

Customer satisfaction with sommelier services of upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose – The abolishment of the wine tax in Hong Kong has led to increased wine consumption and increased demand for wine-related professionals, such as sommeliers. Yet the importance of sommeliers' value-adding performance in the context of upscale Chinese restaurants has not been examined. To address this gap, the SERVQUAL framework is adopted to examine the influence of sommeliers' service quality (SQ) on customer satisfaction (CS) and loyalty in the context of upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong.

Design/methodology/approach – The survey method is used to collect data from 302 units of the population of interest, partial least square-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is used to test the links between constructs.

Findings – Four of the seven dimensions of sommeliers' service quality, namely, empathy, tangibles, credibility and assurance, have a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, whereas the impact of perceived value and responsiveness on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty is positive but only marginally significant. Reliability has a weak and non-significant impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Research limitations/implications – Examining a small number of upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong limits generalisation of the findings to other contexts. Replication of the research in different contexts will enhance generalizability. In terms of implications, the discussion highlights the importance of sommeliers' service performance on customers' SQ perceptions SQ, CS and loyalty, all of which are important variables for restaurateurs.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study of the influence of the quality of sommelier's SQ on CS and loyalty in upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong. Given the lack of attention to this service role in the literature, the study contributes theory from which further understanding can develop.

Keywords Marketing, SERVQUAL, Wine, Customer satisfaction, Consumer behaviour, Service quality, Customer loyalty, Chinese restaurant, Sommeliers, Loyalty, Hong Kong

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The abolition of wine duties in Hong Kong and the recognition of the importance of wine professionals' expertise in effectively promoting wine in a competitive hospitality sector have both spurred increasing demand for wine and restaurateurs' demand for wine professionals, including sommeliers (InvestHK, 2018). Wine is a complex product offering multiple consumption choices, and its consumption can be challenging for consumers (and restaurateurs) who have limited knowledge of wine quality, range, suitability for particular occasions, food-wine pairing, related price-quality choices and other important aspects.

One way for restaurateurs to deal with challenges in wine provision, promotion and consumption, particularly for upscale restaurants where customers may be more demanding, is to educate customers about wine choice (provenance, range availability, value assessments and recommended options), in different situational contexts, and for consumption with particular foods (Alonso, 2014; Dewald, 2008). Ultimately, the complexity, range and depth of the customers' required knowledge justify the imparting of wine education by credible wine professionals, such as accredited sommeliers, who are responsible for wine services (Memoire, 2015).

Sommeliers evaluate wine quality, manage wine stocks and keep abreast of the latest information about wine products and consumption trends, being able to provide quality professional guidance and recommendations to customers and to other professionals in the industry (TASI – The Association de la Sommellerie Internationale, 2015). A key consequence reflecting the importance of the sommelier's role is the need to be perceived by restaurateurs and by customers as competent and trustworthy experts, who can make consumers feel comfortable and reassured about their choice of wine (Hussain *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that upscale restaurants increasingly seek to offer customers a professional sommelier service to assist them with their consumption requirements. By being able to identify the best wines that meet customers' expectations, sommeliers become a source of potential competitive advantage for the business, ultimately contributing to customer satisfaction and loyalty, and to the restaurants' success (Alonso, 2014; Dewald, 2008).

Sommelier services have costs but their strategic importance may explain the increasing demand for professional sommeliers, particularly in upscale Chinese restaurants (CEDB - The Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, 2014). This demand justifies increased deployment of accreditation programmes and training to improve sommeliers' performance, with the number of qualified sommeliers more than doubling (from 20 to 42) in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2010 (Chui, 2012).

Theoretical support and anecdotal evidence for the importance of sommelier services are substantial but empirical research is lacking, warranting scholarly attention in this paper to sommeliers' role and contribution to upscale Chinese restaurants' performance in Hong Kong (Livat and Remaud, 2018; Ryu *et al.*, 2012).

Research acknowledges that customers are willing to pay more for consuming wine products when visiting a restaurant offering sommelier services, compared with restaurants without sommeliers (Dewald, 2008; Manske and Cordua, 2005). This infers that the association between the perceived quality of the service provided by sommeliers (SQ) and customers' satisfaction (CS) with related of wine consumption increases perceived value for customers and their loyalty to the restaurant.

This study operationalises the association between constructs using SERVQUAL, a marketing construct for perceived SQ (Ali and Raza, 2017; Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Heung and Gu, 2012) that has been validated for the hospitality industry, particularly in the context of food and beverage business (Bojanic and Rosen, 1994; Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Lam *et al.*, 1998; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). The literature establishes that SQ – a cognitive judgment – precedes CS – an experiential affective judgment (de Oña, Machado and de Oña, 2015; Oliver, 2010, 1999). Provided SQ adds to customer perceived value, CS is the link between SQ and customer loyalty (behavioural intentions) (Jen *et al.*, 2011; Dabholkar *et al.*, 2000). Thus businesses are more likely to retain their satisfied customers and to benefit from repeat purchase intention and loyalty. Therefore, it is justified for restaurateurs to offer excellent SQ, including sommelier services, because loyal customers spend more and spread positive word of mouth (Chang, 2009; Hwang and Kunc, 2015).

Research has examined SQ for upscale Chinese restaurants (Becker *et al.*, 1999; Heung *et al.*, 2000; Hussain *et al.*, 2018), but CS and loyalty in the context of sommelier's SQ are yet to be examined. This study examines the direct and indirect effects of sommelier's SQ on CS and loyalty in the context of upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Perceived service quality (SQ) – dimensions of the SERVQUAL instrument

Conceptualised as the difference between customer expectations and actual perceptions of the service received (Stevens *et al.*, 1995), SQ is often measured by means of the multi-dimensional SERVQUAL measurement model and instrument (Bressolles and Durrieu, 2010; Tripathi and Dave, 2014). Developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985, 1988), the original instrument had 10 dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding and tangibles), later reduced to five dimensions to improve measurement consistency, namely tangibles (physical facilities, equipment and appearance of staff), assurance (staff's knowledge and courtesy and their ability to generate customer trust and confidence), reliability (in delivering services as promised), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), and empathy (caring and individualised attention provided to customers).

Applied across a wide array of service types, Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) concluded that reliability and empathy were the most and the least important dimensions. This conclusion is supported in some literature – such as Juwaheer and Ross (2003), Kvist and Klefsjö (2006) and Yarimoglu (2014) – but there is no consensus, with other research highlighting the importance of assurance and empathy – when interactions with customers require close communication – and of tangibles in the case of highly intangible dominant services (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2007).

Applied to sommelier services, each SERVQUAL dimension is briefly reviewed below, leading to the formulation of hypotheses to be examined in this study.

Tangibles

Recognised in studies within restaurant settings (Ali and Raza, 2017; Lee and Hing, 1995; Han and Ryu, 2009; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), “tangibles” were deemed the most important dimension in measuring SQ (Fick and Ritchie, 1991) and the first aspect that customers notice and take into account in considering CS (Han and Hyun, 2017; Ramseook-Munhurrin, 2012). For example, Chang (2009) found that tangibles (namely, menu design, staff appearance and cleanliness of dining venue) are the most powerful predictor of SQ and CS in steakhouses in Taiwan. Indeed, appealing service staff, legible and interesting menus, and clean restaurant areas were also highlighted as key attributes of perceived SQ for Croatian city restaurants (Marković *et al.*, 2011). Focusing on CS, Heung and Gu (2012) used employees' physical attributes as measurement tools to examine the importance of tangibles in building CS, suggesting that neat and properly dressed employees along with attractive flatware, stemware, and glassware set ups were significant CS predictors.

In the case of sommeliers as professional wine experts, tangibles include their equipment, tidiness, and the wine lists presented to customers (O'Neill and Charters, 2006), regarded by Ryu and Han (2011) as a determinant of CS. This provides the basis for *H1* below:

H1. Sommeliers' tangibles are directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Assurance

Referring to customers' perception of employees' knowledge, courtesy and ability to inspire trust and confidence in customers, assurance is well recognised as a reliable indicator of customers' assessment of a restaurant's SQ (Hwang and Zhao, 2010; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018; Roy and Eshghi, 2013; Stevens *et al.*, 1995), as well of CS and customer repurchase intention. For example, Chow *et al.* (2007) suggested that perceived quality of customer interactions with staff related to the expertise evidenced as in the case of employees' menu knowledge, to the timely response, and to the service attitude, also significantly influencing CS (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Hwang and Zhao, 2010) and repurchase intention (Ladhari *et al.*, 2008).

For sommeliers, the literature recognises their expertise in the areas of dining and wine, assuming a position of trustworthiness in customers' minds (Dewald, 2003; Lee and Hing, 1995; Lu, 2016). Supporting the importance of assurance in building customers' positive SQ perceptions and CS, sommeliers are perceived as key in recommending suitable wines to customers (Festa *et al.*, 2016), supporting *H2* below:

H2. Sommeliers' assurance is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Reliability

Reflecting the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, and noted earlier as the most important SQ dimension, reliability is also an important factor in meeting customers' expectations and a recognised driver of CS in the hospitality sector (Dabestani *et al.*, 2017; Marković *et al.*, 2010; Ramseook-Munhurrun, 2012). For example, Chin and Tsai (2013) argued that employee reliability is the most significant SQ dimension influencing customers' satisfaction and loyalty in themed restaurants.

In the case of sommeliers, Sirieux *et al.* (2011) noted the need for reliability in recommending wines from the master wine list according to customers' interest and taste, hence meeting customer expectations. Focus is on reliably providing their expert opinion and information about the recommended wine to customers, namely in terms of brand recognition and value for money, effectively satisfying customers' needs and strengthening customers' positive perceptions of the wine and of sommelier services (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Chocarro and Cortiñas, 2013). Sommeliers' ability to deliver services as promised and that meet customers' expectations lead to CS, supporting *H3* below:

H3. Sommeliers' reliability is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Responsiveness

Referring to the staff's willingness to assist customers and to provide prompt service, responsiveness is a recognised indicator of SQ, CS and repurchase intention, especially in the context of food and beverage context. For example, service staff prompt response to customers, being courteous, knowledgeable in their area of expertise, and being attentive and aware of customer needs, was found to influence customers' perceived SQ and CS in full-service restaurants (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006). This reiterated the recognised positive effect of responsiveness in strengthening SQ, CS and loyalty (Lee *et al.*, 2000), further illustrated in US customers repurchase intention in a Chinese restaurant (Qu, 1997). Liu and Jang (2009a) identified 24 attributes relevant to the assessment of SQ in Chinese restaurants, with responsiveness being a significant predictor of CS and repurchase intentions. Ultimately, employees' responsiveness has been deemed to determine the overall customer experience in casual dining restaurants (Ponnam and Balaji, 2014).

As members of a service team, sommeliers must understand customer needs and be able to provide services in a timely manner to being able to satisfy customers' needs and wants (Lu, 2016). For example, to accommodate changes in dining trends in response to customers' needs, professional sommeliers may extend business hours for customers to enjoy a leisurely occasion (Mehta and Maniam, 2002) and be ready and willing to supply the customers' requested wines instead of ordering from the restaurant list (Bruwer and Hwa-Nam, 2009). This supports *H4* below:

H4. Sommeliers' responsiveness is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Empathy

The caring and individualised attention a business provides to its customers, or empathy, is also deemed a dimension of SQ, as well as an important factor in building customer-brand relationship in various contexts (Khamis and AbRashid, 2018; Sin *et al.*, 2005). Although seen by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) as the least important SERVQUAL dimension, empirical research in the hospitality sector forwards the importance of empathy in maintaining perceived SQ (Amin *et al.*, 2013; Bojanic and Roasen, 1994) and in promoting CS, by building customers' positive perceptions (Tripathi and Dave, 2014), and behavioural intentions reflected in customer loyalty and referral intention (Hussain *et al.*, 2018).

The argument is that serving staff's care and attentiveness to customers are vital for promoting loyalty, because customers always seek personal attention and enjoy services that account for their perceived best interest (Hamari *et al.*, 2017). This justifies the importance of demonstrating staff's concern for individual customers' interest, offering meticulously customised services and making customers feel respected when experiencing services in reputable restaurants, conditions deemed critical in building CS (Chin and Tsai, 2013).

Sommeliers' emphasis must be on understanding customers' emotions in purchasing wine, and on recommending wine based on customers' preference (Dewald, 2008). Sommeliers' willingness and ability to understand customers' preference in wine (Gerard, 2009) strengthens customers' positive behavioural intention (Manske and Cordua, 2005). Hence, increasing the level of empathy can contribute positively to perceived service quality, promoting CS and competitiveness (Costa *et al.*, 2004; Meesala and Paul, 2018). This is the basis for *H5* below:

H5. Sommeliers' empathy is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

There is no consensus regarding the number of and nature of SQ dimensions and the importance of particular dimensions varies with different service types (Ladhari, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2016; Seth *et al.*, 2005). Indeed, reducing the 10 SQ dimensions into only five meant the encapsulating of credibility, for example, in a broad assurance dimension, with some loss of detail potentially important in the case of sommelier services, given the specific and exclusive nature of the expert service that is provided. To examine this detail this study looks into matters of credibility, discussed below.

Credibility

Credibility represents "trustworthiness, believability and honesty" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985, p. 47), supporting reliability and assurance (Kang and Namkung, 2018). Applied to hospitality, credibility is related to the staff's personal characteristics, hence requiring sommeliers with in-depth wine knowledge so to assist customers wine choices (Barber *et al.*,

2008), serving as a reliable and credible information source capable to reduce customers' perceived risk in purchasing wine (Somogyi *et al.*, 2011).

Given the perceived nature of SQ, sommeliers seek to develop a professional image of credibility that increases customers' confidence in their wine purchase intention (Manske and Cordua, 2005). One way to achieve this is through the wearing a uniform that signals the professional image and core value of the organization (Ryu and Han, 2011) as well as the sommelier's expertise. By wearing a sommelier badge on a sommelier collar as a part of their uniform, along with recognised pins or signs, sommeliers' expertise and credibility can be made conspicuous to customers (Court of Master Sommeliers, 2016). Sommeliers may also display qualification certificates in a place visible to customers to indicate their professional achievements (Mishra, 2006), hence enhancing their credibility (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Finally, sommeliers may enhance their expert image by attending wine shows and acting as judges in various public events in the hospitality sector, aiming at attracting customers' attention to their professional standing, thereby building positive brand image for the restaurateur of affiliation, as well as strengthening customers' purchase intention (Manske and Cordua, 2005; Zaranonello and Schmitt, 2013).

Clearly, professional qualifications, such as certifications, uniforms, pins and signs, and public image can be seen as tangible evidence of sommeliers' credibility and level of expertise, hence important in building positive customers' perceptions of SQ (Grenčíková *et al.*, 2013) and CS (Grenčíková *et al.*, 2013). This provides the basis for *H6* below:

H6. Sommeliers' credibility is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Perceived service quality and customer satisfaction

Perceived SQ is an expression of customer's perception of the quality or superiority of a product with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives (Zeithaml, 1988), and precedes CS (de Oña, Machado and de Oña, 2015; Oliver, 2010, 1999), understood as customers' overall judgment of their purchasing and consuming experience (Chow *et al.*, 2007; Heung and Ngai, 2008; Tam, 2004).

H1 to *H6* refer to the association between the various SERVQUAL dimensions and both SQ and CS. Based on the expectations-disconfirmation paradigm (EDP) and despite recognised limitations (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2001), a direct association is inferred in the literature between SQ and CS (Dubé *et al.*, 1994; Ngoc and Uyen, 2015; Swanson and Davis, 2003), such that the SERVQUAL dimensions reviewed above are also deemed reliable in determining CS and (indirectly) loyalty in the Chinese restaurant context (Liu and Jang, 2009a; Ryu and Han, 2011). For example, Lee and Hing (1995) adopted the SERVQUAL instrument to measure expected and perceived service quality in Chinese and French fine-dining restaurants. They concluded that tangibles, reliability, and assurance were the most important SQ dimensions related to customer satisfaction in Chinese restaurants (Meesala and Paul, 2018).

Understanding the impact of sommeliers' service quality and its dimensions on perceived SQ and CS in Chinese restaurants remains a concern (Becker *et al.*, 1999; Heung and Gu, 2012). Managers in the hospitality sector generally seek to strengthen customers' perceived SQ by improving their staff interactions with customers (Jun *et al.*, 2017). In the case of sommeliers, wine recommendations should take customers' preference into account, paying attention to the accuracy in food ordering and performing professionally in all dining occasions (Hammond *et al.*, 2009; Manske and Cordua, 2005), hence focusing on customers' satisfaction and on fostering loyalty.

As noted earlier in this paper, an indirect positive association between CS and repurchase intention requires that SQ adds to customer perceived value. Perceived value is addressed below.

Perceived value

Conceptualised as customers' overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988), perceived value is regarded as an important predictor of CS (Arora and Singer, 2006; Kaura *et al.*, 2015), determined by the difference between customers' expected returns and their actual spending (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991).

Comprising four dimensions and applied to restaurant services, acquisition value and transaction value are dimensions determined by menu prices, hence significant during the purchasing process (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000), such that sommeliers should ensure competitive pricing to strengthen CS without harming perceived SQ. The two other dimensions, value in-use and redemption value, relate to post-consumption services, depend on post dining experiences (Petrick, 2002; Oh, 2000a) and justify sommeliers' attention to the overall dining performance (Arora and Singer, 2006).

Therefore, to account for affordability in providing wine options for customers to choose from, sommeliers may recommend wines in different price ranges (Green, 2003), potentially reducing customers' monetary and time costs (Tam, 2004), and enhancing perceived value, SQ and CS (Ginon *et al.*, 2014; Oh, 2000b; Ryu *et al.*, 2012). This provides the basis for *H7* below:

H7. Customer perceived value is directly associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS.

Enhancing perceived value, SQ and CS is deemed to relate indirectly to customer loyalty, discussed below.

Customer loyalty (repurchase intention)

Related to customers' preference and repurchase intention (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996), customer loyalty is conceptualised as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior (Oliver, 1999). It is seen as associated with CS (Chow *et al.*, 2007; Hyun, 2010; Kandampully *et al.*, 2015) and a critical determinant of competitive advantages (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Verona and Prandelli, 2002). In the hospitality industry, it is considered that enhanced CS level leads to high customer loyalty and repurchase intention (Meesala and Paul, 2018; Yüksel and Yüksel, 2002), contributing to favourable business performance (Gupta *et al.*, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2007, 2009).

Sommeliers' services have the potential to improve CS and strengthen customers' loyalty and repurchase intentions, warranting investing in the provision of services of high perceived quality. The consideration is that CS with sommeliers' service is directly related to building customer loyalty, providing the basis for *H8* below:

H8. Customer loyalty is positively associated with customers' perceived SQ and CS

Customers' perceived SQ is critical for business success and a major area for empirical research in the food and beverage industries (Chocarro and Cortiñas, 2013; Han and Hyun, 2017; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018), given its potential to foster repeated patronage, referral intention,

attitudinal loyalty and sales (Bufquin *et al.*, 2017; Heung and Gu, 2012; Livat and Rемаud, 2018). Similar to recent SQ research in the same sector (Chin and Tsai, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2016), focus here is on customers' perceived SQ as assessed in relation to the various SERVQUAL dimensions.

Methodology

Based on the preceding discussion, Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the theoretical framework and hypotheses developed in this paper, where the SERVQUAL dimensions act as drivers of CS and, of customer loyalty.

To assess the hypotheses, data collection took place in Hong Kong over 14 weeks in 2016, from April 1 to June 30, involving customers of upscale Chinese Michelin-starred restaurants offering a fine-dining environment (Green, 2003; Wu and Liang, 2009). These restaurants are characterised by a strong demand for sommeliers capable of offering professional dining services to customers, aiming at enhancing CS and loyalty through high sommeliers' SQ (Oliveira-Brochado *et al.*, 2014), which fits the objectives of this study.

After screening, two restaurants were selected from the 2016 Michelin star restaurant list for Hong Kong, namely, Ming Court and Duddell's, along with Cloudland, a reputable upscale Chinese restaurant. Each of the three selected Chinese restaurants employed one sommelier with professional qualifications endorsed by the Hong Kong Sommelier Association, and with a declared passion for interacting with customers and with a focus on

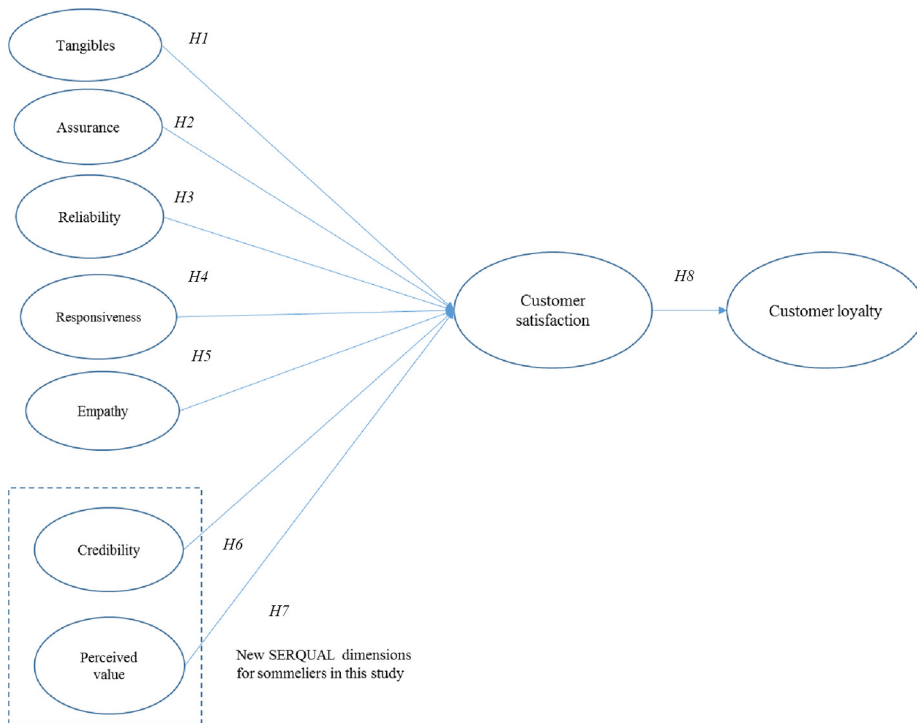


Figure 1.
The conceptual
framework for this
research

the provision of high SQ, explaining aspects such as wine and dine pairing, and involved with wine and food menus.

The survey was first drafted in English, then translated into Chinese and back-translated into English to ensure accuracy. To enhance data reliability, the three sommeliers were asked to randomly distribute the survey and to explain the research purpose to participating customers. Data was then collected using a self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaire that took around 10 min for each respondent to complete. Dealing with customer perceptions of the sommeliers' service provision and accounting for different SQ dimensions, respondents were asked to complete all items of the questionnaire.

Using five-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), multiple-item scales were adopted from the extant literature (Heung and Gu, 2012; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Sulek and Hensley, 2004), namely, "tangibles" with three items (Marković *et al.*, 2011), "reliability" (Sirieix *et al.*, 2011), "responsiveness" (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006), "assurance" and "empathy" (Lee and Hing, 1995). Other scales involved "credibility" (Mishra, 2006) and customer "perceived value" (Ryu *et al.*, 2012). Three items were adopted to measure CS (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Ryu and Han, 2011; Ryu *et al.*, 2012) and loyalty relied on Tam (2004).

Results

A total of 606 customers were invited to participate in the survey. While 422 customers agreed to participate, only 341 completed the survey. Of these, 39 questionnaires were incomplete and discarded. Usable responses were collected from 302 customers, a 71.5 per cent response rate that make up that sample used for data analysis.

Respondents' profile

The sample comprised 46 per cent male and 54 per cent female respondents in the age group 18-56, 61.9 per cent of which were 36-55 years old. Most respondents were university-educated (43.7 per cent), with a further 22.2 per cent having completed postgraduate studies. Monthly income exceeded HK\$30,000 for 56.9 per cent of the respondents, with 26.8 per cent earning above HK\$50,001. More than half of the respondents (60.3 per cent) visited the restaurant at least once a month, and 29.8 per cent visited more than once. Nearly half of the respondents were dining with friends (45.7 per cent), 25.8 per cent were with family members, and less than one-fifth of the participants (13.2 per cent) were dining with business colleagues.

Data analysis

The analysis featured partial least squares-structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS v3.2.8 (Ringle *et al.*, 2015) and the 5,000-bootstrap procedure. PLS-SEM is appropriate for the analyses because the goal is to predict key target constructs measured by a large number of indicators with small sample sizes (e.g. less than 500), as is the case of this study (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

Proceeding in two stages, the reliability and validity of the measurement (outer) model were first measured, followed by the assessment of the structural (inner) model (Table I). Latent constructs' reliability were assessed in terms of individual item loadings, Cronbach's α and composite reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Cronbach's α and composite reliability for each construct was >0.71 except tangibles (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.64$, composite reliability = 0.81), indicating a good level of internal consistency in the responses (Nunnally and Bernstein,

Construct	Loading	t-value	α	Composite reliability
<i>Tangibles</i>			0.64	0.81
The sommelier has clean equipment to serve customers	0.818	32.11		
The sommelier looks neat and well groomed	0.794	27.83		
The wine lists are readable and well presented	0.675	13.94		
<i>Assurance</i>			0.71	0.84
The sommelier is courteous	0.770	23.90		
Seeking recommendations from a sommelier makes me feel confident and risk-free	0.788	23.18		
The sommelier has knowledge to answer my wine enquiry	0.822	32.01		
<i>Reliability</i>			0.73	0.85
The sommelier is able to provide wine and food matching recommendations	0.809	25.20		
The sommelier is able to recommend wine with quality	0.874	52.14		
The sommelier is able to suggest monetary value for wine	0.722	15.74		
<i>Responsiveness</i>			0.76	0.86
The sommelier is willing to serve guest's personal wine	0.807	30.53		
The sommelier is able to extend the service hours upon guest request	0.838	37.39		
The sommelier is able to accommodate my needs	0.813	30.27		
<i>Empathy</i>			0.70	0.83
The sommelier gives personal attention	0.818	33.88		
The sommelier has my best interest in mind	0.860	45.30		
The sommelier understands my specific wine preferences	0.689	14.49		
<i>Credibility</i>			0.69	0.83
The sommelier is a worthy of respect professional	0.766	20.12		
The sommelier is recognised in Hong Kong	0.753	17.74		
The sommelier has a pin or sign to depict the trainings and qualifications of profession	0.839	36.47		
<i>Perceived value</i>			0.74	0.85
The charge for the wine is acceptable	0.828	32.97		
The restaurant dining experience is worth the charge	0.826	30.74		
The sommelier provides me better value compared to others	0.780	24.36		
<i>Customer satisfaction</i>			0.83	0.90
I always receive excellent services from the sommelier	0.881	56.75		
The sommelier put me in good mood	0.864	41.77		
Overall, I am satisfied with the sommelier's services	0.851	41.24		
<i>Customer loyalty</i>			0.76	0.86
I will continue consuming in this restaurant	0.789	24.58		
I will say positive words about this sommelier to others	0.845	35.54		
I will return to the restaurant because of the sommelier	0.836	38.05		

Table I.
Outer model results

1994). The loading for each item was >0.675 and all loadings were highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

The average variance extracted (AVE) was used to assess the convergent validity of the model and the scores for all constructs exceeded the recommended 0.50 thresholds, satisfying the AVE criterion (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) criterion. [Table II](#) shows that the AVEs' square roots for latent constructs exceeded the corresponding latent-variable correlations, indicating discriminant validity ([Hair et al., 2014](#)).

Inner (structural) model results

Using the inner (structural) model results, the hypotheses for the relationships in the conceptual model were tested by their *t-values*, standardised coefficient β values and coefficient of determination (R^2 value). A hypothesis was accepted if the *t-values* was larger than the critical value (i.e. $t \geq 1.96, p \leq 0.05$), with $p \leq 0.10$ indicating marginal significance, using a two-tailed test. The measurement and structural models' significance were tested using the 5,000-bootstrap procedure ([Hair et al., 2014](#)). The results support seven of the eight hypotheses ([Figure 2; Table III](#)).

Regarding the relationship between SQ dimensions and CS, their impact is strongest for empathy ($\beta = 0.215, p = 0.001$), followed by credibility ($\beta = 0.202, p = 0.002$), tangibles ($\beta = 0.183, p = 0.001$) and assurance ($\beta = 0.120, p = 0.041$). Thus, *H1, H2, H5* and *H6* were supported. Perceived value ($\beta = 0.110, p = 0.053$) and responsiveness ($\beta = 0.101, p = 0.084$) are only marginally significant, and *H4* and *H7* were marginally supported. In contrast, the impact of reliability ($\beta = 0.003, p = 0.595$) is weak and non-significant, and *H3* is rejected. Finally, CS's influence on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.707, p = 0.000$) is strong and significant, supporting *H8*.

R^2 values were used to assess explanatory power of the conceptual model ([Figure 2](#)), with $R^2 > 0.10$ being the recommended criterion benchmark ([Chin, 1998](#)). The R^2 values for CS ($R^2 = 0.600$) and customer loyalty ($R^2 = 0.500$), along with 0.55 AVA suggest that the model explains a meaningful proportion of the variation in the endogenous variables.

The results also report the indirect effects of SQ dimensions on customer loyalty. The indirect effects of empathy, credibility, tangibles and assurance on customer loyalty were 0.152 ($p = 0.001$), 0.142 ($p = 0.001$), 0.130 ($p = 0.001$) and 0.085 ($p = 0.045$), respectively, revealing that those dimensions are significant predictors of CS and customer loyalty.

Theoretical implications

The influence of SQ dimensions in building SQ, CS and customer loyalty has been supported by an increasing number of empirical studies in different contexts ([Chumpitaz Caceres and Paparoidamis, 2007; Fullerton, 2005; Kasiri et al., 2017; Lee and Hing, 1995; Parasuraman et al., 1988](#)), but their application to sommeliers' SQ remains unclear. This study contributes to the wine marketing literature by empirically testing a theoretical model that caters for the influence of the various dimensions of sommeliers' SQ on CS and customer loyalty in the

Table II.
Construct correlation
matrix and AVE

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	AVE	AVE square root
1. Tangibles	1								0.59	0.76
2. Assurance	0.60	1							0.63	0.79
3. Reliability	0.55	0.62	1						0.65	0.80
4. Responsiveness	0.53	0.56	0.62	1					0.67	0.82
5. Empathy	0.55	0.59	0.60	0.69	1				0.63	0.79
6. Credibility	0.53	0.54	0.55	0.66	0.65	1			0.62	0.79
7. Perceived value	0.47	0.52	0.59	0.58	0.61	0.59	1		0.66	0.81
8. Customer satisfaction	0.60	0.60	0.57	0.63	0.67	0.65	0.59	1	0.75	0.87
9. Customer loyalty	0.59	0.59	0.64	0.64	0.64	0.65	0.65	0.71	0.68	0.82

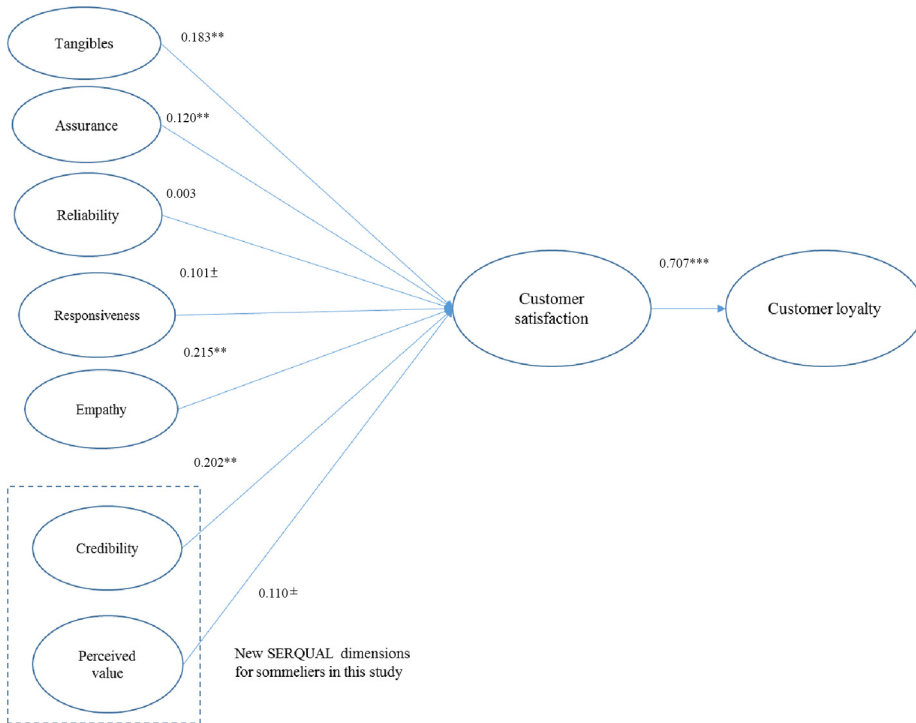


Figure 2. Conceptual model results

Notes: Paths significant at $^{\pm}p < 0.10$, $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$, $***p < 0.001$; AVA = 0.55

Relationship	Path coefficient	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
<i>Service quality dimensions</i> → <i>customer satisfaction (CS)</i>			
Empathy → CS	0.215	3.29	0.001
Credibility → CS	0.202	3.17	0.002
Tangibles → CS	0.183	3.19	0.001
Assurance → CS	0.120	2.04	0.041
Perceived value → CS	0.110	1.94	0.053
Responsiveness → CS	0.101	1.73	0.084
Reliability → CS	0.003	0.53	0.595
<i>CS</i> → <i>Customer loyalty</i>			
CS → Customer loyalty	0.707	19.57	0.000

Table III. PLS-SEM Analyses of sommeliers' SERVQUAL on satisfaction and loyalty

context of upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong. Focusing on sommelier services, the study details the relative importance of individual SQ dimensions (Tables IV and V).

The results for direct effects reveal that empathy ($\beta = 0.215$), credibility ($\beta = 0.202$), tangibles ($\beta = 0.183$) and assurance ($\beta = 0.120$) on CS have positive and significant effects, while responsiveness ($\beta = 0.101$) and perceived value ($\beta = 0.110$) are positive but only marginally significant. Hence empathy is the most influential factor, followed by credibility,

tangibles, assurance, perceived value and responsiveness, while reliability is not effective in building CS.

The results are similar for indirect effects (Table V). Empathy ($\beta = 0.152$), credibility ($\beta = 0.142$), tangibles ($\beta = 0.130$) and assurance ($\beta = 0.085$) have positive and significant effects on customer loyalty, while perceived value ($\beta = 0.078$) and responsiveness ($\beta = 0.071$) are positive but only marginally significant.

Overall, the results reveal that sommeliers' SQ dimensions maintain useful associations with CS. Empathy, credibility, tangibles, assurance, perceived value and responsiveness should be thought as key factors in strengthening CS and customer loyalty in upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong. This extends to sommeliers the findings of non-role-specific studies in the hospitality sector (Heung and Gu, 2012; Adam *et al.*, 2015; Tripathi and Dave, 2014).

This study also strengthens theory by providing evidence of a strong and positive impact of CS on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.707$ $p = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.50$), emphasising CS's importance in the process of customer loyalty building. In the case of sommelier services, other words, managers are recommended to strengthen customers' satisfaction by improving SQ builds customer loyalty, contributing to competitive advantages.

Contrary to expectations, the impact of reliability ($\beta = 0.034$) on customer satisfaction is weak and non-significant. The non-significant effect may be explained by the credence nature of sommeliers' services, high in both information asymmetry and perceived risk, and often requiring the provider to determine the needs of the customer (Howden and Pressey, 2008), hence of difficult assessment by customers. Given these challenges, as this study focus is on reputable upscale restaurants certified with Michelin stars, customers may infer sommelier' SQ from the restaurants' strong and positive brand image, unwittingly crediting the reliability of sommeliers' performance.

Table IV.
Summary of
hypothesis outcomes
(direct effects)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path coefficient	p-value	Outcome
H1	Tangibles → CS	0.183	0.001	Supported
H2	Assurance → CS	0.120	0.041	Supported
H3	Reliability → CS	0.034	0.595	Rejected
H4	Responsiveness → CS	0.101	0.084	Marginally supported
H5	Empathy → CS	0.215	0.001	Supported
H6	Credibility → CS	0.202	0.002	Supported
H7	Perceived value → CS	0.110	0.053	Marginally supported
H8	CS → customer loyalty	0.707	0.000	Supported

Table V.
Summary of
outcomes (indirect
effects)

Relationship	Path coefficient	p-value	Significance
Tangibles → customer loyalty	0.130	0.001	Significant
Assurance → customer loyalty	0.085	0.045	Significant
Reliability → customer loyalty	0.024	0.523	Non-significant
Responsiveness → customer loyalty	0.071	0.082	Marginally significant
Empathy → customer loyalty	0.152	0.001	Significant
Credibility → customer loyalty	0.142	0.001	Significant
Perceived value → customer loyalty	0.078	0.057	Marginally significant

Managerial implications

Managerial implications are compiled in Table VI. Perhaps the major managerial implication from the study relates to the credence nature of sommelier's professional service, requiring the personal intervention of the service provider (the sommelier) and associated with a higher degree of customisation (Mitra *et al.*, 1999). This promotes the importance of sommeliers' empathy and credibility on customers' level of satisfaction and loyalty in upscale Chinese restaurants.

Thus, sommeliers should give personal attention to their customers and to reassure them about the advice being provided (empathy). This might involve gaining a clear understanding of customers' preferences (Lee and Hing, 1995), of why they are considering wine consumption, and of how they can best satisfy customers' personal needs (Kivela *et al.*, 2000). Credibility will be enhanced if sommeliers exhibit certificates of their training and qualifications (Mishra, 2006) in a discrete but conspicuous manner, including professional credentials obtained in education and training programs organised by recognised professional associations (Green, 2003; Grenčíková *et al.*, 2013; Lu, 2016). For example, sommeliers in upscale Chinese restaurants may demonstrate their credibility by wearing a sommelier pin (which distinguishes their expertise by colours and sizes), such that sommeliers who wear a large gold lapel pin are acknowledged as master sommeliers (Court of Master Sommeliers, 2016). Notably, master sommeliers are acknowledged as well educated professionals, and their recommendation of wine and menus are recognised as credible and useful in enhancing customers' satisfaction with their dining experience (Lu, 2016). The implication here is that professionally dressed and qualified sommeliers gain a position of trust in customers' minds (Manske and Cordua, 2005), which reduces customers' perceived risk and strengthens CS and loyalty.

Another managerial implication that supports prior research findings (Chang, 2009; Heung and Gu, 2012), is that tangibles (e.g. personal appearance, equipment hygiene, quality of the menus) have a positive impact on customers' SQ and loyalty. Sommelier's tangibles include their personal and professional appearance, the cleanliness of their tools (including corkscrews, decanters and glassware, which must be spotless and odourless) and the availability of menus and wine list that are legible, well-presented and informative, perhaps

Priority	Recommendations	Responsibility
1	Focus on sommeliers' <i>empathy</i> with customers, providing personal attention and ensuring appropriate understanding of their expectations and preferences	Sommeliers
2	Demonstrate sommeliers' <i>credibility</i> by providing conspicuous physical evidence of their professional standing (e.g. qualifications, awards, pins and signs)	Sommeliers and restaurant managers
3	Focus on <i>tangibles</i> (e.g. by providing clean equipment, pleasant and appealing environment, well-groomed staff, and easily readable and informative wine lists)	Restaurant managers
4	Focus on customers' <i>assurance</i> by facilitating easy access to sommeliers' services. Sommeliers to be readily approachable, courteous, competent and professional	Sommeliers and restaurant managers
5	Draw on sommeliers' empathy by recommending wine that enhances customers' <i>perceived value</i> and contributes to enjoyable dining experiences	Sommeliers
6	Strengthening sommeliers' <i>responsiveness</i> by improving their skills in offering prompt responses	Sommeliers

Table VI.
Summary of
managerial
implications

including detail on country of origin, grape varieties and wine brands (Julyan, 2015; Tang *et al.*, 2015).

Assurance is also a significant factor in sommeliers' SQ and loyalty. In this respect, the recommendation is that sommeliers should demonstrate their acumen in making wine recommendations so as to capture customers' interest and to create incentives for repurchase behaviour (Lu, 2016) in a courteous and confident manner. This intent should be pursued while treating customers with courtesy to provide a pleasant dining experience for customers, while explaining important detail on the wine labels, describing different grape varieties, explaining vintage variations, telling stories about the winery, proposing wine and food pairing ideas, learning the preferences of their customers and suggesting options with the best value (Dewald, 2008; Green, 2003; Julyan, 2015). An important aspect to consider is that assurance may act as a substitute for customers' need to assess sommeliers' reliability, discussed above in relation to credence qualities of SQ.

Drawing on previous research (Chow *et al.*, 2007; Lee and Hing, 1995), while responsiveness and perceived value have marginal significance for sommeliers' SQ, it is important for sommeliers to respond promptly to customers' demands (Lu, 2016), to build comprehensive knowledge on wine selection, and to strengthen their ability to recommend wine according to customers' preference (Manske and Cordua, 2005). For example, sommeliers may discover that male customers focus more on particular grape varieties and on vintage aspects when selecting wines, whereas female customers may focus more on wine and food combinations before ordering (Barber *et al.*, 2006). Another example is related to Asian customers' possible preference for drinking red wines from France (Meiburg, 2016). Sommeliers may also present prices of wine according to brand name, country of origin and taste hence managing costs and benefits in wine lists to ensure perceptions of fair pricing, influential in maintaining customer satisfaction and loyalty (Hall *et al.*, 2001; Kolpan *et al.*, 2008; Li, 2016).

Finally, although it was found that the magnitude of individual SERVQUAL dimensions is not very strong (i.e. all of the significant predictors with $\beta \leq 0.220$) and one of the dimensions, reliability, did not have a significant influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty, the collective influence of the service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.605$) and customer loyalty ($R^2 = 0.500$) was meaningful. Therefore, considering the synergistic interaction potential amongst service quality dimensions (Anish *et al.*, 2018; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), it is recommended that managers of Chinese upscale restaurants should prioritise their resources allocation to the training sommeliers according to the magnitude and significance of the service quality dimensions. Top priority may be to encourage sommeliers to show their empathy with customers by overtly paying attention to customers' personal needs. Improving the tangibles of sommeliers by encouraging their neat and well-groomed appearance, offering informative and easy to read wine lists is also important, together with encouraging sommeliers to demonstrate their credibility by conspicuous display of their qualifications, pins and signs. Overall, strengthening sommeliers' professional knowledge and image is important.

Limitation and future research directions

A first concern refers to the size of the effects of the different dimensions of SQ on the inferences that can be made from the study results (Cohen, 1988; Hair *et al.*, 2014). Conducting Cohen's f^2 analysis indicates that the effects are low to moderate (i.e. $0.02 \leq f^2 \leq 0.15$). Noting that the analysis of effect sizes can be distorted for example by restricting the study to a subset of the population as in this study (Baguley, 2009), a possible implication is that superior significance does not imply that one dimension is sufficiently

important for other dimensions to be ignored. The various SQ dimensions need to be assessed.

This cross-sectional study examined sommelier services in upscale Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong, limiting its generalizability. Replication is needed in alternative sommelier settings, accounting for different types of restaurants and in different locations (such as Macau, Shanghai and Taipei) to increase the scope and generalizability of the findings.

Further research is also needed to investigate the longitudinal effects of trust and loyalty on repurchase intentions in professional sommelier service contexts. This may include studying the influence of sommeliers' SQ dimensions on customer relationship and loyalty over time.

This study examines customer perceptions. Taking into account sommeliers' and restaurants managers' perspectives may increase understanding of how sommeliers' may enhance SQ, for example through strategic co-creation with consumers.

Finally, this study focused on the effectiveness of sommeliers' SQ dimensions and did not consider the possible impact of other variables, such as customer engagement, trust and relationship marketing orientation. Future research may examine the relative impacts of sommeliers' SQ dimensions and the aforementioned constructs.

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