

Revisiting the Impact of Perceived Empowerment on Job Performance: Results from Front-Line Employees

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the probable effect of perceived empowerment on job performance and the sample of research consisted of 230 participants working in tourism sector as front-line employees. The outcomes of this study indicated that psychological empowerment was positively correlated with employee job performance and employees' job performance were mostly effected from self-determination and impact dimensions of empowerment. Moreover, tests were conducted to analyze the significant differences in participants' perception of empowerment and job performance according to their demographic characteristics. There was a significant difference between perceived empowerment and gender, age and work experience whereas there was no significant difference between empowerment and education levels. On the other hand, the relationship between job performance and work experience was supported however no relationship was found between job performance and gender, age and education level of the participants. Trying to find out what might possibly lead front-line employees to increased job performance, it can be claimed that psychological empowerment still turns out to be a central issue and therefore this research makes useful contributions to the current knowledge by entirely investigating the direct effect of perceived empowerment on employee job performance in hospitality industry where especially front-line employees spend most of their time directly with customers.

Key words: Empowerment, job performance, tourism, hospitality industry and front-line employees

Introduction

In today's complex business life employee performance is believed to be an important subject not only in achieving organizational objectives but also in maintaining competitive advantages over other enterprises. To enhance employee job performance all organizations are required to encourage positive work attitudes like helping customers to resolve problems, cooperating

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with co-workers, trying to prevent unexpected incidents and sustaining quality standards of the organization in order to ensure customer satisfaction.

In hospitality industry, especially front-line employees spend most of their time directly with customers and their attitudes can easily influence customer satisfaction and their perception of services (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Hurley, 1998). Keeping this information in mind, finding out what may possibly lead these employees to increased job performance turns out to be a central issue for the hospitality industry as job performance will also lead to high levels of customer satisfaction. Certainly, there are many empirical studies which have examined the antecedents of job performance using different samples of employees in hospitality industry such as Steward, Carson & Cardy (1996) and Brown et al. (2002) reporting the relationship between personality traits and job performance, Rhoades & Eisenberger (2002) and Aselage and Eisenberger (2003) focusing on the effect of perceived organizational support on employee job performance, Iun & Huang (2007), Ng & Feldman (2013a) stating the relationship between aging and job performance and Ng & Feldman (2013b) explaining the relationship between job tenure and performance. Moreover, Arshadi & Damiri (2013) recently reported the relationship between job stress and job performance and the effects of individual characteristics on employee performance have been researched by Karatepe et al. (2006). It can be easily understood that there are several different antecedents of job performance and there can be many other related subjects from the field of hospitality industry.

On the other hand Chiang & Birtch (2011), Henry et al. (2004) and Karatepe & Uludag (2007) have emphasized empowerment to be useful managerial implications for business practice in the hospitality industry therefore some researchers (Chiang & Jang, 2008; Chiang & Hsieh, 2012) consider psychological empowerment as one of the most essential factors in the hospitality industry. This is perhaps the main reason behind the existence of many researches (Brymer, 1991; Jones et al., 1997; Parsons, 1995; Hales & Klidas, 1998) on hotel employees under the subject of empowerment. In other words the concept of empowerment has become important in hospitality industry where especially front-line employees need the authority to respond quickly and promptly to customers.

Seeing that former studies (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1995) obviously showed that psychological empowerment has an effect on employee job roles and also influences the working environment, current study principally concentrated on the probable relationship between psychological empowerment and job performance of front-line employees. In other words the main argument in this study is that if employees are empowered, they will perform better and this will facilitate reaching organizational goals.

Literature review

Employee Empowerment

During the past decades various scholars have revealed a growing interest in the theory of empowerment. In the management literature the concept has been extensively accepted as an important component for ensuring service quality and customer satisfaction. Daft (2001) defined empowerment as offering employees the control, freedom and information to participate in decision-making and organizational affairs. While defining the term empowerment Conger & Kanungo, (1988), Thomas & Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995) have stressed on

psychological aspects and look to the subject from the degree of empowerment that employees feels internally in 4 dimensions as *meaning, competence, self-determination* and *impact*.

The current study focuses on employees' psychological empowerment by using this conceptualization. The meaning dimension mentions the values of a work with regard to an employee's own standards whereas the competence dimension refers primarily to an employee's belief in his/her capability to perform activities related to work. The self-determination dimension refers to an employee's autonomy in the continuation of work behaviors and finally the impact dimension refers to the degree to which an employee is capable of influencing the outcomes at his/her working environment (Ro & Chen, 2011).

Front-line employees can be seen as the most important employees in the hospitality industry since they are the ones who actually encounter customers. This is the main reason why service-oriented lodging enterprises should encourage employee empowerment. Studies of Lashley (1999) and Jha & Nair (2008) showed that especially the front-line employees play a crucial role in terms of employee empowerment in the hospitality industry since these employees are generally accepted to deal with customer problems and requests in a courteous manner. Bowen & Lawyer (1992) claimed that empowering front-line employees can attribute guest satisfaction by creating self-esteem for employees and Klidas et al. (2007) emphasized that empowerment would result in meeting or exceeding guests' expectations during the service. Lashley (1996) noted that empowering front-line staff would also enable them to do good work and to take responsibility for their own performance.

In order to reach these positive outcomes of psychological empowerment, certainly, an appropriate management support is a prerequisite for empowerment to be effective and successful in hospitality organizations. However, it is important to recognize that empowerment should not mean that managers will lose control and their authority over employees. In this respect, for the hotel industry, employee empowerment should be accepted as the process of decentralizing decision making by giving necessary autonomy to front-line employees. In other words front-line employees' immediate decisions to serve customers are the main basis for empowerment in hotel industry. In this manner, front-line employees will feel that they are happier with their jobs and fulfill the job requirements willingly, have high self-esteem -which is generally low in the industry-, meet higher standards of service with prompt response and more autonomy. These will in the end create high job performance levels of front-line employees which is a necessity in service-oriented organizations.

Job Performance

To date, many definitions and practices were developed for the understanding of the job performance. On a very general level job performance can be defined as "a function of outcomes at work". Unfortunately, like many other subjects in social sciences, there are still different views about the term and each author tries to define the job performance in a different manner. In literature one can easily see two main approaches regarding the nature of job performance. The first group of authors see the job performance as being outcomes and concentrate on results of certain job-related activities (Ainsworth & Smith, 1993). Babin & Boles for example (1998: p.82) defined job performance as "the level of productivity of an individual employee, relative to his/her peers, on several job-related behaviors and outcomes.

The other group considers the job performance as the sum of behaviors that employee controls in a certain context that are relevant for the organizational objectives (Campbell et al., 1993). However, it is generally agreed that job performance consists of many interacting var-

ables such as the job itself, the employee and/or the work environment. Obviously, job performance can essentially be the results of a series of behaviors and tasks performed on a daily basis from the employee's point of view, however, from a manager's perspective outcomes are the key elements for job performance appraisals. So, it is clear that job performance involves more than just doing the tasks of one's job.

As mentioned earlier in this study, a number of studies examined the antecedents of job performance from different points of views. At first glance, it can be seen that scholars have generally examined the relationship between job performance and age-related issues such as aging, physical and mental health and employee well-being. Since hospitality jobs are generally characterized as being service-oriented and labor intensive, younger workers may be more able to show higher levels of job performance due to their physical advantages in terms of their ages (Iun & Huang, 2007). Then it can be thought that there is a negative relationship between age and performance in hospitality-related jobs. On the other hand, some research noted that (Iun & Huang, 2007) older employees have qualities such as cooperation, loyalty and a good work ethic and they perform better than younger employees in terms of quality of work. If hospitality-related jobs are thought to be equipped with physical activities and if the performance of an employee depends on quantity of work rather than quality of work, then again aging can be assumed to lower the employee job performance. Job tenure has also been accepted as related subject of job performance and age of employees.

On the other side, studies examining the relationship between personality traits and job performance (Steward, Carson & Cardy, 1996) suggested that the big five personality traits had significant correlations with supervisors' evaluations of employee performance in hotel industry. Wayne, Musisca & Fleeson (2004) and Brown, et al., (2002) found evidence that especially conscientiousness had positive direct effects and neuroticism had significant negative effects on both self-rated and supervisors' evaluations of front-line employee performance.

When job performance is taken into account it is also necessary to deal with the term empowerment. Hechanova, Alampay & Franco (2006) claimed that employee empowerment should logically be married to service operations because it is difficult to separate the production of the service from its delivery. This is why the idea of providing workers the flexibility and ability to meet customer demands as they arise is naturally appealing. However, while investing money and time in employee empowerment programs all companies should realize whether psychological empowerment is positively affecting employee job performance or not. The present study focuses on this relationship rather than other factors affecting job performance and the related research is mainly limited to these subjects.

Research method and hypotheses

The current study searched the relationship between employees' psychological empowerment and job performance from the point of view of front-line employees working in hotels in Çeşme (Izmir)-Turkey. It was impossible to collect data from all employees in the selected destination since some hotels were closed and some managers did not give the necessary permission for the research. Out of 400 questionnaires distributed to 20 hotels (having 3, 4 and 5 stars) 230 of them returned thus the response rate was calculated as 57, 5%.

The data were collected through questionnaires with 3 sections as psychological empowerment, job performance and basic respondent demographic data and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). In the study psychological empowerment has been con-

sidered as independent variable whereas job performance was dependent variable. The 5-point Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree), has been used for each scale. The 12-item scale in the psychological empowerment section (e.g., My job activities are personally meaningful to me) was adopted from Spreitzer (1995). The job performance scale consisted of 4 items (e.g., I complete my tasks on time) and the scale was adopted from studies of Kirkman & Rosen (1999) and Sigler & Pearson (2000). Demographic questions included gender, age, education and work experience. Gender was coded as dichotomous variables (1:female and 2:male) and other questions were measured using a 5-point scale.

The research model was designed as shown in Figure 1. Many researchers (Spreitzer et al., 1997; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Liden et al., 2000; Niehoff et al., 2001; Peccei & Rosenthal, 2001; Chow et al., 2006) note that psychological empowerment correlates significantly with job performance. Therefore current study proposed first hypothesis as:

- H_1 : Perceived empowerment positively influences employee job performance.

The 4 different dimensions of psychological empowerment are hypothesized as following;

- H_{1a} : The meaning of the job is positively related to job performance.
- H_{1b} : Employee's competence on job positively related to job performance.
- H_{1c} : Employee's self-determination on job positively related to job performance.
- H_{1d} : Employee's impact on job positively related to job performance.

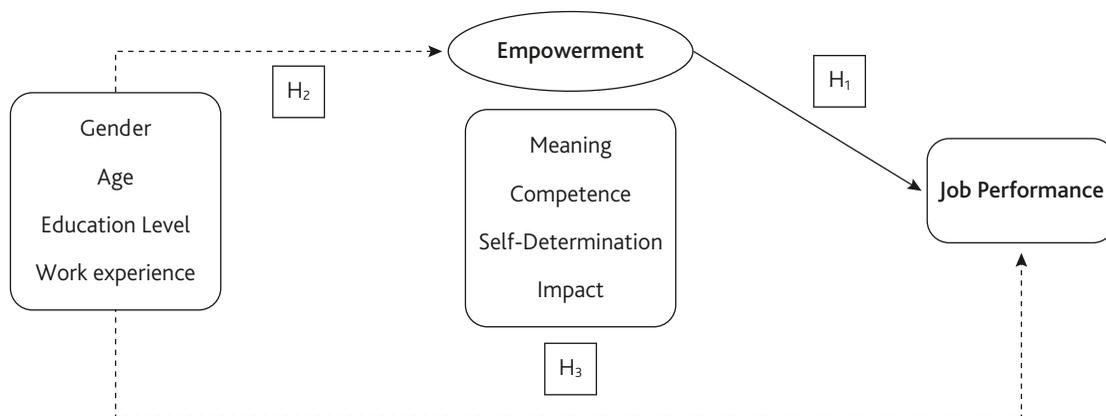


Figure 1. The Research Model

Other hypotheses were to explain the probable relationship between demographic characteristics and psychological empowerment. The relation between job performance and demographic data were also hypothesized as follows:

- $H_{2a-2b-2c-2d}$: There is a relationship between gender ($_{2a}$), age ($_{2b}$), education level ($_{2c}$) and work experience ($_{2d}$) of the employees and empowerment.
- $H_{3a-3b-3c-3d}$: There is a relationship between gender ($_{3a}$), age ($_{3b}$) education level ($_{3c}$) and work experience ($_{3d}$) of the employees and job performance.

Findings

Among the 230 respondents, 149 respondents (64.8%) were female and 81 respondents (35.2%) were male. 42.6% of the respondents were aged between 26-31 years. Education levels were fairly high, with over 80.4% having university degrees or above. The majority (47.4%) of the respondents had average work experience of 1-5 years. The profile of the respondents can be summarized as in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Variable	Sample (N= 230)	Percentage (100%)
Gender		
Female	149	64.8
Male	81	35.2
Age		
20-25	37	16
26-31	98	42.6
32-37	35	15.2
38-45	42	18.3
46 and above	18	7.9
Education		
High school	0	0
College	45	19.6
University degree	146	63.4
Post graduate	39	17
Work experience		
Less than 1 year	57	24.8
1-5 years	109	47.4
6-10 years	49	21.3
11-15 years	15	6.5
16 years and more	0	0

In testing model for exploratory factor analysis all factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$). The reliability ranged from 0.79 to 0.89 and the factor loadings of each item on rotated component matrix are demonstrated in Table 2. In the study, the reliability of psychological empowerment was measured to be 0.82 and the reliability of four different dimensions were 0.80 for meaning, 0.82 for competence, 0.86 for self-determination and 0.79 for impact. On the other hand the reliability of job performance was measured to be 0.89.

A correlation analysis was then conducted to find out the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee job performance. The mean value was ranged from 2.21 to 3.50 and the standard deviation from 1.19 to 1.53. The findings of the correlation analysis (Table 3) suggested that empowerment was positively correlated with job performance ($r = 0.887$ and $p < 0.01$). According to results H1 was accepted. Moreover, the dimensions of psychological empowerment were also positively correlated with job performance and therefore H1a, H1b, H1c and H1d were also supported. As is seen in Table 3, meaning and competence were posi-

tively correlated at the 0.05 significance level and self-determination and impact were positively correlated at the 0.01 significance level. In other words, it can be claimed that participants' job performance were exceedingly effected from self-determination and impact dimensions ($r=0.723$, $r=0.829$ respectively $p<0.01$) of empowerment rather than meaning of the job and competence in work ($r=0.453$, $r=0.552$ and $p<0.05$).

Table 2. Results of exploratory factor analysis

Constructs		Factor loadings	Reliability
Empowerment – Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy: .722			0.82
Meaning	M1: The work I do is very important to me.	.831	0.80
	M2: My job activities are personally meaningful to me.	.792	
	M3: The work I do is meaningful to me.	.772	
Competence	C1: I am confident about my ability to do my job.	.817	0.82
	C2: I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.	.809	
	C3: I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.	.847	
Self-Determination	SD1: I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.	.869	0.86
	SD2: I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work.	.853	
	SD3: I have considerable opportunity for independence in how I do my job.	.875	
Impact	I1: My impact on what happens in my department is large.	.801	0.79
	I2: I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department.	.821	
	I3: I have considerable opportunity for independence in how I do my job.	.798	
Job Performance - Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy: .816			0.89
	P1: I complete my tasks on time.	.803	0.89
	P2: I meet/exceed my goals.	.817	
	P3: I make sure that services meet/exceed quality standards.	.821	
	P4: I respond quickly when problems come up.	.795	

Table 3. Correlations among the study variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	Correlations					
				1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Psyc. Empowerment	2.48	1.20	0.82	1					
2. Meaning	3.50	1.23	0.80	0.664*	1				
3. Competence	3.72	1.35	0.82	0.659*	0.623*	1			
4. Self-determination	2.21	1.19	0.86	0.743**	0.356*	0.541*	1		
5. Impact	2.06	1.53	0.79	0.801**	0.436*	0.651*	0.862*	1	
6. Job Performance	2.43	1.48	0.89	0.887**	0.453*	0.552*	0.723**	0.829**	1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

On the other hand t-test and ANOVA test were conducted to analyze the significant differences firstly in participants' perceptions of empowerment and then job performance according to their demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education level, work experience. The results can be observed in Table 4 for t-test and Table 5 for anova test.

Table 4. T-test results indicating the differences in perceived empowerment and job performance

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
Perceived empowerment	Female	149	1.5472	.54782	.582	.000
	Male	81	2.6427	.66354		
Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
Job performance	Female	149	2.9566	.81547	.163	.314
	Male	81	3.7559	.80025		

T-test results demonstrated that there is a significant difference between perceived empowerment and gender ($p=0.000$). The mean difference between groups was 1,0955 and this indicated that female employees perceived empowerment more than male ones. H_{2a} was accepted. Moreover, t-test results revealed that there is no significant difference between job performance and gender ($p=0.314$) and H_{3a} was rejected.

Table 5. Anova test results indicating the differences in perceived empowerment and job performance

Age		N	F	p	Age	N	F	p
Perceived empowerment	20-25	37	4.125	0.000	Job performance	37	5.213	0.542
	26-31	98				98		
	23-37	35				35		
	38-45	42				42		
	46 and more	18				18		
Education Level		N	F	p	Education Level	N	F	p
Perceived empowerment	High school	0	1.852	0.247	Job performance	0	4.235	0.853
	College	45				45		
	University Degree	146				146		
	Post Graduate	39				39		
Work Experience		N	F	p	Work Experience	N	F	p
Perceived empowerment	Less than 1 year	57	2.145	0.000	Job performance	57	1.257	0.000
	1-5 years	109				109		
	6-10 years	49				49		
	11-15 years	15				15		
	16 years and more	0				0		

According to anova test results a difference was detected between perceived empowerment and age of the participants ($F=4.125$ and $p=0.000$). The Tukey Test was also carried out to analyze the differences between groups. The figures suggested that those who were between 38-45 ages having the highest perception of psychological empowerment than other age groups (H_{2b} was supported). Another test conducted for any difference in the participants' perceived empowerment according to their work experiences suggested that those who have worked for more than 6 years have perceived higher levels of empowerment than those who have worked in the organization for less than 1 year. ($F=2.145$ and $p=0,000$). So, H_{2d} was supported. No significant difference was detected between perceived empowerment and education level of the

participants (H_{2c} was rejected). On the other hand a difference was also detected between job performance and work experience ($F=1.257$ and $p=0.000$). The figures suggested that those who had 1-5 years of experience have higher levels of job performance than other employees (H_{3d} was supported). No significant difference was detected between age and job performance and education level and job performance of the participants (H_{3b} and H_{3c} were rejected).

Moreover a regression analysis was conducted and the R^2 values were used in order to find out what percentage of total change in the dependent variable was due to the independent variable dimensions. The determination factor was found to be $R^2: 0.587$ which showed that 59% of job performance was dependent on perceived empowerment. All four dimensions of psychological empowerment were affecting employee job performance of the participants in the regression analysis and their Beta (β) levels were listed as in Table 6.

Table 6. Regression analysis

Independent variables	Dependent variables				
	Job performance				
Perceived empowerment	β	t	Sig.	F	R2
Self-determination	.512	9.753**	0.000	12.145**	0.587
Impact	.497	7.465**	0.000		
Meaning	.315	3.272**	0.000		
Competence	.308	3.015**	0.000		

** $p < 0.01$

Conclusion

Based on the extant literature findings, it can be claimed that little attention has been devoted to the effects of perceived empowerment on employees' job performance in tourism industry. Thus, the main aim of this study was to measure the impacts of perceived empowerment on employee job performance in this neglected search area. This study looked at empowerment from a psychological perspective of employees rather than looking at the specific empowerment initiatives or programs of the organizations. The research participants were front-line employees in lodging industry since their attitudes could easily influence customers' perception of services provided by the hotel. Certainly, there were some empirical studies which have examined the antecedents of job performance reporting the relationship between job performance and personality (Steward, Carson & Cardy, 1996; Brown, et al., 2002), organizational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003), aging (Iun & Huang, 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2013a), job tenure (Ng & Feldman, 2013b), organizational stress (Arshadi & Damiri, 2013) however, there were not any researches specifically indicating the relationship between job performance and perceived empowerment.

The response rate of the questionnaires was 57.5% out of 20 hotels. Among the 230 respondents most were having university degree or above and working for 1-5 years in tourism industry. The proposed theoretical model was tested using SPSS 16.0 and the analyses found support for 9 hypothesis, including support for a strong relationship between perceived empowerment and employee job performance. Moreover, in the testing model all factor loadings were significant at $p < 0.001$. The hypothesis supported and not supported in the study can be summarized as in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of Hypothesis Results

H ₁ :	Perceived empowerment positively influences employee job performance.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{1a} :	The meaning of the job is positively related to job performance.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{1b} :	Employee's competence on job positively related to job performance.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{1c} :	Employee's self-determination on job positively related to job performance.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{1d} :	Employee's impact on job positively related to job performance.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{2a} :	There is a relationship between gender of the employees and perceived empowerment.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{2b} :	There is a relationship between age of the employees and perceived empowerment.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{2c} :	There is a relationship between education level of the employees and perceived empowerment.	<i>Not supported</i>
H _{2d} :	There is a relationship between work experience of the employees and empowerment.	<i>Supported</i>
H _{3a} :	There is a relationship between gender of the employees and job performance.	<i>Not supported</i>
H _{3b} :	There is a relationship between age of the employees and job performance.	<i>Not supported</i>
H _{3c} :	There is a relationship between education level of the employees and job performance.	<i>Not supported</i>
H _{3d} :	There is a relationship between work experience of the employees and job performance.	<i>Supported</i>

As seen in Table 7, the dimensions of psychological empowerment were also positively correlated with job performance and it is proven that for front-line employees, self-determination and impact dimensions of empowerment were more influential than the meaning of the job and employee's competence in job in terms of their effects on job performance. Moreover, according to test results, it can be supposed that female employees perceived empowerment more than males and employees aging 38-45, had the highest perception of empowerment than other age groups. Additionally it can be seen that work tenure also affects perceived empowerment. In terms of job performance the results suggested that those who had 1-5 years of work tenure had higher levels of job performance than other employees. According to the regression analysis it was found that 59% of job performance was dependent on perceived empowerment.

There was evidence that psychologically empowered employees feel better about their jobs and themselves. Geralis & Terziovski (2003) and Hechanova, Alampay & Franco (2006) mentioned exactly that empowerment practices are associated with well-being, productivity and performance. The findings of the current study also affirmed that empowerment was associated with positive outcomes. Since the relationship between empowerment and job performance was strong and significant, empowerment can be thought as one of the main determinant of employee performance in hospitality operations. It is obvious that organizations which facilitate empowerment among their members will experience high levels of job performance and there will be decreases in customer complaints as employees have autonomy in influencing them. Therefore, front-line employees should be given more flexibility while dealing with the guests and they should feel the sense of self-determination and impact on work outcomes.

Last but not the least; the study was not without limitation. The main limitation was the impossibility to collect data from all front-line employees in the targeted tourism destination since some hotel managers did not give permission to their employees to participate in the study, although they were actually told about the aim of the research. Furthermore there were also other factors affecting job performance of front-line employees, but the current study had just focused on perceived empowerment. In future studies, several other subjects can be used to understand the antecedents of job performance in hospitality industry. In addition, a comparison of empowerment levels among similar organizations may also reveal if empowerment does affect organizational or group performance. By the help of these findings it is expected to contribute to the theoretical studies in the field of tourism.

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