

SERVICE QUALITY BY SMALL AND MEDIUM PRACTICES TOWARDS SMES: THE EXPECTATIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND FIRM PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

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This study examined the relationship between the expectation and perception of service quality by small and medium practices (SMPs) towards the performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study utilized the questionnaire survey as the research instrument distributed to the managers/owners of SMEs in Malaysia. Using multiple regression analysis on 162 respondents, this study shows that the expectation of the service quality provided by SMPs has a significant positive relationship with the perceptions of the service quality received. Similarly, the perceptions of service quality have a significant positive relationship with the firm performance. The findings from this study provide some implications for the SMPs in improving their service quality in performing their tasks. This is because the expectations and perceptions of SMEs play an important role in appointing SMPs for accounting-related matters. This study contributes to the accounting literature and provides information regarding the service quality dimensions which could help SMPs to assess the success of their services.

Keywords: Expectations, Perceptions, Service Quality, Performance

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1. INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in driving economic growth and development in both developed and developing countries. They are considered the backbone of

many economies. This can be seen in a number of areas, such as generating employment opportunities, promoting innovation, providing goods and services to consumer's income distribution, reduction of poverty, training, and entrepreneurship skill development (Wahab & Abdesamed, 2012). SMEs

contribute to the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country, and in many countries, they account for a significant portion of the total GDP. Additionally, SMEs often operate in niche markets and provide specialized goods and services, making them important players in the overall economy. In Malaysia, SMEs are the largest contributors to the GDP and a major source of job creation (Mahidin, 2021). According to the most recent data in the Malaysia Statistical Business Register (MSBR) issued by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (DOSM), there would be 1,226,494 micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in 2021, accounting for 97.4% of total establishments in Malaysia (SME Corp Malaysia, 2022). However, despite their contributions, SMEs often face numerous challenges in terms of access to finance, market access, regulatory barriers, and lack of the appropriate strategies, skills, and competence to survive in business, let alone fend off severe rivalry from competitors (Chong et al., 2022). Because of this, most Malaysian small and medium-sized business owners could not keep their businesses going in the long run and fail within the first five years (Perera, 2016).

It is difficult to achieve success in all facets of entrepreneurship because most SMEs are started and run by sole proprietors (De Bruyckere et al., 2017). Running an SME can be a challenging and complex task, as it requires expertise in many areas such as finance, marketing, operations, and human resources. Entrepreneurs who start SMEs often have limited resources, including time, money, and human capital, which can make it difficult for them to succeed. The founder(s) may be experts in managing a manufacturing process or in developing new products or ideas, or they may be natural marketers, but they cannot be experts in all areas in order to run their business smoothly and profitably (Yusoff, 2006). Additionally, SMEs may face intense competition from larger companies and may have limited access to capital and other resources that are crucial for business growth. They may also have difficulty navigating complex regulations and dealing with economic uncertainty. In order to overcome business limitations, SMEs seek assistance from external business advisors. Many SMEs seek assistance from external business advisors, such as accountants, in order to overcome business limitations and achieve their goals. External business advisors bring a wealth of knowledge, expertise, and experience to the table, which can help SMEs navigate the complex challenges they face. In line with previous studies, the external accountant of an SMP serves as one of the primary external advisors (Scott & Irwin, 2009; Blackburn & Jarvis, 2010; Carey, 2015). For instance, accounting and tax requirements are sometimes regarded as difficult and require a comprehensive knowledge of accounting regulations and tax legislation (Marriott & Marriott, 2000). Many SME owners and managers may not have the necessary knowledge and skills to handle all aspects of running a business, including accounting and tax matters. This is where the expertise of external accountants can be valuable. Accountants can provide valuable insights and advice on financial and tax issues, helping SMEs make informed decisions and stay compliant with regulations (De Bruyckere et al., 2020). According to

Haron et al. (2010), the lack of expertise also provides an opportunity for SMP to broaden their service offerings to include advice and consulting types of services in order to meet the business requirements of SMEs in an economic environment that is always evolving. Business advisory services are sometimes referred to as “non-audit services” and generally refer to the services above and beyond the scope of traditional audit services. These services typically include a wide range of specialized services, such as tax planning and preparation, financial management, strategic planning, market analysis, and process improvement. Non-audit services can provide SMEs with valuable support and guidance to help them overcome the limitations they face and achieve their business goals. They can also help SMEs identify areas for improvement, develop effective strategies, and make informed decisions based on data and expert analysis. It is important to note that while non-audit services can be very beneficial for SMEs, it is also important to ensure that the advisor providing these services is qualified and experienced. SMEs should also consider the potential conflicts of interest that may arise when an accounting firm provides both audit and non-audit services. To ensure the integrity and quality of the services provided, many regulatory bodies require that auditors and non-audit service providers operate independently and maintain appropriate safeguards to protect against conflicts of interest.

SMPs in Malaysia offer both audit and non-audit services and the majority of their clients are SMEs (Haron et al., 2012). SMPs play an important role in supporting these businesses with a range of accounting and advisory services. SMPs are typically small to medium-sized accounting firms that offer a range of services to SMEs, including financial statement audits, tax planning and preparation, and management consulting. By working closely with SMEs, SMPs are able to understand their unique needs and provide customized solutions to help them overcome the challenges they face and achieve their business goals. SMPs in Malaysia are regulated by the Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA) and are required to adhere to high standards of professionalism, quality, and ethics. By working with SMPs, SMEs in Malaysia can benefit from the specialized knowledge and expertise that these firms offer and receive tailored solutions to help them achieve their business objectives.

Thus, for SMPs to sustain market share and penetration, they must enhance their competitive strategy. In today’s rapidly changing business environment, SMPs face intense competition from both local and international accounting firms, as well as from other providers of business advisory services. To remain competitive and succeed in this environment, SMPs must continuously evaluate and improve their services, marketing, and overall business strategy. A high level of service quality has been shown in prior research to be associated with a rise in both customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Lewis et al., 1994; Ismail et al., 2006; Dahlggaard-Park, 2015; Kranias & Bourlessa, 2013). Some studies indicated outsourcing of statutory accounting services and additional business advice has a beneficial impact on the performance of SMEs (Kamyabi & Devi, 2011; Barbera & Hasso, 2013;

Danjuma, 2015; Carey, 2015). Outsourcing these services can provide SMEs with access to specialized knowledge, expertise, and experience that they may not have in-house, and can help them overcome the limitations they face and achieve their business goals.

Accounting services and business advice, on the other hand, necessitate a high level of expertise and highly skilled individuals. It is important to note that while outsourcing can have a beneficial impact on the performance of SMEs, it is also important to choose the right provider of these services. SMEs should look for providers with the necessary expertise, experience, and reputation, and ensure that they are a good fit for their business needs and goals. Thus, the factors influencing customer perception of quality may differ from those influencing consumer perception of quality in other industries that supposedly deliver less complicated services (Doloreux & Laperriere, 2014). The differences in the needs, sizes, and characteristics of the consumers show how challenging it is for these professionals to provide the level of quality that their clients need (Santos & Spring, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between expectations and perceptions of SMEs regarding the quality of business assistance from SMPs. Furthermore, this study will also examine whether the perceptions of service quality provided by external accountants matter in terms of performance for SMEs. The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- To determine whether there is a significant relationship between the expectation of service quality and the perception of service quality.
- To determine whether there is a significant relationship between the perception of service quality and the performance of the company.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and explains the theoretical framework and hypotheses development. Section 3 analyses the methodology that has been used to conduct empirical research that is in line with the objectives of this study. Section 4 elaborates on the results and discussions the findings. Section 5 concludes the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Service quality

Many scholars have created various definitions and measuring frameworks for service quality. In most cases, it is based on subjective quality, which depends on the customers' perspective and their judgment (Ahmed, 2018). Lewis and Booms (1983) claim that the gap model, which compares the level of service supplied to what the customer had anticipated, is a method for determining service quality. The goal of this model is to identify and close these gaps in order to improve service quality and meet customer expectations. By understanding customer expectations and designing processes and systems that deliver high-quality services, businesses can ensure that they are providing a level of service that exceeds customer expectations and sets them apart from their competitors.

Providing high-quality services is associated with exceeding client expectations. When customers receive a level of service that is better than what they expected, they are more likely to be satisfied with the service, become loyal customers, and recommend the service to others. Exceeding customer expectations is often considered to be a key factor in providing a high-quality service. This can involve understanding what customers value most about a service and designing processes and systems that deliver on those expectations. For example, a business that provides fast and reliable service, or a service that is delivered with a personal touch, may be more likely to exceed customer expectations and provide a high-quality service.

By focusing on exceeding customer expectations, businesses can create a competitive advantage and differentiate themselves from their competitors. This can lead to increased customer satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat business, which can ultimately result in improved financial performance and long-term success.

Additionally, the firm's success is believed to be driven by high service quality (Ismail et al., 2006). It is regarded as a strategic tool for improving business performance and operational efficiency (Jain & Gupta, 2004; Kranias & Bourlessa, 2013). However, according to Parasuraman et al. (1985), most researchers and service business managers believe that service quality requires a comparison of expectations with performance. Meanwhile, Ahmed (2018) cites two crucial features of the notion of service quality. First, there is the objective or mechanical quality aspect, which is decided, based on the product's characteristics as an independent objective fact independently of the client's viewpoint, and according to this aspect, the product's quality must fulfil predetermined standards (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Smart, 1995). The second is the subjective, humanistic, or perceived quality element, which is based on customer perceptions and opinions. Consequently, it assesses how effectively the quality of service satisfies the customer needs and expectations (Batagan et al., 2009; Smart, 1995; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Service quality can be defined as the difference between the client expectations for the service performed before the service experience and the service received (Temba, 2013). This definition highlights the importance of understanding customer expectations and delivering a level of service that meets or exceeds those expectations. The client expectations serve as the basis for evaluating the quality of the service provided since quality is high when performance goes above and beyond what the customer expects and quality is low when performance does not meet customer expectations (Asubonteng et al., 1996). Hence, an expectation is defined as customer needs or wants, namely what they believe a service provider needs to provide rather than what they believe the provider would offer (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In this sense, service quality is a subjective concept, as it depends on the individual customer perception of the service received. This perception is influenced by a variety of factors, including past experiences with similar services, customer needs, and expectations, and the level of customer satisfaction with the service received. By understanding

customer expectations and delivering a level of service that meets or exceeds those expectations, businesses can improve their service quality and increase customer satisfaction. This can lead to increased customer loyalty and repeat business, which can ultimately contribute to the success of the firm.

2.2. The relationship between SMPs and SMEs

The contribution of SMEs to Malaysia's economy is vital. However, the majority of Malaysian SME owners fail in the first five years because they are unable to sustain their businesses over the long term (Perera, 2016). There are a number of indicators that SME owners lack business planning. Many new and existing micro and small firms have trouble competing because of internal and external problems such as money problems, a lack of business experience, problems with infrastructure and locations, a high cost of financing, and bad pricing (Zelie et al., 2020). One of the main issues is related to accounting practices, which can be minimised by maintaining proper accounting records (Sallem et al., 2017). Proper documentation of business activities and transactions can aid SME owners in their decision-making processes (Zimmerman, 2016). Therefore, SMEs need accountants that can be relied on to give advisory services and assist them with business advice, strategic planning, financial management assistance, and legal advice in order to improve their performance (Husin & Ibrahim, 2014).

According to empirical evidence, accountants play a critical role in advising SMEs since they are the most common source of guidance (Scott & Irwin, 2009; Samujh & Devi, 2008; Carter et al., 2004), especially in matters relating to regulation and compliance (Blackburn et al., 2010). Accountants, usually SMPs, are reported to be the most frequently utilised source of business advice for SMEs (Ramsden & Bennett, 2005; Berry et al., 2006; Strike, 2012). SMPs are considered as trusted advisors to SMEs and play a critical role in providing valuable financial and regulatory advice. SMPs are often considered the first point of contact for SMEs seeking financial advice, as they have the expertise and experience to help businesses navigate the complexities of financial and regulatory compliance. According to Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA, 2008), the most sought-after services by SMEs are taxation, accounting, secretarial services, and business consulting, with taxation services topping the list. Additionally, accountants can provide valuable insights into financial planning, risk management, and growth strategies, which can help SMEs grow and succeed. The demand for assistance is also influenced by a lack of internal accounting expertise (De Bruyckere et al., 2020). However, contemporary trends in the accounting profession indicate that accountants are increasingly giving individualised business advice to SMEs and doing extra accounting and finance-related analysis to aid SME managers in decision-making (De Bruyckere et al., 2017). During the early stages of an SME's life cycle, for instance, the owner-manager meets novel concerns and seeks external advice to assist them to address these issues (Blackburn et al., 2010). An SME may engage its external accountant to provide

advice that directly assists performance. External accountants can provide SMEs with a wide range of advice and services that can directly or indirectly impact performance. By working closely with SMEs, accountants can provide tailored advice and support to help businesses overcome challenges and achieve their goals. For example, accountants can provide strategic advice on growing revenue, such as market analysis, product development, and pricing strategies. They can also help SMEs improve their management control, by providing guidance on regulatory compliance, risk management, and performance reviews. Additionally, accountants can assist SMEs in improving their finance structure, by introducing new sources of finance and helping to optimize their debt and equity financing. Finally, accountants can provide valuable support in financial planning, by assisting with insurance and investment decisions, retirement planning, and estate planning. These services can help SMEs to build a strong financial foundation and plan for their future success.

Overall, the role of external accountants in advising SMEs is diverse and can have a significant impact on the performance and success of these businesses. By providing expert advice and support, accountants can help SMEs to achieve their goals and overcome challenges in an ever-changing business environment. Since external accountants know a lot about systems and finances, they are in a good position to help SME owners gain a competitive edge in these areas (Carey & Tanewski, 2016).

2.3. Resource-based theory

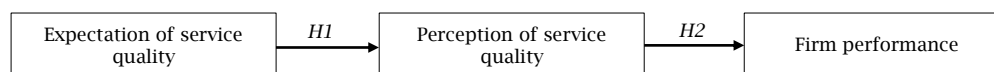
The resource-based theory, proposed by Penrose (1959), states that a corporation should be seen as a collection of material and human resources held together by an organisational framework. According to Gottschalk and Solli-Sæther (2005), the resource-based theory addresses two key points: first, to create a competitive advantage, a resource should provide economic value and be currently scarce, difficult to imitate or copy, non-substitutable, and not easily accessible in factor markets. Second, firm performance is determined by resources (Gottschalk & Solli-Sæther, 2005; McIvor, 2009). In relation to accounting, resources refer primarily to knowledge, skills, and competence (De Bruyckere et al., 2020; Jayabalan et al., 2009). According to this theory, smaller businesses must rely on external advisors to help them manage their businesses because they have limited in-house knowledge, capabilities, and competencies (Kamyabi & Devi, 2011; Barbera & Hasso, 2013; Carey & Tanewski, 2016; Pickernell et al., 2016).

The decision-making processes of micro and small business owners may benefit from the accurate documentation of business operations and transactions (Zimmerman, 2016; Puryati, 2018). Firms may achieve a competitive advantage by using internal and external information and expertise (Peteraf, 1993). In accordance with the resource-based theory, SMEs engage professional accountants to offer support services and advice to compensate for their lack of resources. Consequently, the resource-based theory of the firm provides a theoretical foundation for the evaluation of firm-specific factors that may affect the performance of SMEs (Irwin et al., 1998).

Figure 1 depicts the research framework of this study. The framework shows that expectations of service quality as the independent variable and perception of service quality is the dependent

variable. On the other hand, the perception of service quality is the independent variable and firm performance is the dependent variable.

Figure 1. The research framework of this study



2.4. Hypotheses development

2.4.1. Expectations of service quality and perception of service quality

According to Oliver (2010), the expectation is the anticipation of future results based on past performance, current circumstances, or other information sources. Mudie and Pirrie (2006) state that expectations are generally formed before the usage of a service, while they may also surface when a customer is actively participating in the delivery of a service. Some studies believe that expectations serve as a reference criterion for judging service delivery performance (Nicolaidis & Grobler, 2017; Oliver & Swan, 1989; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Cadotte et al. (1987) made a significant contribution to understanding the types of standards used by stating that expectation is essential in shaping customer perceptions and evaluations of service quality. According to their research, customer expectations serve as a standard or benchmark against which actual service performance is judged. When the service received meets or exceeds customer expectations, it is more likely to result in positive customer perceptions and satisfaction. On the other hand, when the service falls short of customer expectations, it is more likely to result in negative customer perceptions and dissatisfaction.

In the meantime, Schiffman et al. (2010) define perception as the individual's process of selecting, managing, and interpreting a stimulus received into an assessment related to things that exist around them. In the context of customer service, perception refers to the way customers interpret and make judgments about the service they receive. Perception is shaped by a number of factors, including past experiences, cultural background, and personal values and beliefs. Businesses need to understand how their customers perceive their services, as this can help them to identify areas for improvement and to design services that meet customer needs and expectations. By understanding customer perceptions, businesses can improve their service quality and increase customer satisfaction, which can ultimately contribute to their success. By delivering a level of service that meets or exceeds customer expectations, businesses can create a positive perception of their brand and build a loyal customer base.

A person's perception becomes the starting point for evaluating and running something, including financial accounting and statements (Puryati, 2018). For instance, various factors are likely to influence SME owner-manager perceptions of the determination of services by SMPs, such as knowledge, competency, expertise, relationship, and trust (De Bruyckere et al., 2017). According to

Blackburn and Jarvis (2010), "competence trust" is a required component to extend the relationship between the owner-manager and the accountant in order to facilitate business advice. Furthermore, external accountants and owner-managers acquire a "relational trust" over time, which may have an impact on reuse intentions. In addition, if owner-managers think that outside accountants went above and beyond what they expected, they will be more likely to use SMPs for other services.

According to Almsalam (2014), customer expectations and perceived service quality have a substantial influence on customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction happens when perceived service quality matches or surpasses expectations for service quality, according to Brogowicz et al. (1990). Meanwhile, Gebremichael and Singh (2019) said that the prevalence of unfulfilled expectations implies a problem with the quality of services provided to clients. Hence, the expectation of service quality is positively associated with the perception of service quality. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a positive significant relationship between expectations of service quality and perception of service quality.

2.4.2. Perception of service quality and firm performance

According to several studies, outsourcing statutory accounting services has a favorable impact on corporate performance (Danjuma, 2015; Osim et al., 2020; Kamyabi & Devi, 2011). Outsourcing statutory accounting services can provide businesses with a range of benefits that can support improved financial performance and help drive success. It is important, however, for businesses to carefully consider the benefits and risks associated with outsourcing, and to choose a provider that has the expertise, experience, and reputation necessary to deliver high-quality services. Barbera and Hasso (2013) and Carey (2015) also discovered a correlation between the degree to which an SME employs an external accountant for additional business advice and SME performance (Kamyabi & Devi, 2011; Barbera & Hasso, 2013; Carey, 2015). The studies suggest that SMEs that seek advice from external accountants are more likely to achieve improved performance compared to those that do not. This is because external accountants bring a wealth of expertise, experience, and knowledge to the table, which can help SMEs to make informed decisions and overcome business challenges. This highlights the importance of outsourcing accounting services for SMEs and underscores the role that external accountants can play in supporting the growth and success of these businesses.

Meanwhile, Berry et al. (2006) discovered that SMEs that always utilise an accountant for business advice get a greater growth rate in their study that considers the frequency of usage as an additional dimension to the connection with the external adviser. This supports the idea that outsourcing accounting services can be beneficial for SMEs and highlights the role that external accountants can play in supporting the growth and success of these businesses. The study also highlights the importance of considering the frequency of usage as a dimension of the relationship between SMEs and external accountants. SMEs that use external accountants more frequently are more likely to benefit from the advice and expertise that these accountants can provide. The findings of this study highlight the benefits of outsourcing accounting services for SMEs and underscore the role that external accountants can play in supporting the growth and success of these businesses.

According to Audet and St-Jean (2007), when SME managers understand more about external service providers, they will use their services more frequently. In line with the resource-based theory, the study suggests that SME managers who have a better understanding of the services provided by external accountants are more likely to perceive the value of these services and are more likely to seek them out to support their business. Having a clear understanding of the services offered by external accountants can help SME managers make informed decisions about which services they need and when they need them. This can help SMEs take advantage of the expertise and support that external accountants can provide, which can ultimately help them to improve their performance and achieve their business goals. The findings of this study highlight the importance of understanding the services provided by external service providers, and the impact that this understanding can have on the frequency of usage of these services.

Sarens et al. (2011) suggest that customer loyalty is strengthened by the perceived quality of the services offered and their effect on SME performance. When SMEs receive high-quality services from their external advisors, it can lead to increased satisfaction and improved performance. This, in turn, can lead to increased customer loyalty, as SMEs are more likely to continue using the services of the same provider. In other words, the SME perception of the quality of service provided by SMPs is positively related to the performance of the SMEs. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There is a positive significant relationship between the perception of service quality and the performance of the company.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research instrument

A questionnaire for this study is self-constructed based on the reference of previous studies by Kamyabi and Devi (2011), which is used as the main research instrument for this study. The questionnaire elicits data on the expectations and perceptions of service quality by SMPs towards SMEs. The self-constructed questionnaire includes four sections,

namely, sections A, B, C, and D. Section A is divided into two: the first sub-section consists of four questions to capture relevant information on the respondents' profile, which include the age, gender, academic qualification and state; the second sub-section consists of nine questions related to the respondents' organization. Section B of the questionnaire consists of nine questions that require ranking on a six-point Likert scale (1 is "extremely disagree", while 6 is "extremely agree") to investigate the opinion of respondents towards the performance of their company. Section C consists of ten questions and requires ranking on a six-point Likert scale to investigate the opinion of the respondents on their expectations of the service quality provided by their accountant (the SMPs). Section D consists of eighteen questions regarding the opinion of respondents on the perceptions of service quality provided by their accountant (the SMPs).

3.2. Data collection

The questionnaires together with a cover letter were sent through an online survey system, i.e., Google Forms to SMEs located in Malaysia. The data were collected from the SMEs' owners, managers, or equivalents. The link to the Google Forms was shared with the respondents through social media such as WhatsApp, and email over a period of one month from September 1, 2022, until September 30, 2022. After each submission of the Google Forms, follow-ups were conducted after one week of sharing. The data collected was automatically keyed into Microsoft Excel.

From the 400 sets of questionnaires distributed to the SMEs' owners, managers, or equivalents in Malaysia, only 162 were returned and 238 were uncollectable due to no response. Therefore, the sample size of 162 respondents can be used which represents a response rate of 40.5%. The usable sample size of this study is considered acceptable as according to Sekaran and Bougie (2010), a sample size that is larger than 30 and less than 500 is appropriate for most researchers. The data collected was then analysed.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows the demographics of the respondents based on their age, gender, and degree of education. According to the demographic profile, 22.8% of respondents were under 30 years old, 25.3% were between 31 and 40 years old, 37% were between 41 and 50 years old, and just 14.8% were above 50 years old. Seventy-three (73) per cent of the responders were male, whereas 89% were female. Table 1 also depicts the distribution of respondents according to their education levels. The majority of respondents were diploma holders (64% of the overall population), followed by degree holders (41%), the Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, SPM) holders (20%), masters (12%), doctors (12%), and professionals (9%).

Table 1. Respondent's profile

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age	Below 30	37	22.8
	31 to 40	41	25.8
	41 to 50	60	37.0
	Above 50	24	14.8
Total		162	100.0
Gender	Male	73	45.1
	Female	89	54.9
Total		162	100.0
Academic qualification	SPM below	20	12.3
	Diploma	64	39.5
	Degree	41	25.3
	Masters	12	7.4
	Ph.D.	12	9.9
	Professional (e.g., ACCA, CIMA, CPA)	9	5.6
Total		162	100.0

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of SMEs. Small SMEs account for 47.4% of the population, followed by micro SMEs (34.0%) and medium SMEs (18.5%). The majority of SMEs are in the service and other sectors (65.4%), followed by manufacturing (18.5%), construction (9%), and agricultural (6.2%). The type of SME is comprised of family-owned businesses at 34%, followed by young businesses at 32.7%. Meanwhile, women-owned SMEs account for 22.8% of all SMEs, whereas export SMEs account for only 10.5%. The majority (61.1%) have fewer than 5 employees. with a sales turnover of less than RM 300,000 per year. Most respondents used SMP when they needed professional services from an accountant.

Table 2. SME's profile

<i>Demographic characteristics</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Size	Micro	55	34.0
	Small	77	47.5
	Medium	30	18.5
Total		162	100.0
Type of business	Manufacturing	30	18.5
	Construction	16	9.9
	Agriculture	10	6.2
	Services and other sectors	106	65.4
Total		162	100.0
Type of SME	Family-owned SME	55	34.0
	Women-owned SME	37	22.8
	Exporting SME	17	10.5
	Young SME	53	22.7
Total		162	100.0
Employees	Less than 5	99	61.1
	From 5 to less than 30	46	28.4
	From 30 to not exceeding 75	13	8.0
	From 75 to not exceeding 200	8.0	2.5
Total		162	100.0
Sales turnover	Less than RM 300,000	111	68.5
	From RM 300,000 to less than RM 3 million	42	25.9
	From RM 3 million to not exceeding RM 20 million	6	3.7
	From RM300,000 to less than RM15 million	0	0.0
	From RM 15 million to not exceeding RM 50 million	3	1.9
Total		162	100.0
Services with SMP	Yes	103	63.6
	No	59	36.4
Total		162	100.0

Table 3 shows that the most common types of services sought by SMEs from SMPs are statutory account preparations, auditing financial accounts, business advisors, financial management, and bookkeeping.

Table 3. Professional services SMEs get from SMPs

<i>Type of professional services</i>	<i>%</i>
Statutory account preparations	39.5
Auditing financial accounts	42.6
Business advisors	49.4
Technical expertise	17.9
Statutory audit services	22.2
Financial management	43.8
Statutory tax services	22.2
Management accounting	23.5
Pension planning and advice	13.0
Bookkeeping	40.7
Computer audit	22.8
Human resource/employment regulations	22.2
Business structure (mergers/company setup)	14.2
Inheritance/succession/business transfers	11.1
Budgeting	35.2
Information technology (IT) expertise	24.1
Regulation: health and safety	22.8
Company secretariat	25.3
Others	0.6

4.2. Factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is a statistical technique that is often used in the early stages of research to gain an understanding of the relationships between a set of variables (Pituch & Stevens, 2015). Multiple exploratory factor analyses with maximum likelihood and varimax rotation were conducted to validate the results and ensure that the underlying structure of the data is accurately captured following the translation and selection of Likert-scale questionnaire items.

4.2.1. Performance of the company

A first-factor analysis was performed on the items measuring the performance of the company. Table 4 of the correlation matrix shows that there are enough correlations to justify using factor analysis. The correlation matrix reveals that all items have inter-correlations greater than 0.3, implying that the predicted factor model looks to be appropriate. The determinant score value of 0.0004 is greater than 0.000001, indicating the absence of multicollinearity. The value of the determinant is an important test for multicollinearity. Some of the relevant factors in a research study become statistically insignificant due to multicollinearity, and as a result, the statistical conclusions drawn from the data may not be reliable (Shrestha, 2020; Haitovsky, 1969).

Table 4. Correlation matrix^a and determinant score for performance of the company

	<i>B1</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>B3</i>	<i>B4</i>	<i>B5</i>	<i>B6</i>	<i>B7</i>
<i>B1</i>	1.000	0.783	0.766	0.750	0.603	0.568	0.541
<i>B2</i>	0.783	1.000	0.829	0.777	0.599	0.510	0.537
<i>B3</i>	0.766	0.829	1.000	0.812	0.584	0.602	0.589
<i>B4</i>	0.750	0.777	0.812	1.000	0.686	0.575	0.662
<i>B5</i>	0.603	0.599	0.584	0.686	1.000	0.569	0.576
<i>B6</i>	0.568	0.510	0.602	0.575	0.569	1.000	0.691
<i>B7</i>	0.541	0.537	0.589	0.662	0.576	0.691	1.000

Note: a. Determinant = 0.004.

Table 5 illustrates that a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy measure of 0.892 ($KMO > 0.5$) falls within the superb range, indicating that the sample size is sufficient for factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). In the context of this study, with a sample size of 162, an average value of 0.5 to 0.6 is appropriate for sample sizes ranging from 100 to 200 (Shrestha, 2020). With a p-value being less than 0.05, Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) was also significant.

Table 5. KMO and Bartlett's test for firm performance

<i>KMO and Bartlett's test</i>		
KMO measure of sampling adequacy		0.892
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi ²	889.830
	df	21
	Sig.	<0.001

This study used the principal component analysis extraction method and the varimax orthogonal rotation approach with Kaiser normalisation. After extraction, Table 6 shows the final factor loading, anti-image correlation, and communality. The diagonal element of anti-image correlation is greater than 0.5 for all variables (and preferably greater), indicating that the sampling

information is adequate. The table reveals that most values are more than 0.85. The communalities after extraction show the amount of variance in each variable that can be explained by the retained factor. For instance, the first statement (Item B1) communality value is 0.704. This indicates that the common variance for this statement is 70.4%. In the meantime, factor loading values convey how each variable is related to the underlying factors. Variables with loadings values greater than 0.40 imply that they are representative of the factor. All of the factor loading values for the performance of the company are > 0.70 , which denotes the reliability of the variables.

The mean score for all items ranged between 3.87 and 4.23. The mean scores for items B5, B6, and B7 are all above 4.00, indicating that they are generally strongly agreeable. On average, the respondents agree with the lifestyle, independence, and job security provided by the company. Items B1, B2, B3, and B4, on the other hand, have a tendency to agree based on their mean scale score of less than 4.00. It indicates that the majority of respondents agree with the company's profitability, sales growth, return on assets, and cash flow. This suggests that outsourcing these services may have a positive impact on the performance of the company.

Table 6. Summary of factors related to the performance of the company

<i>Factors</i>		<i>Anti-image correlation</i>	<i>Communality after extraction</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Factor loading</i>
<i>Item</i>	<i>Performance of the company</i>					
B1	I am happy with my company's profitability.	0.931	0.704	3.89	0.972	0.839
B2	I am happy with my company's growth in sales.	0.887	0.722	3.98	0.952	0.850
B3	I am happy with my company's return on assets.	0.878	0.782	3.87	0.940	0.884
B4	I am happy with my company's cash flow.	0.892	0.812	3.88	0.995	0.901
B5	I am happy with the lifestyle provided by my company.	0.928	0.540	4.10	0.973	0.735
B6	I am happy that I can get independence provided by my company.	0.855	0.497	4.23	0.766	0.705
B7	I am happy with the job security provided by my company.	0.875	0.524	4.08	0.939	0.724

4.2.2. Expectations of service quality

The second-factor analysis was conducted on the instrument evaluating the expectation of service quality. The correlation matrix for this second-factor

analysis demonstrates that all items have inter-correlations greater than 0.3, and it may be concluded that the hypothesized factor model, as presented in Table 7, appears to be suitable.

Table 7. Correlation matrix^a and determinant score for expectations of service quality

	<i>C1</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>C3</i>	<i>C4</i>	<i>C5</i>	<i>C6</i>	<i>C7</i>	<i>C8</i>	<i>C9</i>	<i>C10</i>
<i>C1</i>	1.000	0.619	0.632	0.605	0.517	0.684	0.608	0.564	0.507	0.371
<i>C2</i>	0.619	1.000	0.816	0.697	0.555	0.560	0.583	0.575	0.528	0.353
<i>C3</i>	0.632	0.816	1.000	0.792	0.675	0.560	0.537	0.605	0.593	0.429
<i>C4</i>	0.605	0.697	0.792	1.000	0.628	0.616	0.582	0.665	0.631	0.536
<i>C5</i>	0.517	0.555	0.675	0.628	1.000	0.609	0.550	0.605	0.598	0.672
<i>C6</i>	0.684	0.560	0.560	0.616	0.609	1.000	0.754	0.724	0.644	0.609
<i>C7</i>	0.608	0.583	0.537	0.582	0.550	0.754	1.000	0.737	0.654	0.559
<i>C8</i>	0.564	0.575	0.605	0.665	0.605	0.724	0.737	1.000	0.831	0.709
<i>C9</i>	0.507	0.528	0.593	0.631	0.598	0.644	0.654	0.831	1.000	0.735
<i>C10</i>	0.371	0.353	0.429	0.536	0.672	0.609	0.559	0.709	0.735	1.000

Note: a. Determinant = 0.000.

Table 8 shows that the KMO value is 0.907 and Bartlett's p-value is < 0.001 indicating the data was adequate and suitable for factor analysis.

Table 8. KMO and Bartlett's test for expectations of service quality

<i>KMO and Bartlett's test</i>		
KMO measure of sampling adequacy		0.907
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi ²	1370.735
	df	45
	Sig.	<0.001

The diagonal element of anti-image correlation for all items in Table 9 is greater than 0.5, indicating that the sampling information is adequate. The findings indicate that most of the values are higher than 0.85. The communalities after extraction demonstrate that the amount of common variance for all variables is more than 50%. Variables with loadings values > 0.40 imply that they are representative of the factor.

The mean score for all items ranged between 3.93 and 4.32. Except for items C5 and C10,

the majority of the items have mean values greater than 4.00. The results show that the majority of respondents agree with the tax consultant, business advice, management consultancy, and financial advice provided by the accountant. The mean values below 4.00 imply that respondents are likely to

agree with the IT consultancy provided by their accountant. This could indicate that the accountant's IT consultancy services are perceived to have a positive impact on the SMEs performance, which includes profitability, sales growth, return on assets, and cash flow.

Table 9. Summary of factors related to expectations of service quality

Factors		Anti-image correlation	Communality after extraction	Mean	SD	Factor loading
Item	Expectations of service quality					
C1	I expect my accountant provides tax consultation to my company.	0.937	0.548	4.09	1.130	0.627
C2	I expect my accountant provides business advice to my company.	0.904	0.764	4.32	0.969	0.833
C3	I expect my accountant provides management consultancy such as strategy formulation to my company.	0.845	0.853	4.17	1.013	0.872
C4	I expect my accountant provides financial advice such as banking or lending to my company.	0.944	0.706	4.22	0.997	0.702
C5	I expect my accountant provides IT consultancy to my company.	0.901	0.573	3.93	1.126	0.568
C6	I am happy with the quality of the tax consultation provided by my accountant.	0.921	0.675	4.01	1.060	0.665
C7	I am happy with the quality of business advice provided by my accountant.	0.934	0.628	4.15	1.000	0.642
C8	I am happy with the quality of management consultation such as strategy formulation for my company provided by my accountant.	0.919	0.813	4.00	1.003	0.799
C9	I am happy with the financial advice such as banking, or lending provided by my accountant.	0.908	0.748	4.03	1.036	0.781
C10	I am happy with the IT consultation provided by my accountant.	0.860	0.712	3.95	1.136	0.824

4.2.3. Perception of service quality

The third and final exploratory factor analysis was performed on the items measuring the perception of service quality. According to Table 10, the determinant value was 8.143E-10 (or 0.000000008143), which is less than the required value of 0.00001. This indicates that the items exhibit multicollinearity. According to Field (2009) and Haitovsky (1969), the determinant values < 0.00001 indicate that a group of three or more questions/statements has high intercorrelations; therefore, the threshold for item elimination should be reduced until this condition is satisfied. It is important to identify

pairs of variables where the correlation coefficient is greater than 0.80 and to consider excluding them from the analysis. To eliminate collinearity, the items with a correlation coefficient greater than 0.80 were eliminated for the analysis. In addition, items with a correlation coefficient of < 0.3 in the correlation matrix were also excluded, as this indicates a weak relationship (Shrestha, 2020). Items D4, D7, D9, D10, D11, and D13 were removed because few pairs of their correlation coefficients exceeded 0.80, while item D9 was removed because its correlation coefficient was less than 0.3, resulting in 11 (items D1, D2, D3, D5, D6, D8, D14, D15, D16, D17, and D18) items remaining in the factor.

Table 10. Correlation matrix^a and determinant score for perception of service quality

	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	D11	D12	D13	D14	D15	D16	D17	D18
D1	1.000	0.752	0.677	0.705	0.565	0.621	0.761	0.700	0.299	0.765	0.721	0.727	0.720	0.633	0.619	0.723	0.592	0.534
D2	0.752	1.000	0.651	0.624	0.565	0.606	0.593	0.600	0.247	0.640	0.657	0.618	0.602	0.683	0.622	0.657	0.641	0.610
D3	0.677	0.651	1.000	0.868	0.685	0.760	0.784	0.737	0.207	0.755	0.730	0.677	0.718	0.554	0.559	0.659	0.506	0.489
D4	0.705	0.624	0.868	1.000	0.682	0.804	0.822	0.762	0.175	0.778	0.773	0.731	0.759	0.586	0.578	0.686	0.498	0.469
D5	0.565	0.565	0.685	0.682	1.000	0.734	0.640	0.676	0.174	0.603	0.637	0.599	0.599	0.645	0.577	0.607	0.527	0.527
D6	0.621	0.606	0.760	0.804	0.734	1.000	0.689	0.695	0.204	0.763	0.745	0.701	0.762	0.645	0.588	0.640	0.584	0.557
D7	0.761	0.593	0.784	0.822	0.640	0.689	1.000	0.856	0.207	0.804	0.806	0.799	0.819	0.580	0.592	0.725	0.571	0.464
D8	0.700	0.600	0.737	0.762	0.676	0.695	0.856	1.000	0.212	0.741	0.800	0.799	0.758	0.627	0.583	0.732	0.579	0.475
D9	0.299	0.247	0.207	0.175	0.174	0.204	0.207	0.212	1.000	0.288	0.361	0.311	0.362	0.282	0.276	0.358	0.330	0.380
D10	0.765	0.640	0.755	0.778	0.603	0.763	0.804	0.741	0.288	1.000	0.850	0.789	0.835	0.641	0.619	0.733	0.566	0.535
D11	0.721	0.657	0.730	0.773	0.637	0.745	0.806	0.800	0.361	0.850	1.000	0.830	0.865	0.700	0.626	0.768	0.654	0.586
D12	0.727	0.618	0.677	0.731	0.599	0.701	0.799	0.799	0.311	0.789	0.830	1.000	0.845	0.677	0.642	0.787	0.609	0.574
D13	0.720	0.602	0.718	0.759	0.599	0.762	0.819	0.758	0.362	0.835	0.865	0.845	1.000	0.711	0.685	0.799	0.634	0.567
D14	0.633	0.683	0.554	0.586	0.645	0.645	0.580	0.627	0.282	0.641	0.700	0.677	0.711	1.000	0.783	0.772	0.757	0.760
D15	0.619	0.622	0.559	0.578	0.577	0.586	0.592	0.583	0.276	0.619	0.626	0.642	0.685	0.783	1.000	0.785	0.679	0.668
D16	0.723	0.657	0.659	0.686	0.607	0.640	0.725	0.732	0.358	0.733	0.768	0.87	0.799	0.772	0.785	1.000	0.728	0.703
D17	0.592	0.641	0.506	0.498	0.527	0.584	0.571	0.579	0.330	0.566	0.654	0.609	0.614	0.757	0.679	0.728	1.000	0.800
D18	0.534	0.610	0.489	0.469	0.527	0.557	0.464	0.475	0.380	0.535	0.586	0.574	0.567	0.760	0.668	0.703	0.800	1.000

Note: a. Determinant = 8.143E-10.

Table 11 displays the updated correlation matrix and determinant score for the perception of service quality. After item removal, the determinant

value is 3.758E-5 (or 0.00003758), which is more than the necessary value of 0.00001. This shows that multicollinearity is not present.

Table 11. Updated correlation matrix^a and determinant score for perception of service quality (after removing of items)

	D1	D2	D3	D5	D6	D8	D14	D15	D16	D17	D18
D1	1.000	0.752	0.677	0.565	0.621	0.700	0.633	0.619	0.723	0.592	0.534
D2	0.752	1.000	0.651	0.565	0.606	0.600	0.683	0.622	0.657	0.641	0.610
D3	0.677	0.651	1.000	0.685	0.760	0.737	0.554	0.559	0.659	0.506	0.489
D5	0.565	0.565	0.685	1.000	0.734	0.676	0.645	0.577	0.607	0.527	0.527
D6	0.621	0.606	0.760	0.734	1.000	0.695	0.645	0.588	0.640	0.584	0.557
D8	0.700	0.600	0.737	0.676	0.695	1.000	0.627	0.583	0.732	0.579	0.475
D14	0.765	0.640	0.755	0.603	0.763	0.741	1.000	0.783	0.772	0.566	0.535
D15	0.727	0.618	0.677	0.599	0.701	0.799	0.783	1.000	0.785	0.609	0.574
D16	0.633	0.683	0.554	0.645	0.645	0.627	0.772	0.785	1.000	0.757	0.760
D17	0.592	0.641	0.506	0.527	0.584	0.579	0.757	0.679	0.728	1.000	0.800
D18	0.534	0.610	0.489	0.527	0.557	0.475	0.760	0.668	0.703	0.800	1.000

Note: a. Determinant = 3.758E-5.

Meanwhile, Table 12 shows that the value of KMO statistics is equivalent to $0.930 > 0.6$, which suggests that sampling is adequate and the factor analysis is appropriate for the data. Bartlett's test of sphericity is highly significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating that at least some of the variables in the correlation matrix have significant correlations. A significant value < 0.05 indicates that factor analysis is appropriate.

Table 12. KMO and Bartlett's test for perception of service quality

<i>KMO and Bartlett's test</i>		
KMO measure of sampling adequacy		0.930
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi ²	1594.583
	df	55
	Sig.	<0.001

The summary in Table 13 shows that the diagonal element of anti-image correlation for all items is > 0.5 indicating that the sample information is adequate. The results reveal that the majority of

the values are above 0.85. The communalities after extraction demonstrate that the amount of common variance is above 50% for all the variables. Variables with factor loading values > 0.40 indicate that they are representative of the factor.

The mean score for all items ranged between 4.20 to 4.61. This shows that all variables are strongly agreeing because all mean values are above 4.00. It demonstrates that the majority of respondents believe their accountants have good financial accounting techniques and good management accounting techniques, are proficient with word-processing packages such as Microsoft, are proficient with the database package, are proficient with accounting-based applications, and are proficient with internet communication applications. The respondents also agreed that their accountants provide strategies in business, provide a variety of services, have good communication skills, active in marketing and promotion, and are proactive in gaining new business.

Table 13. Summary of factors related to perception of service quality

Factors		Anti-image correlation	Communality after extraction	Mean	SD	Factor loading
<i>Item</i>	<i>Perception of service quality</i>					
D1	My accountant is good with financial accounting techniques such as financial statements.	0.934	0.672	4.44	0.990	0.820
D2	My accountant is good with the management accounting techniques such as product costing and valuation.	0.931	0.666	4.29	0.937	0.816
D3	My accountant is good with word-processing packages such as Microsoft Word.	0.917	0.643	4.61	0.960	0.802
D5	My accountant is good with the database package.	0.946	0.613	4.43	1.008	0.783
D6	My accountant is good with accounting-based applications.	0.939	0.672	4.55	0.899	0.819
D8	My accountant is good with the internet communication applications such as email, Google Meet, Webex, and Zoom.	0.922	0.669	4.60	0.981	0.818
D14	My accountant provides service strategies that help my business.	0.936	0.758	4.38	1.028	0.871
D15	My accountant provides a variety of services.	0.943	0.683	4.38	1.016	0.827
D16	My accountant has good communication skills.	0.932	0.787	4.57	0.891	0.887
D17	My accountant is active in marketing and promotion to counter competition.	0.928	0.668	4.30	0.959	0.818
D18	My accountant is proactive in gaining new business.	0.905	0.619	4.20	1.004	0.787

4.3. Reliability test

The reliability of a questionnaire is examined with Cronbach's alpha. It provides an easy approach to determining whether a score is reliable or not. The adequate threshold value for Cronbach's alpha

is that it should be > 0.7 . All psychometric evaluations were conducted using the replies of individual participants (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Reliability tests were then carried out on the statements of each variable and the results are summarised in Table 14.

Table 14. Summary of factors related to service quality

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>No. of items/statements</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Overall	28	0.827
Expectations of service quality	10	0.735
Perception of service quality	11	0.729
Performance of the company	7	0.815

The results demonstrate that the scale meets the reliability requirements. Cronbach's alpha revealed that all 28 items had scored more than 0.70, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.827. This indicates that the internal consistency for reliability for all items is good. The value for expectations of service quality is 0.735, the value for perception of service quality is 0.729 and the value for performance of the company is 0.815. It indicates that the variables exhibit a correlation with their component grouping and thus they are internally consistent.

4.4. Correlation analysis

In this study, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the significance of the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable. Table 15 displays the correlation analysis results. The Pearson correlation coefficient is $r = 0.689$ and the significance value is less than 0.001, indicating that expectations of service quality are positively related to perception of service quality. This significance value indicates that the likelihood of finding a correlation coefficient this large in a sample of 162 people if the null hypothesis (no relationship between these variables) is very low (close to zero in fact). As a result, we can be confident that there is a genuine relationship between expectations of service quality and perception of service quality ($p < 0.001$). The correlation between service quality perception and company performance is $r = 0.581$, which is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. Expectations of service quality appear positively related to the performance of the company, $r = 0.575$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 15. Correlations^b

		<i>Expectations of service quality</i>	<i>Perception of service quality</i>	<i>Performance of the company</i>
<i>Expectations of service quality</i>	Pearson correlation	1	0.689**	0.575**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< 0.001	< 0.001
<i>Perception of service quality</i>	Pearson correlation	0.689**	1	0.581**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< 0.001		< 0.001
<i>Performance of the company</i>	Pearson correlation	0.575**	0.581**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< 0.001	< 0.001	

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). b. Listwise N = 162.

4.5. Regression analysis

Table 16 presents the results of the regression analysis. The first equation incorporates the independent variable, *expectations of service quality*, and the dependent variable, *perception of service quality*. The R^2 value (in the "R²" column) indicates how much the independent variable can explain in terms of the total variation in the dependent variable. Table 16 illustrates that the R^2 value of 0.475 indicates that the independent variable, *expectations of service quality* explains 47.5% of the dependent variable, *perception of service quality*.

Table 16. Model summary for expectations of service quality and perception of service quality

<i>Model</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>Adjusted R²</i>	<i>Std. error of the estimate</i>
1	0.689 ^a	0.475	0.471	0.58003

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), expectations of service quality. b. Dependent variable: Perception of service quality.

In this study, regression analysis has been utilised to find out the direct effects of expectations of service quality on the perception of service quality, and the results are displayed in Table 17 below.

Table 17. The coefficient for expectations of service quality and perception of service quality

<i>Model</i>		<i>Unstandardized coefficient</i>		<i>Standardized coefficient</i>		<i>Sig.</i>
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	
1	(Constant)	1.770	0.226		7.834	< 0.001
	Expectations of service quality	0.651	0.054	0.689	12.024	< 0.001

Note: a. Dependent variable: Perception of service quality.

The finding has revealed the significant influence of expectations of service quality ($b = 0.689$, $p < 0.001$) towards the perception of service quality. As a result, *H1* is supported in this study. This indicates that having high expectations for service quality will undoubtedly improve SME perception of the accountant's service quality. This suggests that if the expectations of service quality change by one standard deviation, the perception of service quality changes by 0.611 standard deviation. The finding may also be interpreted as the mean score of perception of service quality (Y) increasing by 0.226 for each increase in expectations of service quality ($X1$). The results suggest that the perception of

service quality may be accurately predicted using the expectations of service quality. High expectations for service quality can lead to a more positive perception of the accountant's service quality and ultimately result in improved satisfaction among SMEs. This, in turn, can contribute to customer loyalty, which can be beneficial in terms of long-term business growth and stability. It is important for accounting firms to not only meet but also exceed their client's expectations in order to provide high-quality services and build strong, long-lasting relationships with their clients. The first hypothesis (*H1*) stated that there is a significant relationship between expectations of service quality and

perception of service quality. The finding suggests SMEs have high expectations of the service quality supplied by SMPs based on their personal views. The inclination of the perception of service will grow when respondents have good expectations of the service quality supplied by their accountants in tax consultation, business advice, management consultancy, financial advice, and IT consultancy. The findings indicate that accountant capabilities, competencies, and knowledge have a significant impact on service quality. This supports a study by Haron et al. (2012), that there is a substantial correlation between the technical proficiency of SMP staff members in providing services and SME satisfaction. This implies that SMPs must continuously invest in training and professional development to ensure that they are able to meet the growing demands and expectations of their SME clients. By improving their skills and knowledge, SMPs can increase the level of service they provide and deliver higher-quality services to SMEs, which can help improve SME performance and contribute to their long-term success.

Meanwhile, Khoo (2022), found a significant correlation between the impact of service quality on corporate image and customer satisfaction. This finding also suggests that service quality is a key factor affecting corporate image and customer satisfaction, which in turn affects revisit intention and word of mouth. This implies that service quality has a significant impact on a company's reputation, customer satisfaction, and repeat business. If the service quality is high, it can lead to positive word-of-mouth and increase the likelihood of customers returning for future business. On the other hand, poor service quality can have the opposite effect and lead to negative perceptions of the company and decreased customer satisfaction.

Table 18 presents the results of the regression analysis on the perception of service quality and the performance of the company. The result shows

a significant relationship between the perception of service quality and the performance of the company. The R^2 value of 0.581 indicates that the independent variable, *perception of service quality*, explains 58.1% of the dependent variable, *performance of the company*. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.337 indicates that the model can explain 33.7% of the variance in the performance of the company.

Table 18. Model summary for perception of service quality and performance of the company

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. error of the estimate
1	0.581 ^a	0.337	0.333	0.63908

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), *perception of service quality*.
b. Dependent variable: *Performance of the company*.

This study also determined the direct effects of the perception of service quality on the performance of the company. The second hypothesis (H_2) stated there is a significant relationship between the perception of service quality and the performance of the company. The findings in Table 19 showed a significant relationship between the performance of the company and the perception of service quality ($b = 0.581$, $p < 0.001$). H_2 is therefore supported by this study. This suggests that higher expectations of service quality by accountants will increase the performance of SMEs. This will result in a more positive perception of the service quality provided and ultimately lead to customer satisfaction, improved corporate image, and increased revisit intention and word of mouth, which can all contribute to improved business performance. The finding can also be interpreted for the perception of service quality (X_2), the mean score of the performance of the company (Y) is estimated to increase by 0.581 for each increase in the perception of service quality.

Table 19. The coefficient for perception of service quality and performance of the company

Model		Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.477	0.284		5.196	< 0.001
	Perception of service quality	0.570	0.063	0.581	9.027	< 0.001

Note: a. Dependent variable: *Performance of the company*.

This finding indicates a positive significant relationship between the perception of service quality and the performance of the company, which means that an increase in the perception of service quality will significantly increase the performance of SMEs. It implies that the quality of the accountant's abilities and competencies, such as proficiency with financial accounting techniques, management accounting techniques, database packages, and accounting-based applications, provision of business strategies, provision of a variety of services, good communication skills, marketing activity, and proactive pursuit of new business, play a significant role in the knowledgeable aspect of service quality. The competencies and abilities of accountants can have a major impact on the service quality they provide, and thus on the performance of SMEs. These abilities and competencies can help ensure that the SMEs receive the best possible advice and support in areas such as financial accounting, management accounting, business strategy, communication, and marketing. By having

a knowledgeable and competent accountant, SMEs can benefit from improved financial performance and a more positive corporate image. This finding is consistent with the findings of Haron et al. (2012), namely that the expertise and technical ability in executing the services can increase the satisfaction of SMEs, hence improving their performance. A study by Carey (2015) also found that when business advice and auditing are purchased together, SME performance is perceived to be even better. This implies that service quality in terms of auditors' depth of knowledge is beneficial to SMEs.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the opinions of SME owners, managers, and equivalents on their expectations and perceptions towards the quality of service provided by SMPs. Furthermore, this study examined the relationships between the perception of service quality with the SME performance. Our findings indicate that the provision of management

consultancy such as strategy formulation to the company, business advice, and information technology consultation are critical expectations by SME owners and managers towards SMPs. This highlights the importance of SMPs in having a comprehensive understanding of their clients' business operations, including market trends and industry practices, in order to provide relevant and effective management consultancy services. Furthermore, having good communication skills and being proactive in seeking new business opportunities can help SMPs to establish a positive relationship with their clients and build trust, which is essential for achieving high service quality. Overall, the results of this study indicate that meeting and exceeding clients' expectations of service quality can lead to improved SME performance and customer satisfaction.

Interestingly, our findings reveal that SME owners and managers perceive that their SMPs have good communication skills and are able to provide service strategies that help in their business. These findings highlight the importance of effective communication in building trust and establishing a good relationship between SMEs and SMPs. Good communication skills enable SMPs to understand the specific needs and requirements of their clients and provide tailored solutions to their clients. In addition, providing business strategies and information technology consultation demonstrates the SMPs' expertise and commitment to helping their clients succeed. These findings suggest that SMPs should prioritize developing strong communication skills, keeping up-to-date with the latest technology, and providing value-added services beyond just compliance-based accounting.

This study also finds that SME owners and managers are happy with their cash flows, return on

assets, and growth of sales. This result suggests that the services provided by accountants have a positive impact on SME financial performance, which reinforces the importance of providing high-quality services to SMEs. The high level of satisfaction with these financial outcomes highlights the value that SMEs place on the accountant's ability to improve their financial performance. The findings emphasize the crucial role that accountants play in the success of SMEs and the importance of providing high-quality services to meet their expectations and needs.

This study is not without its limitations. First, the scope of this study is limited to the Malaysian environment. Malaysia is sufficiently different in its socio-cultural-political-economic-business context to limit this study's findings from being generalized to other countries. Second, it is important to keep in mind that perception and subjective opinions can be influenced by various factors and may not always accurately reflect reality. It would be useful to complement the questionnaire results with other forms of data, such as financial statements and performance reports, to get a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of outsourcing statutory accounting services on SME performance. Additionally, perhaps future research might follow up this study using a more in-depth information perspective such as an interview or case study. Both interviews and case studies can provide a deeper understanding of the topic being studied and can complement the results of more quantitative methods, such as questionnaires. They can also help to shed light on the underlying processes and mechanisms that are driving the results, which can inform future research and contribute to the development of more comprehensive theories.

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