indicates that employees in SMSHs have high respect or courtesy for their visitors. Overall, majority of visitors claimed that it was important for them to be well during their stay at SMSHs. Several respondents stated that they would very much enjoy personal recognition from the hotel staff, including being “called by name”.

According to a couple from the European region:

It is very pleasant dealing with front line staff at this hotel. Although there are some communication barriers especially in term of language used, but we understand their intention which to serve us in a responsive and professional manner.” (Interview informant 1).

Another respondents said, “We came early to check-in and the room were not ready for us, however the hotel staff has taken initiative by providing us with a temporary place to keep our luggage” (Interview informant 10).

The front-line employees of SMSHs are often responsible for providing services and dealing with complaints. Therefore, they should be available whenever needed, give individualised attention, respond to visitors request and have enough knowledge to answer questions. Our findings show that visitors often make a conscious decision to select SMSHs and did not demand a luxury service or pampering, but appreciate courtesy and responsive communication. [Ariffin and Maghzi \(2012\)](#) showed that satisfaction with services has a powerful effect on the overall customer satisfaction. The more satisfied the visitors are, the more likely they would return or prolong their hotel stay, Therefore, upgrading employees' soft skills could result in improving the hotel services.

Assurance

"Assurance" refers to the service personnel's knowledge, capacity, manner and ability to convey a sense of trust to the customers ([Kandampully et al., 2011](#)). The respondents were largely satisfied with the overall assurance of SMSHs. Survey results showed that most guests rated "employees provides tour advise" as the most important, with a mean of 4.17. Tourist seemed to appreciate any good advice from the hotel employees as it would help them make the most of their visit to the city. The respondents also valued "employees instil confidence in guests" as much as they valued "the hotel provides its guests a safe and secure place" (M = 4.15). Accordingly, the respondents were also happy when "employees are polite, professional and friendly" (M = 4.06) and when "employees have in-depth occupational knowledge (M = 4.03).

The following comments are indicative of the views expressed by the visitors with respect to the assurance dimension they had received: "I have booked this hotel earlier and they keep my record properly". (Interview informant 14). "Low-priced stop for us to/from desert. Although some confusion regarding availability of rooms, a staff treated us well. Overall good value for the price, but we don't expect 1st class amenities" (Interview informant 9).

Descriptive statistics indicated that the SMSHs in the UAE have high assurance service by creating trusting relationship with their visitors. Employees in SMSHs should understand the need of their visitors, try to provide services in a timely fashion and perform their tasks as promised. Employees play a major role in a hotel business as customers expect services to be provided by well-qualified, experienced and trusted employees ([Jani and Han, 2014](#)).

Empathy

Empathy effects service quality because it allows people to look at problem from another perspective and to stand in somebody else's shoes (i.e. a hotel staff that provides quick services and sensitive to visitors' demands, requests and complaints). Showing empathy makes the visitors in the SMSHs feel respected and taken care of. Poor empathy can lead to poor communication between the hotel staff and visitors. Our results indicated that as a whole, respondents rated "access to the hotel (transportation, accessibility, car parking area, etc.)" fairly positively (means of above 4.07). Another area that was also rated high compared to the other aspects of empathy dimension was "employees inspire trust and confidence" (M = 4.06), and "service time provided by the hotel is convenience to the guests" (M = 4.01). Whilst many visitors were satisfied by their experience of a particular SMSH, others were often critical of the same SMSH. During the interview sessions, among the issues that recurred as the main areas requiring improvement were parking space, computer and internet/Wi-Fi accessibility, lounge space area and signage of the hotel.

As mentioned by one of the respondents, "I need to ask several people before getting to this hotel. The signage is unclear and the main entrance door does not reflect the entrance of the hotel" (Interview informant 9). Other visitors claimed, "Access to services, such as luggage assistance as well as food and beverage services, is limited in this hotel" (Interview informant 4). "My friend and I have spent two weeks in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Dubai.

Along the way we stopped in quite a few SMSHs. Since we're driving, finding a parking space is a challenge for us." (Interview informant 11). These examples illustrate the variability in service delivery and the importance of empathy dimension for SMSHs in the UAE.

Overall visitors' satisfaction staying at small- and medium-sized hotels

As shown in [Table IV](#), despite the fact that some visitors raised concern in some determinants, the results from the table showed that the majority of respondents have a positive impression about the overall service quality provided by SMSHs in the UAE. The mean value for the six variables ranges between 3.88 and 4.16. The findings suggest that "value for money accommodation" was the main factor that contributed to the overall satisfaction of the guests. A high satisfaction rating was expected as SMSHs in the UAE have made significant effort in meeting and exceeding the international standards for hotels. Several international visitors commented that three-stars hotels were much better than one-star hotels in relation to tangibles, reliability and responsiveness.

A visitor stated:

Based on my experience visiting Dubai several times and staying in various categories of SMSH for several days, services in 3-stars is much better than those in 1-star. The ambience is cleaner and service is very good" (Interview informant 3).

Another visitor from China who had stayed at SMSHs in various countries claimed that

I have stayed at a lot of places, particularly SMSHs in Asia countries, and when compared to SMSHs in the UAE, I feel more comfortable here, generally more hygienic and convenience (Interview informant 7).

He further asserted "It's a good budget hotel with small, clean and comfortable rooms".

It is important to note that those visitors who critically made negative comments were not particularly demanding but were merely seeking a reasonable quality of service and may simply be more concerned with the service environment/product in the SMSHs ([Keeley, 2001](#); [Nash et al., 2006](#)). [Choi and Chu \(2000\)](#) compared service quality and customer satisfaction among Asian and Western travellers in Hong Kong hotels. The study found that Asian visitors' overall satisfaction was primarily derived from the value factor, whereas Western visitors were influenced by the room quality and considered service quality as the most important factor. Cultural values in hotel services have also been observed; consistent with findings by [Tsai et al. \(2002\)](#) and [Hsieh and Tsai \(2009\)](#). SMSHs in the UAE also cater for international and domestic visitors; as a result, it is essential for SMSH owners/managers to understand the need of their international visitors. This study therefore conveys that SMSH visitors demand for more than the basics; instead, they have a mix of consumption needs.

Conclusion and implications

Research in the area of service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry has undoubtedly grown in the recent years. However, there is hardly any fundamental research that seeks to understand the level of services at SMSHs. [Ottenbacher et al. \(2009\)](#) suggested that hospitality and tourism management scholars should emphasise on specific settings (developed or developing country) and segments within the hospitality industry (such as hotel industry), as well as on the diversity within the segments (such as mid-scale hotels in the hotel industry). As such, this study provides new insights into an important aspect of consumer behaviour in hotels – the antecedents of service quality in the SMSHs (with three-stars and below categories) operating in an emerging country, specifically the UAE. Understanding how visitors evaluate the perceived service quality of SMSHs

experience is important to hotel operators and marketers, as repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth are critical to the success of SMSHs. Given the competitive business environment of SMSHs, a focus on service quality and customer satisfaction can be a driving force for survival.

The findings from this study are consistent with previous studies by scholars ([Keeley, 2001](#); [Nash et al., 2006](#); [Grobelna and Marciszewska, 2013](#); [Rauch et al., 2015](#); [Mohsin and Lengler, 2015](#); [Hung et al., 2015](#)) that customer satisfaction in the hotel sector is driven by multiple factors. The results show that SMSHs visitors attach significant importance to some aspects of SERVQUAL such as tangible, responsiveness and assurance more than factors such as reliability and empathy. The willingness to serve customers, availability to respond to customers' requests and flexibility to meet customers' demands have positive impacts on how visitors view hotel service delivery, which subsequently influences satisfaction in the SMSHs. Tangible factors such as room attractiveness and décor also play significant roles in affecting customer satisfaction. In addition, the employees' knowledge of surrounding areas, occupational skills, courteous attitude and the ability to make customers' feeling safe and secure positively influence customers' satisfaction.

In contrast to previous studies ([Minh et al., 2015](#); [Hossain, 2012](#)), this study did not find a positive relationship between reliability and empathy dimensions on customer satisfaction. A reasonable explanation to this could be due to customers' expectations themselves. Customers' expectations had been influenced by their knowledge about general standards of hotel practices ([Karunaratne and Jayawardena, 2010](#); [Juwaheer, 2004](#)). This is especially true for SMSHs as not much is expected from a viewpoint of personalised service and understanding of one specific need when compared with luxury hotels ([Karunaratne and Jayawardena, 2010](#)).

Although this is an exploratory study, it makes several contributions to the literature. First, this paper is among the first that attempts to analyse service quality of SMSHs in the UAE – adding new insights and fresh evidence to the existing cross-cultural research on consumer behaviour research that is still in its infancy ([Rauch et al., 2015](#)). Even though the UAE is located in the Middle East, it is a modern and dynamic country that for most Western tourists, the UAE offers an environment that is extremely familiar ([United Nation, 2018](#)). Unlike many developing countries, economic inequality in Dubai does not really exist between the tourists and the locals ([Zaidan and Kovacs, 2017](#)). Second, many studies have examined service quality and customer satisfaction in the luxury and full-service hotel contexts, and this study contributes to scholarly literature by extending the research to include the SMSHs. It is important for the hospitality service quality researchers to differentiate the sectors in the hospitality industry ([Crick and Spencer \(2011, p. 472\)](#)). Third, this study used a modified SERVQUAL dimension of service quality developed by [Parasuraman et al. \(1991\)](#). Although it has also been subjected to various criticism, the study shows that the modified SERVQUAL model with five dimensions of tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy was a reliable instrument and a useful tool for assessing hotel service quality.

Additionally, the findings raise some fundamental implications for SMSHs. First, the owners/managers of SMSHs may need to develop more specific strategies for achieving service quality and satisfaction for their visitors. The increasing level of competition within the SMSH industry in the UAE suggests that owners/managers must be able to offer personalised services to hotel visitors to raise their overall level of satisfaction. Second, it is known that SMSHs are operating with numerous constraints and limited resources. However, this does not limit the SMSHs owners/managers to differentiate themselves from their competitors by introducing value-added services, offering innovative products or focussing on delivering a wider range of services rather than a standardised low-cost pricing strategy to satisfy the customers. Third, the SMSHs should regard important issues such as maintaining their facilities in the hotel room. It is apparent that basic amenities should be in good working

condition as it is critical for customer satisfaction. As such, SMSHs should allocate financial resources to maintain their amenities.

The findings from this study can also aid the management of SMSH not only in the UAE but also in other countries. The findings can be used in planning its marketing strategies and in making improvements in the standards and quality of service in areas such as tangible, responsiveness and assurance. Even though reliability and empathy did not have a positive relationship on customers' satisfaction, they are still important to some guests. From the interview, it is apparent that customers seemed to perceive the same service differently. As such, the hotels can considerably increase their customer satisfaction level if they perform better in all aspects.

In addition, service quality and customer satisfaction have a somewhat reciprocal relationship. Many studies claim that there are positively correlated relationships between customer satisfaction and service quality (Etemad-Sajadi and Rizzuto, 2013; Amin *et al.*, 2013; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Satisfaction is a psychological construct that describes an overall affective response to a perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and perceived performance after consumption (Oliver, 1999). If the perceived performance is less than expected, customers will be dissatisfied, and if the perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, customers will be satisfied (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Following this theory, it is evident that customers already have a perceived expectation on product and service performance prior to purchase (Yang and Peterson, 2004). These expectations are generally formed from past experiences with the product or service or they could be formed from similar products, services, marketing stimuli and existing attitudes and confidence perceived by the customer (Moon *et al.*, 2011). Customers that are satisfied with their purchase are likely to repurchase, and this leads to greater customer retention than those with unsatisfactory experiences (Gagnon and Roh, 2008). When services provided did not meet the customers' expectation, they might seek services from other providers. It can therefore be implied that in a highly competitive business environment, specifically in the hospitality and tourism sector, individual hoteliers need to satisfy their customers better than their competitors (Ahmad, 2014). To avoid the conceptual ambiguities between service quality and satisfaction, it can be debated that satisfaction is the broader, long-term evaluation, while quality is a more precise, short-term judgment (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985).

Limitations and future research

This study is exploratory in nature, and the findings of the present study must be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, this study used a convenience sample instead of a random sample, but this is common in many similar studies (Ladhari and Rigaux-Bricmont, 2013; Amin *et al.*, 2013; Qu and Sit, 2007). According to Saunders (2009), for non-probability samples, the probability of each case being selected from the total population is not known, and it is impossible to answer research questions or to address objectives that require statistical inferences about the characteristics of the population. The results may therefore reflect specific target populations that are not representative of the entire population of SMSHs in the UAE, hence limited generalisation of the findings. Future studies in this area could address this problem by using random and larger samples. Second, the study was conducted during a specific period of time at the chosen locations. The results might be different if the study were to be conducted in other locations or during a different period of time. Third, this study was conducted in the UAE alone; future studies should be replicated in other neighbouring countries, specifically those with different cultural, social, political and economic environments. Finally, this research is limited to examining service quality and customer satisfaction in SMSHs. It would be worthwhile for future research to examine hotels in other categories, and the results of such studies should be compared with this study to examine similarities among the findings. In spite of these limitations, the findings of this study yield valuable insights into the service quality and customer satisfaction aspects of SMSHs in

emerging economies such as the UAE and provide a basis for the future investigation and diagnosis of this field of study. In addition, it would be interesting for future research to look at how gender, nationality and age group influence customers' satisfaction at SMSHs.

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