GUEST SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION WITH POOL ATTRIBUTES AT FIVE-STAR HOTELS IN DUBAI

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ABSTRACT. – Guest Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Pool Attributes at Five-Star Hotels in Dubai. This study investigates the influence of hotel amenities on guest satisfaction, with particular emphasis on swimming pool facilities in luxury hotels. The research employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of guest reviews from Booking.com to identify the key attributes of five-star hotel pools that most significantly affect guest satisfaction levels. The study focuses on Dubai as its research context, selected for its prominence in the global luxury tourism market. The emirate boasts 168 five-star hotels offering approximately 145,000 rooms and serviced apartments, including world-renowned properties such as the Burj Al Arab that serve as both accommodations and tourist destinations in their own right. The research revealed three primary dimensions of pools: "staff & service", "pool environment" and "quality of pool", alongside "overall impression", each comprising multiple attributes. The results show that guests were the most satisfied with the quality of "staff and service" and the least satisfied with the "ambiance" (an attribute of the "pool environment") and with the "quality of the pool". These results have meaningful implications for hotel management practices and facility design considerations in the luxury hospitality sector.

Keywords: guest satisfaction, pool attributes, 5-star hotels, Dubai, hotel reviews.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction has been an important topic in tourism and hotel management studies (Hui et al., 2007). When guests are satisfied with their experience at a hotel, they are more likely to return in the future, leave positive reviews, and recommend the hotel to others (Jawabreh et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2009a; Li et al., 2013).

Additionally, customers often select a hotel based on factors such as location, brand reputation, available amenities (such as swimming pools), service quality, pricing, loyalty programs, and ratings or reviews from previous guests (Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). Consequently, hotel owners are increasingly prioritizing the quality of services they provide, aligning them with the expectations and desires of their guests (Jawabreh et al., 2020).

Numerous studies focusing on customer satisfaction have preferred to evaluate five-star hotels because these hotels are expected to offer a wide range of facilities, such as pools, health spas, and beauty and barber salons (Xie, 2014; Jawabreh et al., 2020). However, most research has focused on western, developed countries and relatively fewer studies have been conducted in non-Western countries (Padman & Ahn, 2020).

In the past, research on hotel customer satisfaction primarily relied on methods such as surveys, interviews, or case studies (Deng, 2008; Choi & Chu, 2001). However, in recent years, there has been a shift toward analyzing online reviews to assess customer satisfaction (Dong et al., 2014; Egresi, 2017; Egresi, 2015; Guo et al., 2007; Li et al., 2013). This trend is driven by the intangible nature of tourism and hospitality services, which inherently involve higher perceived risks for consumers. As a result, potential guests increasingly depend on online reviews to make informed decisions (Litvin et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2018). By analyzing and acting on insights from online reviews, hotels can make informed decisions to meet guest expectations and drive success.

This study aims to further explore the significance of certain hotel amenities, particularly swimming pools, in influencing guest satisfaction. Specifically, the research will identify the key attributes of 5-star hotel pools that contribute most to guest satisfaction and dissatisfaction. To achieve these objectives, we employ both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of reviews posted on Booking.com.

The proposed approach is innovative, as it leverages social media data to analyze the preferences and expectations of luxury hotel guests. Dubai was selected as the study area due to its prominence in luxury tourism, with 168 five-star hotels offering approximately 145,000 rooms and serviced apartments[3].

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[3] Statista.com

Additionally, the city is home to iconic hotels, such as the Burj Al Arab, which are themselves major tourist attractions.

This paper is structured as follows: First, we conduct a comprehensive review of the existing literature. Next, we outline the methodology for data collection and analysis before presenting our key findings. Finally, we summarize the study's contributions, highlighting the practical implications, while also addressing its limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hotel service quality and customer satisfaction

Service quality can be defined as the difference between the perception of the service received and the service expected (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In contrast, customer satisfaction is viewed as an attitude (Oliver, 1980) or a subjective judgment of the quality of a product or service based on expectations and actual performance (He et al., 2020).

Based on these definitions, the two concepts may appear synonymous. However, although there is a clear relationship between them (Marković & Janković, 2013), many researchers argue that there are distinct differences between service quality and customer satisfaction. For instance, some researchers describe satisfaction as a more specific, short-term evaluation (e.g., assessing a single service encounter), whereas quality is considered a more general and long-term evaluation (Parasuraman et al., 1985). As we will demonstrate, the quality of hotel facilities, amenities, and services plays a significant role in guest satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2014; Calheiros et al., 2017).

Customer satisfaction at luxury hotels

Determinants of guest satisfaction may vary depending on hotel type and star rating (Radojevic et al., 2015; Rhee & Yang, 2015; Xu & Li, 2016). Numerous studies have examined customer satisfaction with various hotel attributes at five-star or luxury hotels in countries such as Malaysia (Padma & Ahn, 2020; Lau et al., 2005), Ghana (Allan, 2016), Turkey (Cetin & Walls, 2016; Ak & Dinçer, 2019), India (Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010), and Pakistan (Mohsin et al., 2011), often using online customer reviews as a data source. For instance, Alrawadieh and Law (2019) analyzed 400 English-language reviews on TripAdvisor for top-rated hotels in Istanbul, Turkey, and found that customer satisfaction is primarily influenced by perceptions of room size and quality, as

well as the quality of staff services. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2014) investigated factors influencing customer satisfaction at four- and five-star hotels in Hangzhou, China, identifying 23 attributes grouped into six categories that significantly impact satisfaction. One of these attributes was the size and quality of swimming pools (Zhou et al., 2014), which is particularly relevant to our study. Other research has compared hotel guest satisfaction across countries. For example, Khozaei et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of online reviews for 1,800 hotels in 40 Asian countries on Agoda.com to better understand customer satisfaction at three- to five-star hotels.

Satisfaction with the size and quality of swimming pools at hotels

Previous studies have shown that customer satisfaction is generally influenced by multiple factors (Guo et al., 2007). However, in many cases, satisfaction with a single hotel attribute can significantly impact overall customer satisfaction (Oh, 1999). Guests tend to evaluate their general satisfaction with hotel facilities and services based on their perception of the attributes they consider most important (Guo et al., 2007). Satisfaction with key attributes can also influence guests' willingness to pay (Heo & Hyun, 2015), making it crucial for hotel managers to identify which attributes guests prioritize when evaluating their experience. This knowledge can help hotels classify (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Shanka & Taylor, 2004) and prioritize attributes based on their impact on overall customer satisfaction (Albayrak & Caber, 2015).

One classification system was proposed by Ryan and Huimin (2007), who categorized hotel attributes into three main types: core, additional, and ancillary. The first category, *core attributes*, encompasses the fundamental features expected in any hotel, irrespective of its star rating. These include essentials such as a comfortable bed with clean linens, a hygienic bathroom, and courteous staff. The *additional attributes* vary based on the hotel's classification and may involve factors like room and bathroom size, as well as the quality of furnishings. Finally, *ancillary attributes* are typically associated with higher-tier hotels and include amenities such as swimming pools, fitness centers, spas, business facilities, and similar offerings.

The factors guests prioritize when evaluating their satisfaction with a hotel often vary depending on their travel purpose and the nature of their stay. For example, business travelers may emphasize the quality and functionality of the business center, while leisure travelers are more likely to prioritize amenities that enhance relaxation and entertainment for themselves and their families, such as the availability and condition of a swimming pool (Ryan & Huimin, 2007).

Indeed, previous research has consistently highlighted the significance of swimming pools as a key attribute in higher-ranked hotels (Marić, 2016). For instance, the term "pool" emerged as the most frequently mentioned word in guest reviews of five-star hotels in both Turkey and Greece (Çatır & Ören, 2021). Similarly, Dong et al. (2014) analyzed reviews on a Chinese affiliate of TripAdvisor for 4- and 5-star hotels in Sanya, Hainan, People's Republic of China, and found that "swimming pool" ranked among the top ten most commonly used words. In another study, "pool" was listed as the 9th most frequent word out of 40 in online reviews of luxury hotels (Padma & Ahn, 2020). Additionally, a literature review by Dolnicar and Otter (2003), which examined studies published between 1984 and 2000, revealed that 38% of these articles referenced swimming pools, underscoring their importance. This finding is further corroborated by Cherapanukorn and Charoenkwan (2017) and Alanazeh (2017), reinforcing the prominence of swimming pools in the hospitality industry.

Hotel attributes can also serve as sources of dissatisfaction, which often differ from those that drive satisfaction (Gu & Ryan, 2008). For example, while swimming pools ranked fourth among the key attributes of suite hotels, issues related to food and beverage services were identified as significant contributors to customer dissatisfaction (Xu & Li, 2016). In online reviews, swimming pools were frequently criticized for being dirty or in poor condition, highlighting maintenance and cleanliness as common concerns.

Online reviews, guest satisfaction, and the hotel industry

Online reviews play a crucial role in generating electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Egresi & Prakash, 2019; Xu & Li, 2016). eWOM is defined as "*all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers*" (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 461). This encompasses interactions between producers and consumers, as well as among consumers themselves. eWOM can take various forms, including forums, blogs, social networks, and customer reviews (Cheung & Lee, 2012), and it has the potential to reach a broader audience more quickly than traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) (Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). As a result, online reviews have emerged as one of the most valuable and influential sources of information, significantly impacting customers' purchasing decisions (Guo et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2016; Filieri et al., 2018). In this context, customer-generated reviews on online platforms may have a stronger influence on purchasing behavior than reviews written by experts (Park & Kim, 2008).

One of the economic sectors most significantly impacted by online customer reviews is the travel and tourism industry, particularly the hotel sector (Serra Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). Research has shown that 75% of travelers rely on online reviews as their primary or sole source of travel information (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), with a vast majority making accommodation decisions based on these reviews (Gretzel & Yoo, 2007). It is, then, no wonder that Ye et al. (2011) found that a 10% increase in customer review ratings can increase online bookings by more than 5%.

Online reviews also serve as a valuable tool for hotels, offering a wealth of cost-effective and unbiased data to better understand guest satisfaction (Egresi et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2014). Hoteliers can leverage this information to boost consumer demand (Guo et al., 2007; Wen, 2009; Xu & Li, 2016), enhance their hotel's reputation (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), and improve overall business profitability (Guo et al., 2007; Sun & Kim, 2013).

Both positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) play significant roles in influencing customer decisions. Depending on their priorities, some customers are swayed by positive feedback, while others are more affected by negative reviews (Zhang et al., 2010). Positive comments can enhance potential guests' perceptions of a hotel (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009) and increase the likelihood of online bookings (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Torres et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2009). For instance, Verma et al. (2012) found that positive guest reviews raised the probability of making a hotel reservation to 70-80%.

Other scholars have found that negative reviews tend to have a stronger influence on potential customers (Sparks & Browning, 2011), significantly reducing the likelihood of booking a room at the hotel (Zhang et al., 2010). For instance, Verma et al. (2012) suggest that the probability of making a reservation drops to 40% for hotels that consistently receive negative feedback.

It is evident from the above discussion that a thorough analysis of online reviews can provide valuable insights into how specific hotel attributes contribute to customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This information can be instrumental for hoteliers in their efforts to attract more guests and enhance the financial performance of their businesses (Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, to date, there has been limited research focused on understanding how different hotel attributes influence guest satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on online reviews (Dong et al., 2014).

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, we compiled reviews published in English by users on the Booking.com hotel reservation platform between November 1, 2021, and October 31, 2022. We selected this platform because it is the largest in the world, and most five-star hotels are represented on it. We consider the reviews posted on this platform to be reliable, as only guests who have actually stayed at a hotel can post reviews. Additionally, users are encouraged to share both positive and negative aspects of their hotel experiences in their comments. The research sample includes a number of 42 hotels, which represents approximately one-quarter of all five-star hotels in Dubai (table 1).

Table 1. The 5-star hotels included in the study

Hotel		
Address Beach Resort	Atlantis The Palm	Jumeirah Beach Hotel
Sofitel Dubai the Obelisk	Grand Millenium Business Bay	Rove Downtown
Raffles The Palm Dubai	Rixos Premium Dubai JBR	Swissotel Al Murooj Dubai
Fairmont The Palm	Centara Mirage Beach Resort Dubai	Premier Inn Dubai International Airport
The Retreat Palm Dubai	Studio M Atabian Plaza	The First Collection at Jumeirah Village Circle
MGallery by Sofitel	Sofitel Dubai The Palm	Gevora Hotel
The Ritz-Carlton Dubai	Four Points by Sheraton Downtown	The H Dubai
Anantara World Islands Dubai Resort	JW Marriott Marquis Hotel Dubai	Anantara Dubai The Palm Resort & Spa
The St. Regis Dubai	First Central Hotel Suites	Raffles Dubai
The Dubai Edition	Five Palm Jumeirah Dubai	Citymax Hotel Bur Dubai
Address Sky View	Taj Exotica Resort & Spa The Palm	Palace Downtown
Paramount Hotel Midtown	Hilton Dubai Jumeirah	Avani Palm View Dubai Hotel & Suites
Taj Dubai	Novotel Suites Dubai Mall of the Emirates	Address Dubai Mall
Shangri-La Dubai	Dukes The Palm, A Royal Hideaway Hotel	Grand Cosmopolitan Hotel

Once all reviews were downloaded into an Excel sheet, we searched for duplicates and carefully removed any that were identified. Ultimately, 736 reviews remained for further analysis. The next step involved filtering the

reviews to retain only comments related to swimming pools. As a result, many reviews were condensed to a single sentence. The entire dataset consisted of 10,970 words, with an average of 15 words per review. We also conducted a spelling check on the comments and corrected any misspelled words.

Next, we used a free platform (www.wordclouds.com) to create a word cloud based on the most frequently used words in the online guest reviews. Verbs appearing in different tenses were merged, as were nouns in singular and plural forms, along with synonymous words. Finally, to make the word cloud more relevant and readable, we removed words that appeared fewer than 20 times in the comments. The final word cloud was generated using the remaining 45 words.

A sentiment analysis was also conducted. Sentiment analysis is the process of evaluating a text to determine the emotional tone of the message (Vetinev et al., 2021). Based on this, the writer's attitude toward a particular subject or product can be classified as positive, negative, or neutral (Wu et al., 2024). Nowadays, sentiment analysis is typically performed using artificial intelligence. However, in this case, we opted to manually analyze the sentiment of the reviews because the entire text was relatively short and because experts consider the results of machine learning to be less accurate than manual processing (Kirilenko et al., 2018).

In the second part, the reviews were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis is a scientific method that enables the qualitative and quantitative examination of a text, allowing for the identification of key themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, the two researchers manually coded the text. Following Neuman's (2003) recommendation, the coding process was conducted independently by each researcher. The results were then compared, and any discrepancies in assessment were discussed until a consensus was reached. During this process, some themes were eliminated, while others were merged.

Findings

Word cloud

First, a word cloud was generated based on the most frequently used words in the reviews (fig. 1). As expected, the most used words were "swimming" (mentioned 155 times) and "pool" (105 times), along with "area" (107 times). Most guests described the pool area as "clean" (63 times), "beautiful" (28 times), and either "large" (27 times) or "small" (24 times). Additionally, descriptors such as "helpful" (39 times), "friendly" (37 times), and

"attentive" (21 times) likely referred to the qualities of the "staff" (97 times). The "experience" (mentioned 27 times) was most often characterized as "great" (100 times), "nice" (100 times), "good" (72 times), "amazing" (71 times), "lovely" (50 times), "well" (45 times), "excellent" (44 times), "best" (35 times), "fantastic" (31 times), and "perfect" (26 times)—all positive descriptors. These assessments were based on the "service" (69 times), "facilities" (41 times), "views" (61 times), and "ambiance" (25 times). Ultimately, we conclude that most guests "enjoyed" (51 times) and "liked" (25 times) their "stay" (35 times) at the "hotel" (66 times) swimming pool area in "Dubai" (20 times).

Fig. 1. Word cloud with the most frequently used words in hotel reviews.
Source: the authors

Sentiment analysis

The next step was to analyze the 736 comments related to swimming pools to determine their sentiment polarity. Out of the 736 reviews or review excerpts, we identified three in which the authors merely mentioned the existence of swimming pools without expressing any opinion about them. As a

result, sentiment analysis was conducted on the remaining 733 comments. The vast majority of these comments (650, or 88.68%) were classified as positive, while only 59 (or 8.05%) were negative. The remaining 24 (or 3.27%) were neutral, containing both positive and negative aspects.

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the reviews

Upon analyzing the 736 guest comments, we identified twelve codes, which were further grouped into four dimensions: pool environment, quality of the pool, staff and service, and overall experience (table 2). In total, the twelve codes were referenced 979 times, with 89% of these references being positive (table 2).

Table 2. Main dimensions and codes resulting from the qualitative analysis of the reviews

Dimension	Code	Positive count	% positive of code	Negative count	% negative of code
Pool environment	Ambiance	63	64.3	35	35.7
	Views	65	98.5	1	1.5
	Facilities	46	73	17	27
	Activities	2	66.6	1	33.4
	Total env.	176	76.5	54	23.5
Quality of the pool	Size of the pool	29	52.7	26	47.3
	Quality of the water	41	83.7	8	16.3
	Amenities in the pool	15	78.9	4	21.1
	Total quality	85	69.1	38	30.9
Staff & service	Staff attitude & behavior	160	98.8	2	1.2
	Quality of service	42	95.4	2	4.6
	Products served	12	92.3	1	7.7
	Extra services	21	87.5	3	12.5
	Total staff	235	96.7	8	3.3
Overall impression	Quality of the pool area	277	98.9	3	1.1
	Experience	100	97.1	3	2.9
	Total	377	98.4	6	1.6
All		873	89.2	106	10.8

Staff and service

The staff and service dimension received the most comments (243, of which 97.7% were positive and only 3.3% were negative). The vast majority of these comments were related to staff attitude and behavior (162, of which only two, or 1.2%, were negative). One of the many positive reviews regarding staff attitude reads as follows:

"*The service at the pool is amazing. As I was walking to the pool, [name of the staff member] already had towels and cold water ready for us. [He] was always keeping an eye on the water, making sure everyone is safe. [He was] super friendly and outgoing*" [31].

As we can see, the primary responsibility of the staff working in the pool area is to act as lifeguards. This is why one of the two complaints recorded in this section was about the insufficient number of lifeguards ensuring guests' safety [446].

Next, almost all guests agreed that the quality of the service was very high (95.4% left positive comments). For example, one guest wrote the following review:

"*The staff at the pool was super attentive. Always checking what we need before we even knew we needed it. We loved the glass cleaning and the ice cream service. Made our pool experience so extra special*" [157].

Another user, referring to the quality of the service by the pool area, exclaimed:

"*At the pool, hospitality [is] at its best. You receive complementary ice bucket with water (no plastic, recyclable bottles [and], not to forget, the complementary fruit slices and lollies throughout the afternoon*" [395].

Most of the time, the service was described as excellent [for example, cases 40, 53] or amazing [case 31, among others]. Many guests also praised the poolside staff for their prompt and friendly service [for example, 34]. Only two comments regarding the service were negative. For example, one guest complained that the staff did not answer their call, and they had to walk to the bar to get what they wanted [595] while another guest expressed dissatisfaction with the high price of the drinks [436]. One guest framed their critique of the service as constructive feedback, suggesting areas where the staff could improve:

"*The only recommendation I would make is to provide water at the beach/pools for Imperial Club guests as we didn't want to be going back into the lounge for water frequently. I think this should be part of the Imperial Club package*" [147].

Only 13 comments referred to what was served to the guests, of which twelve were positive. For example, one review mentioned "*the relaxing pool area [which] features an in-pool bar, with a nice selection of drinks and food*" [84]. Another overall positive comment mentions hookah as being served by the pool:

"*The pool lounge is a nice place to sit in the night with a drink or hookah. Kids are not allowed near the deck seating area, though! Overall, a great place to stay with family and spend quality time in Dubai*" [55].

Finally, 24 reviews addressed the provision of extra services, with the overwhelming majority being positive (table 2). Most of these comments praised employees for offering complimentary amenities—such as cold towels and water—which guests greatly appreciated, especially in Dubai's intense heat. For example, one guest praised the poolside service, stating: "*The service at the pool is amazing. As I was walking to the pool, [employee's name] already had towels and cold water ready for us [...] Great place—I'll definitely visit again!*" [31]. Another guest appreciated the "*cold towels brought when you're just getting a little warm*" [35].

Pool environment

Three-quarters of all references to the pool environment are positive (table 2). This dimension consists of four codes: ambiance, views, facilities, and activities. Apart from one review, all mentions of the views from the pool were positive. The views of iconic landmarks such as the Burj Khalifa [cases 18, 28, 37, 48, 51, 607], Burj Al Arab [505, 512, 623], other buildings in Dubai Downtown [21], and The Palm [693] were described as incredible [21, 684, 734], amazing [28, 60, 345, 353, 410], fantastic [248, 683], impressive [501], magnificent [252], sensational [735], and even "out of this world" [11].

Nearly three-quarters of the reviewers who mentioned this attribute expressed satisfaction with the facilities in the pool area. For example, one reviewer noted, "*The pool area [...] offers a combination of sun loungers and more private cabanas. The cabanas give an added degree of privacy, and I was rather impressed with the fact they were fully air conditioned*" [73]. Another guest added, "*The pool area was spacious, with plenty of sun loungers. As soon as we arrived, staff escorted us to our loungers and asked if we wanted the umbrella up or down*" [724]. However, in some cases, the facilities appeared "*much older,*" making the pool area seem "*lacking in atmosphere*" [77]. Another negative review referred to the pool area as "*run down and so old and not what it looks like in the pictures*" [433]. Similar issues were also brought in a few other reviews such as 403 and 507.

Other travelers were impressed by the presence of a "kids' area" and "kids' pool" [57, 162]. The children apparently "*enjoyed the pool and the play area around the pool and had a wonderful time*" [503; similar description in 342]. Another reviewer highlighted the availability of pool facilities catering to all age groups: "[*there were] several pools to cater for every age. The pool with the slides was a favorite for children. Main pool has a lovely outdoor jacuzzi too!*" [253]. Further, another guest contended that although his family enjoyed them, pool facilities were "*more suitable for couples than families*" [204].

Ambiance was mentioned almost one hundred times in the reviews, with almost two-thirds of these being positive. Most comments were variations of the following quote: "*There is a nice atmosphere at the pool. Different types of cultures and people together that makes it diverse. I definitely feel comfortable*" [197]. Another user added that "*the pool site is amazing especially at night when you can see the beautiful lights of the surrounding buildings*" [617].

One important factor that added to the good/fabulous vibe [394, 546] was the choice of music played in the background [37, 212. 340, 388, 394]. However, some guests complained that "*The pool area was playing loud and obtrusive music, and did not provide a relaxing poolside atmosphere*" [606]. To some, "*the noise level is very disturbing*" [70] and concluded that the "*pool area is targeted to partying, not relaxing and resting*" [195]. These critics characterized the pool area as having a "cheap vibe" [336]. Also on the downside, some guests complained that "*there is not much shade at the pool*" [200].

Another negative aspect brought to our attention by the reviewers was that the pool area was "a little crowded" [162; 647] and "*especially during the weekend, it was a bit difficult to find available space*" [187] and "*beds at the pool*" [336]. This may be because "*they let outsiders have priority [at the pool]*" [336]. However, others contended that the pool area was "spacious" [508] and "*never crowded and there are always beds to sunbathe on and fresh towels as you enter the pool area*" [506]. Also, "*since [the pool area] is not crowded at all, you can enjoy privacy and cleanliness for sure*" [179; other positive references to this aspect could be found in cases 400 and 582].

Only three comments referred to the activities that are organized around the pool, of which two were positive and one negative. On one hand, guests visiting the pool with their families tend to appreciate the activities organized by the hotels because "The resort will keep you and kids engage in various activities like pool, water park, lazy river, Spa (for both kids and adults)" [232]. On the other hand, solo travelers or couples seeking to enjoy a quiet day by the pool frequently find these noisy disruptions frustrating. For example, one particularly displeased guest described the scene in the pool and by the pool as follows:

"*Kids jumping in the pool, which for safety reasons is not allowed anywhere else, people throwing balls over your head, again dangerous. Nobody cares, awful!!!! 5 star turned into 2-3 star Benidorm including the skyscrapers, but not the price*" [49].

Quality of the pool

More than two-thirds of the comments related to the quality of the pool were positive (table 2). Of the three codes comprising this dimension, pool size received the fewest positive reviews, with just over half of guests expressing satisfaction. Many guests described the pools as "big" or "large" [22, 89, 114, 121, 129, 146, 341, 353, 369, 400, 438, 444, 638, 691, 727] or even "huge" [298, 299, 388]. For example, one guest commented that "*the pool is amazing, and you can do laps. It is over 35 meters long and very well-maintained*" [34].

However, many tourists criticized some 5-star hotels for having unexpectedly small pools [72, 282, 425, 457, 463, 485, 511, 535, 664, 720]. One visitor remarked, "*The swimming pool is incredibly small for a property this size and the only one they have*" [286; a similar view in review 303]. Others, however, found the small size unproblematic. For instance, one review stated, "*The pool is a little small and not really a place to hang out for a long time, but great for a dip*" [421]. Others, mentioned that although the pool was quite small, they still enjoyed the morning [536] and even recommend it "100%" [432].

Another issue raised in the reviews was the water quality of the pools. Nearly 84% of the 49 reviews addressing this topic were positive (table 2). The vast majority of guests described the pools as clean [32, 36, 158, 170, 171, 175, 176, 181, 243, 274, 287, 320, 372, 399, 409, 419, 440, 485, 519, 539, 541, 543, 549, 566, 590, 537, 675, 692, 723]. However, a small number of visitors reported issues such as dirty water [289, 429] or unpleasant odors [670, 715]. One guest suggested that infrequent water changes might explain these problems [302], while another warned of potential health risks, noting that *children can get sick* [300].

Water temperature was another frequently mentioned aspect of pool quality in guest reviews. Generally, hotel pools were described as having "cool" water, which many guests appreciated given Dubai's hot climate [218, 338, 382]. As one guest noted, *"The chilled pool is the best thing needed when the sun is beating down on you"* [178]. However, during cooler periods, some visitors found the water temperature uncomfortably cold [429], with one remarking they *"wished it could have been a few degrees warmer"* [64]. The contrast between the cold water and Dubai's extreme heat was also highlighted as problematic, with one reviewer explicitly stating, *"the pool is not warm enough for Dubai"* [510]. Despite these concerns, most guests felt the pools maintained the *"right temperature"* [74, 342, 394, 465, 676].

The availability of pool amenities was addressed in only 19 reviews, with nearly 80% offering positive assessments (Table 2). Guests particularly appreciated hotels featuring multiple pools designed *"to cater for every age"* [253]. Several properties offered aquatic features such as slides [5, 250] - described as *"a favorite for children"* [253] - along with dedicated play areas for water games [5, 250]. Some establishments also provided outdoor jacuzzi [253]. However, a minority of reviewers reported malfunctioning amenities, with one noting critically: *"The hot tub attached to the private pool didn't work; it wasn't heated, and the jets did not function"* [339].

Overall impression

Overall, guests employed a wide range of positive descriptors to characterize the pools and pool areas, with terms ranging from simple appreciations like *"nice"* and *"lovely"* to more enthusiastic evaluations such as *"good," "great,"* and *"excellent".* Some visitors offered even stronger praise, describing the pools as *"fantastic"* (or *"beyond fantastic"*), *"wonderful,"* or *"amazing"* (table 3).

Our analysis identified only three reviews (approximately 1% of the total sample) that expressed negative evaluations (table 2). These critical assessments primarily stemmed from discrepancies between guests' expectations and their actual experiences. One particularly illustrative comment noted: *"The pool appears significantly more impressive in the hotel's promotional materials than in reality"* [498], highlighting this perception gap.

The overall experience with the pool facilities at these 5-star hotels received overwhelmingly positive evaluations, with only three exceptions among all reviews. A substantial majority of guests reported highly satisfactory experiences [52, 91, 245, 275, 711], exemplified by comments such as: *"The swimming pool was a great experience. The separate children's pool allowed kids to enjoy themselves fully, which was fantastic"* [613]. Many praised specific features, with one guest noting: *"The beachfront infinity pool was wonderful - every moment there was enjoyable"* [732].

While most visitors sought relaxation at the pools [59, 245, 275, 711], others primarily sought recreational activities [60]. This occasionally led to conflicts between these groups, as highlighted by one dissatisfied guest: "*Pool area is targeted to partying not relaxing and resting. [...] it was a bad stay*" [195]. Despite these occasional tensions, the consensus remained strongly positive, with many guests expressing intentions to return [41, 561], affirming the overall quality of their pool experiences.

Table 3. Descriptors used by guests to describe the quality of the pool area

Descriptor	Examples of reviews using this descriptor for the pool area
Nice	108, 120, 121, 127, 129, 136, 162, 165, 190, 237, 276, 279, 305, 335, 365, 372, 423, 438, 443, 452, 480, 491, 496, 508, 518, 521, 530, 536, 566, 569, 611, 669, 682
Lovely	33, 90, 92, 97, 243, 348, 349, 482
Good	121, 213, 236, 238, 270, 366, 445, 559, 605, 612, 618, 695
Great	107, 109, 11, 186, 229, 254, 278, 292, 361, 478, 500, 513, 539, 580, 588, 703, 719
Excellent	110, 218, 259, 327, 414, 581
Magnificent	76, 496, 736
Cool	19
Enjoyable	19
Fantastic	85, 105, 235, 283, 299, 311, 555, 575, 626, 709
Beyond fantastic	83
Wonderful	102, 103, 308, 325, 551, 677
Amazing	104, 115, 126, 203, 210, 241, 249, 345, 354, 455, 517, 573, 634, 674, 734
Good value for the money	125
Sensational	143
Heavenly	145
Beautiful	150, 158, 185, 700, 717
Unbelievable/Incredible	159, 196
Mind-blowing	217
Stunning	301
Superb	350
Perfect	586
Astonishing	600
Fabulous	704

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses a gap in luxury hotel literature by identifying the key dimensions and attributes of pools that matter most to guests. The research reveals three primary dimensions of pools—alongside overall impression—each comprising multiple attributes. In total, the study identifies eleven key attributes of hotel pools, plus two additional ones that shape the overall impression.

The findings highlight "staff & service" as the most critical dimension, appearing in 243 reviews. This underscores the significance of service quality in luxury hotels, aligning with prior research (Alrawadieh & Law, 2019; Khoo-Lattimore & Ekiz, 2014; Padma & Ahn, 2020). Notably, the attribute "staff attitude and behavior" was the most frequently mentioned within this dimension, reinforcing the importance of effective human resource management (Khozaei et al., 2016; Padma & Ahn, 2020). The overwhelmingly positive feedback in this category suggests that hotel managers recognize its value and prioritize high-quality service. Thus, investing in well-trained, courteous staff remains essential.

Consistent with Guzel & Guzel's (2016) study, another key dimension for guests was pool environment, particularly ambiance. However, this attribute received the highest proportion of negative feedback (35 out of 98 comments), indicating a need for improvement to enhance guest satisfaction. Additionally, guests highlighted facilities as an area where some luxury hotels fell short, with 27% of reviews criticizing outdated or inadequate offerings.

The third dimension, pool quality, garnered the fewest mentions. Among these, pool size was the most contentious issue—nearly half of the reviewers deemed it too small for a luxury hotel, echoing Guzel & Guzel's (2016) observations.

Finally, the overall impression of Dubai's 5-star hotel pools was overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that their quality contributes to the city's appeal as a luxury destination.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for luxury hotel managers. They must recognize that guests prioritize service quality and exceptional human interactions over mere facilities or amenities. As Padma & Ahn (2020) also emphasize, luxury hotel guests expect staff to "go the extra mile"—delivering personalized, attentive service that makes them feel valued. For instance, small yet thoughtful gestures, such as offering cold towels or bottled water poolside, significantly enhance guest satisfaction. Ultimately, 5-star hotel customers seek a pampering experience, where every detail reflects a commitment to excellence.

Another key finding of this study highlights the critical importance of pool area ambiance. Hotel managers should conduct targeted research to better understand their guests' preferences. The study reveals that the primary motivation for using pool facilities is rest and relaxation. While families with children may appreciate dedicated play areas or activities, the majority of guests prefer a tranquil atmosphere – potentially enhanced by subtle background music.

Finally, while mentioned less frequently, guests also expressed a strong preference for larger pools that avoid overcrowding and allow for lap swimming. Several reviewers framed this as a prestige issue, suggesting that larger pools align with the expectations of a true five-star experience. Interestingly, some guests even noted envy toward nearby residential complexes that offered more extensive pool facilities than the luxury hotels they visited. While spatial constraints may limit renovations of existing pools, these findings highlight the importance for architects and developers to prioritize generous pool dimensions when designing new five-star properties, ensuring they meet guest expectations for both functionality and exclusivity.

Limitations and future research

As with all social science research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while our sample encompassed numerous five-star hotels, we restricted our analysis to guest reviews posted within a single calendar year. This temporal constraint resulted in a relatively modest sample size (though sufficient for our research objectives) and makes our findings inherently time-bound. A longitudinal analysis spanning multiple years (e.g., a decade) might yield significantly different results, as guest preferences and industry standards evolve over time.

Additionally, our cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of consumer perceptions. Future research employing a longitudinal approach could not only address this limitation but also track evolving guest expectations regarding luxury hotel pool amenities. Such studies would provide valuable insights into temporal trends in hospitality preferences.

Our analysis revealed significant heterogeneity in guest preferences across different hotels in our sample. This variation indicates that our generalized recommendations may not be equally applicable to all properties. To address this limitation, we suggest two promising avenues for future research.

First, following the methodological approach of Wei and Kim (2022) in their case study of Atlantis The Palm, property-specific analyses could yield more targeted operational recommendations. Such focused examinations would account for unique guest demographics and property characteristics that may influence satisfaction levels.

Second, we propose a market segmentation approach that classifies five-star hotels based on key pool area attributes. This categorization could reveal meaningful patterns in guest expectations and satisfaction across different hotel types, enabling more nuanced management strategies.

Another consideration when analyzing review-based studies is that not all customers leave reviews. Some may lack awareness of the review process, others may not have time, and some may be unsure what to write. Typically, only guests who were either highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied submit reviews, with little representation from those with moderate experiences. Even among reviewers, they tend to comment only on aspects that elicited strong reactions. This explains why not all guests who stayed at the studied hotels mentioned the pool area in their reviews. Consequently, our findings should be interpreted as representing only partial insights into guest perceptions.

These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of this study.

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