

## THE EFFECT OF CUSTOMER EMPOWERING BEHAVIOURS ON SERVICE PERFORMANCE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY\*

Merve ÖKSÜZ<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Under highly competitive service industry, customers are more selective while making their decisions. Thus, companies' response customers' needs and wants immediately and meet their expectations by creating unique services. Customers' actions may encourage and motivate employees to make decisions about successful service delivery which is called customer empowering behaviors. This article aims to explain antecedents of customer empowering behaviors which have impacts on employee absorption and customer service performance in the service industry. In this study, a multilevel conceptual model is used and suggests that customer empowering behaviors will be efficient on customer service performance through fostering job engagement. Quantitative research method is used by collecting questionnaires from 421 frontline employees who work either at the reception desk or guest relations in hotels with 4 and 5 stars in the South and South Western districts of Turkey. SEM and HLM were used to analyze collected data in research. The results indicate that customer empowering behaviors play a vital role that affects customer service performance through promoting employee absorption, however, customer complexity has not any significant effect on relationships between customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption and customer service performance.

**Key words:** Customer Empowering Behaviors, Job Demands and Resources Theory, Services Marketing, Customer Complexity, Employee Service Performance.

**JEL Code:** C3, J28, M12

### 1. Introduction

The service industry has been known to be a challenging one. Besides the increasing expectations coming from the customers' side, the number of

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\* This study was based on Ph.D. thesis of Merve ÖKSÜZ.

<sup>1</sup> Assist Prof., PhD, Başkent University, Turkey, merveoksuz85@hotmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2470-7919>

organizations in the service context are rising in line with more diverse customer demands, rising competition in the global context, and advanced technology (Spreitzer, 1996; Tekin & Köksal, 2012). This is possible because of this challenging nature of the work context, in many service industries including the hospitality industry, the employee turnover rate is the highest and the job performance has been in constant drop (Kruja, Ha, Drishiti & Oelfke, 2016) as well as the employee motivation (Pelit & Turkmen, 2008).

A high level of customer service performance is the source of competitive advantage through creating customer satisfaction (Lashlay, 1996), and the role of the frontline employee in the creation of competitive advantage is noteworthy (Kruja et al., 2015; Öztürk, Hancer & Im, 2014). Hence, the context of empowerment carries major importance. In other words, empowering the frontline employees in most of the cases yields effective service delivery, and returns as heightened customer satisfaction (Chiang & Jang, 2008). Though the extant literature has focused on the supervisor or manager-sourced empowering behaviors in the service settings (Auh, Menguc & Jung, 2014), some recent studies focus on the fact that customers can also empower the employees in the service process (Dong, ChuangLiao, Zhou & Campbell, 2015). Such studies further claim that customer-sourced empowering behaviors foster employee satisfaction and performance by increasing their creativity in their work (Dong et al., 2015).

This paper first aims to enrich the understanding of the positive role of customer empowering behaviors on employee performance. The article also focuses on the hindering effects of customer complexity on customer empowering behaviors - employee performance relationship in line with Job Demands and Resources Framework and tests these relationships in a service setting specifically in the hospitality industry. This paper's initial motivation for studying customer empowering behaviors and its effects on customer service performance comes from a variety of reasons. First of all, customer empowering behaviors have an enhancing effect on customer service performance (Dong et al., 2015). Moreover, customer empowering behaviors are likely to benefit organizations, are particularly key motivators of employee's creativity, and enhance customer satisfaction. Second, customer empowering behaviors are unexamined in the marketing literature and only to a limited extent by Dong et al., (2015). At the same time, studying the positive effects of customer empowering behaviors on service employee performance may provide significant contributions for both marketing theory and practice.

Due to the fact that customer empowering behavior literature is limited to Dong et al., (2015), empowerment and leader empowering behaviors concepts are used to observe the effects of customer empowering behaviors on service employee performance at the employee – level. Therefore, a link between empowerment and customer empowering behaviors is established by noting supervisors' (i.e. leader empowering behaviors) effect (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Boudrias, Gaudreau, Savoie & Morrin, 2009).

This study aims to explain the role of customer empowering behaviors on the service-employee-performance. From a theoretical perspective, the study brings a variety of contributions to the literature. First, this study is the first research in the literature that associates customer empowering behaviors to service employee performance. In line with Job Demand – Resources Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), the study associates customer empowering behaviors with customer service performance through job engagement, namely employee absorption. Second, by using the Job Demand – Resources Theory, this study proposes customer empowering behaviors as a resource exposed to employees, which would enhance employee performance through increasing employee absorption. Third, the study further introduces employee absorption as an agent factor between customer empowering behaviors and customer service performance. From this point of view, the study claims that customer empowering behaviors encourage employees to provide service in their own way, which would help them feel more absorbed at work, and would help them with their performance.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **The Concept of Empowerment and Customer Empowering Behaviors**

In a world with highly sophisticated customer needs demanding flexibility and quality, Hill and Hug (2004) define empowerment as a crucial component of sustainable competitive advantage among firms. Furthermore, empowerment helps the organizations to be successful and it is strongly related to the active use of employees (Hill & Hug, 2004). Moreover, empowered employees perceive themselves as being valuable assets in the organization. (Ukil, 2016). According to Thomas and Velthouse (1990), empowerment is an increased task motivation that inspires the attitude to accomplish. Furthermore, it promotes the feeling of self-efficacy and the overall organizational job performance (Velthouse, *et al.*, 1977; 1986, p. 474). Employees perform their best when they have the opportunity to express themselves with respect to the issues that influence their work. The term of employee empowerment refers to *the flow of authority from supervisors to subordinates, as well as, the shift of responsibility and decision making initiative from managers to employees* (Biemann, Kearney & Margraff, 2015, p.2).

Employee empowerment, further, enhances productivity, provides better customer satisfaction and builds employee loyalty. Additionally, it reduces employee turnover, stress at work, increasing employee job performance (Kruja, Ha, Drishiti, & Oelfke, 2016). Majorly, employees become responsible where they can address issues effectively by taking initiative without having to wait for the supervisors. Including employees in the decision making process as a type of empowerment during service context results in greater customer satisfaction and retention (Raub & Robert, 2010; Hug & Hill, 2004).

Employee empowerment encourages self-development, which is required in achieving various targets within the organization (Fernandez & Moldogaziev,

2013). In this regard, employees feel confident and ready to handle the challenges within the organization. According to Spreitzer (1996) feeling confident during solving customer-related problems gives employees resiliency while making decisions on behalf of customers. Particularly in the service industry, which has a high level of customer complexity, employees can take action freely and solve their problems immediately against customers' high demanded expectations (Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014). Therefore, empowerment reduces the management workload especially on the operational roles and responsibilities within the organization (Kruja *et al.*, 2016).

A particular source of employee empowerment, which has received significant attention in the organizational literature, is leaders' empowering behaviors, namely empowering leadership behaviors. This concept builds a stepping stone for the customer empowering behaviors in this study. Raub and Robert (2010) define empowering leadership as "a shift in the source of control from leader to the follower" and further states that an empowering leader's main role is "to lead others to lead themselves" (Raub & Robert, 2010, p. 1747). Empowering leadership behavior is the authorization of responsibility to the lowest organizational level by top managers (Ahearne, Methieu & Rapp, 2005). Furthermore, empowering leadership permits employees to take initiative during a decision-making process as relevant to work-related issues (Auh, *et al.*, 2014).

Customers usually convey valuable information to employees prior to how the service should be provided to them, and they may contribute to the service process by sharing their opinions with the service providers (Dong, *et al.*, 2015). This study defines the customer empowering behaviors as a "...customer action that make employees feel motivated, and able to make decisions on their behalf regarding how to achieve desired outcomes during the service encounters" (Dong, Chuang, Liao, Zhou & Campbell, 2015, p.1365).

According to Dong *et al.*, (2015), customer empowering behaviors are instrumental in fostering employee creativity through instigating employee promotion focus. Employee creativity would, in turn, create higher customer satisfaction (Dong *et al.*, 2015).

In line with this definition, customers who are involved in high levels of employee empowering behaviors are expected to help the employees to see the importance of their work for them, consult the employees on their service related decisions about the service outcome or allow the employee to provide service their way. The concept of customer empowering behaviors has received minor attention in literature except Dong *et al.* (2015) who associated this customer behavior to employee service creativity via fostering employee promotion focus. The conceptual model identifies customer empowering behaviors as a job resource, which, in line with JD-R framework, will increase service employee absorption that eventually affect customer service performance.

## Job Demand Resources Theory

The research aims to observe the effects of customer empowering behaviors on employees' customer service performance through the mediating role of employee absorption. In line with this objective, research uses the Job Demands-Resources Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) as a theoretical framework. According to Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke (2004), the term job demands can be defined as “*the psychological, physical, social or organizational characteristics of a job that require mental, cognitive ability, the physical ability of employees to complete the overall goal of the organization*” (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke 2004, p. 87). In marketing literature, common examples of job demands are stated as workload, cognitive ability, poor working environment, and emotional demands. Job demand aspects are also related to high work pressure and emotionally demanding interactions with clients or customers in the workplace (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). An employee who deals with high job demands such as high workload, high customer complexity, high mental and cognitive abilities may face a health impairment. Due to health impairment, an employee may experience anxiety and stress on the job that can affect the overall performance of the employees. The marketing literature further posits that job demands are associated with both physiological and psychological costs. Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2001) state that job demands have a negative effect on employee's adaptation and motivation within the work environment. In this sense, over-demanding work conditions, job-related stress, and undesirable physical environment at work have negative impacts on one's working process (Bakker *et al.*, 2007).

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2017), the term job resources are the factors that are used by the employee to complete the requirements of a job. The most common examples of the job resources that are mentioned in the extant literature include job autonomy, employee feedback, opportunities for the growth of the employee in an organization. Prior studies further posit that job resources are significant antecedents of employee work engagement (Mauno, Kinnunen & Ruokolainen, 2007). Besides any other factor that enhances the personal growth and learning in employees (Taştan, 2014), job resources may include factors like salary, job security, supervisor support, and positive physical environment (Nahrang *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, job resources also include interactive relations with colleagues, strong relationships with the supervisor and has a positive relationship with work engagement which is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Bakker, Hakkanen, Demerouti & Xanthopoulou, 2007, p. 274). Absorption which is the cognitive element of engagement can be defined as “*to be characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work*” (Bakker, Hakkanen, Demerouti & Xanthopoulou, 2007, p. 274). Additionally, work engagement has a great deal of organizational and individual consequences similar to job resources (Taştan, 2014). According to previous studies, it is identified that

job resources are critical in enhancing employee motivation levels and engagement towards their job and organization which would further increase their job satisfaction and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

### **The Premises of JD-R Theory**

JD-R posits that each work has its demands and challenges which may produce strain and stress. JD-R theory more particularly identifies two factors, namely job demands and job resources (Nahrang, Morgesson & Hoffman, 2010). Prior literature posits that while job demands refer to social and organizational aspects that cause physical or psychological costs in employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006), job resources refer to the aspects that motivate employees. To illustrate; helping employees to achieve their goals or personal growth, improved social relations with colleagues, and supervisor support reflect job resources aspects (Bakker, Hakkanen, Demerouti & Xanthopoulou, 2007). Nevertheless, job demands include work overload, long working hours, and inconvenient working environment causing which, in turn, hinder job performance (Bakker *et al.*, 2007). JD-R theory further states that it will be up to the job resources to weaken the adverse effects of job demands (Bakker *et al.*, 2006). More particularly, the presence of resources will reduce the negative effects created by job demands, in turn, affect job performance.

### **Conceptual Model**

#### **Customer Empowering Behaviors – Employee Absorption**

The extant literature has dominantly stated that empowering behaviors in general results in higher employee motivation by fulfilling the employees' need for control and mastery at work (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Dong *et al.*, 2015). According to Dong *et al.* (2015), deciding on behalf of a customer, need for control and mastery at work will develop employees' self-regulation which provides employees increased self-confidence and to be able to handle all the problematic issues in the workplace. Customer empowering behaviors let employees provide service in their way so that they take initiative when they are faced with a problem during the service process. As a result of this, employees' creativity and motivation will raise while they are working and they feel immersed in their job (Dong *et al.*, 2015). More particularly, empowering customer behaviors to require employees to make decisions and take actions without much intervention coming from the side of the customers (Dong *et al.*, 2015).

As a consequence of this, employees feel more engaged in their job and they feel more absorbed in their work (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Dong *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, it enables the employees to realize the importance of their contribution to the organization and create meaningfulness in their work. Therefore, an employee's motivation and willingness to work will increase and cause the employee to be carried away happily when he is working (Dong *et al.*, 2015).

The study argues that customer empowering behaviors might be a source of absorption in employees since they tend to participate in customers' decision-making process, as well as to create new ideas, actions or solutions while conducting their work. Therefore, as illustrated in the conceptual model, customer empowering behaviors will foster a sense of absorption for the employee at work.

H1: Customer empowering behaviors have a direct and positive effect on employee absorption.

### **Employee Absorption and Customer Service Performance**

Service employees who feel engaged and dedicated to their jobs display higher job performance such as feeling positive and are eager to work. The prior studies in marketing literature suggest that engagement has a great deal of customer service performance-related outcomes (Menguc *et al.*, 2017). Engaged employees feel more energetic, active, and have positive emotions as well as having a higher level of willingness towards the job that ends up displaying a better job performance, a better understanding of business context, decreased turnover, increased organizational commitment, and higher productivity (Taştan, 2014). Furthermore, engagement conceives decent energy and enthusiasm and engaged employees tend to be active learners, well-organized, careful, and hard-working in the organization (Menguc *et al.*, 2017). According to Basikin (2007) “*absorption which is a sub-dimension for engagement, refers to the state in which one is highly concentrated and happily engrossed in works so that he feels time passes quickly and it is difficult to detach from work*” (Basikin 2007, p. 5). Hence, highly absorbed employees feel energetic at work, they are willing and positive about the work they do and immersed in that work. As a result, absorbed employees willing to display more effort, desire to work make their job better, and feel happy while they are working (Taştan, 2014). Additionally, organizational outcomes of engagement include customer satisfaction, higher customer service performance, and feel engrossed in the organization (Karatepe, 2013).

H2: Employee absorption has a direct and positive effect on customer service performance.

### **Moderating Effect of Customer Complexity on Customer Empowering Behaviors and Employee Absorption Relationship**

This hypothesis is related to whether the extent of customer complexity in a hotel will affect the effect of customer empowering behaviors on employee absorption at the employee-level. This study claims that customer empowering behaviors will have less impact on employee absorption in a hotel when there is high customer complexity. Accordingly, as shown in the conceptual model Figure 1, the positive relationship between customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption will be weakened in hotels with a high level of customer complexity.

Under high customer complexity customer's needs and wants have become more diverse and they always demand far more from the service employees. Therefore, meeting customers' high demanded expectations require customized and individualized offerings which result in high workload, long and irregular working hours, and decreased motivation in the tourism industry (Taştan *et al.*, 2014; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014). As a result, employees have to display extra effort, take extra responsibility and present greater coordination between the customer and hotel with long working hours (Singh, Marinova, & Brown, 2012; Schmitz *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, during the service process, deciding on behalf of the customer may cause stress rather than trigger employee creativity and motivation. Therefore, these difficult situations may hinder employees' feel immersed and happy at work.

H3: Customer complexity negatively moderates the effect of customer empowering behaviors on employee absorption.

### **Moderating Effect of Customer Complexity on Employee Absorption and Customer Service Performance Relationship**

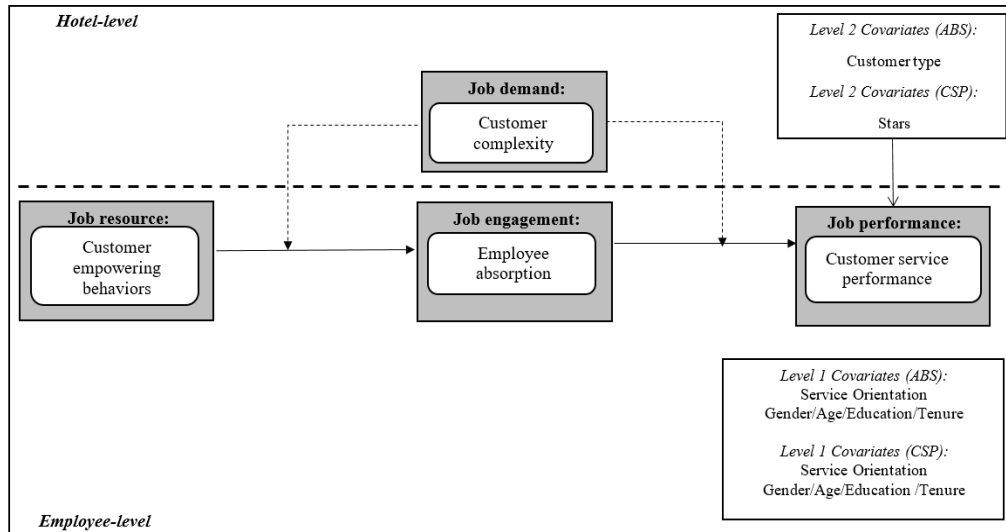
This study claims that customer complexity will have a weakening effect on the positive relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance. Under a high level of customer complexity in the hotel, service employees try to understand each customers' expectations better and have to take care of them more than every day's routine. Therefore, they will experience a variety of difficulties while displaying extra performance in order to offer individualized service. During providing unstandardized service to each customer, employees need to not only predict each customers' favorite service delivery but also take initiative for these customized offerings. Furthermore, complex customers' expectations may confuse employees' roles and duties at work, because sometimes they cannot understand what is expected exactly from them to serve in the hotel (Schmitz *et al.*, 2014; Singh, 1998). Consequently, these psychological and behavioral troubles may negatively influence customer service performance.

As indicated in the research model Figure 1, in a hotel, under high customer complexity working environment, even an employee who feels highly absorbed and immersed in his work, he will display lower customer service performance. This suggests that high customer complexity will have a weakening effect on the positive relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance.

H4: Customer complexity negatively moderates the effect of employee absorption on customer service performance.



**Figure 1.** Research model



### 3. Methodology

In line with the aforementioned situation in the Turkish tourism industry, this study investigates the effect of customer empowering behaviors on service employees' performance through the mediator role of employee absorption. In order to collect the data needed to test the hypotheses of the study, quantitative face to face surveys are conducted with frontline employees who work either at the reception desk and in guest relations in 4 and 5-star hotels in the South and South Western districts of Turkey. Before data collection, the questionnaire is sent to Istanbul Bilgi University's Ethics Board Committee for approval.

This article suggests that the effect of customer empowering behaviors on service employee performance at the employee-level will be through job engagement, which is conceptualized as employee absorption. Since the study aims to investigate whether the employee-level relationships between customer empowering behaviors–job engagement–customer service performance are contingent on different factors at the hotel-level (i.e., customer complexity) a minimum number of 30 hotels were included in the study. In line with the additional literature, the study reached to a sample size of at least 350 employees (Hair, Celsi, Bush & Ortniau, 2014).

The study claims that customer empowering behaviors have positive effects on customer service performance by creating employee absorption. In order to collect the data needed to test the hypotheses, quantitative face to face surveys are conducted with frontline employees who work either at the reception desk and in guest relations in 4 or 5 star hotels in the South and South Western districts of Turkey. 421 usable are received from the reception desk or in guest relation employees working in 37 units (hotels). The overall response rate was 67.9%.

Table 1 demonstrates that 45.6% of the participants are female and 54.4% are male. The age of the participants dominantly ranges between 25-31 (38.7%), followed by participants whose ages range between 18-24 (24.2%), 32-38 (24.20%), 39-45 (9.7%), and 46 and higher (2.4%). 62.5% of the participants are university graduates whereas 31.1% have graduated from high school. A small portion of the sample 4% reported that they completed a master's degree. 66.3% of the participants are single and the rest of the participants are married. In the study, while 310 participants work as a receptionist, 111 employees work in the guest relation department. On average, the participants mentioned that they are working in the tourism industry for approximately around 7 years (85.4 months), and at their current position for 3 years roughly (36.5 months).

**Table 1.** Sample Information and Demographic Variables

		N	%	Mean
<b>Gender</b>	Male	229	54.4	-
	Female	192	45.6	-
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	279	66.3	-
	Married	142	33.7	-
<b>Age Group</b>	18-24	105	24.9	-
	25-31	163	38.7	-
	32-38	102	24.2	-
	39-45	41	9.7	-
	46+	10	2.4	-
<b>Education Level</b>	Primary school	3	.7	-
	Middle school	7	1.7	-
	High school	131	31.1	-
	Undergraduate	263	62.5	-
	Postgraduate	17	4	-
<b>Position at the hotel</b>	Guest relations	111	26.4	-
	Receptionist	310	73.6	-
<b>Star of the hotel</b>	5 stars	376	89.3	-
	4 stars	45	10.7	-
<b>Tenure in the tourism industry (month)</b>	-	-	-	85.4
<b>Tenure at the current hotel (month)</b>	-	-	-	36.5

## 4. Findings

### Method of Analysis

In this study, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the data including confirmatory factor analysis. In order to test the hypotheses,

multilevel modelling was used. The study assumes that the views of the hotel employees, which relies on collecting the data would be highly embedded in and cannot be thought separately of the characteristics of the workplace that they take part of. The level of criterion variables that used in the model (i.e., employee absorption and customer service performance) would be highly affected from employee-level characteristics as much as the hotel-level characteristics. In fact, this assumption is tested: Table 5 demonstrates the results of the ANOVA test, conducted to see whether the criterion variables significantly differ from hotel to hotel. The findings show that both the employee absorption and customer service performance levels of the employees are significantly different between hotels. This provides evidence that the views of the employees provided in the questionnaire of this study are nested in the hotels they work for, and the independence of the observations from the workplace should not be expected. In order to use multilevel modeling for the hypothesis testing, HLM 7.0 was used (Raudenbusch, Bryk, Cheong Congdon, & du Toit, 2004).

### **Model Fit**

CFA (Confirmatory Factor Analysis) is a statistical method that evaluates the measurement model (Byrne, 2001). CFA confirms the relationship between latent and observed variables. For a good model fit, the scores of CFI and TLI need .90 or above, and the value of RMSEA requires lower than .09. Another statistical rate of a model is GFI which ranges between 0 and 1, is also mentioned to be adequate around .90 or above (Hair, Celsi, Bush & Ortniau, 2014). In light of this information, as Table 2 displays that the model indicates an acceptable fit.  $\chi^2$  (349) = 2,464,  $p < .000$ , GFI = .91, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .059)

**Table 2.** Model Fit

<b>Model Fit Summary</b>	
Model CMIN	
CMIN	349,855
P	.000
CMIN/DF	2,464
Model RMR, GFI	
GFI	,919
Baseline Comparisons	
CFI	,936
TLI	,92
Parsimony- Adjusted Measures	
RMSEA	,059

### **Reliability and Validity Tests**

Table 3 indicates that Cronbach alpha values of the model's constructs are customer empowering behaviors  $\alpha = .77$ , absorption  $\alpha = .83$ , customer complexity  $\alpha = .79$ , customer service performance  $\alpha = .84$ , and service orientation  $\alpha = .82$

respectively. Furthermore, when compared the value of the constructs to the minimum level of acceptance level for coefficient alpha which is .70 in the literature, it is clear to be seen that all of the constructs meet the requirements.

According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988) the average variance extracted score (AVE) of the model should be more than .50. As shown in Table 3 according to Anderson and Gerbing (1988) the value of all indicators in the model should be more than .40. All of the constructs match the requirement except the construct of customer empowering behaviors has the .41 AVE score. However, in light of this information, the model displays evidence for convergent validity.

Discriminant validity demonstrates a construct's unique capability to evaluate a particular phenomenon, that cannot be found by other constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, discriminant validity is reached when the AVE values for each of the two latent variables are bigger than their square intercorrelation values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, in line with the correlation values specified in Table 4, the AVE value of each construct in the model is higher than their square correlations with other latent factors. In other words, due to the model's significant discriminant validity scores, all items in the study's measurement model explains their measures in the best way (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

Overall, measurement models meet all the requirements for construct validity by providing adequate evidence for convergent and discriminant validity.

**Table 3.** Used Scales, Factor Loadings, Cronbach Alpha, Composite Reliability and AVE Scores

Constructs	Factor Loadings
<b>Employee – Level</b>	
<b>Customer Empowering Behaviors (Adapted from Dong et al., 2014; Ahearne et al., 2005)</b> ( $\alpha = .77$ ; CR = .77; AVE = .41)	
Our customers make decisions about the service that they receive from our hotel together with me	0.545
Our customers consult me on decisions about the service they receive from our hotel	0.711
Our customers believe that I can handle demanding tasks about their needs in our hotel	0.702
Our customers' express confidence in my ability to deliver service at a high level	0.654
Our customers allow me to provide service in my own way	0.565
<b>Absorption (Schaufeli &amp; Bakker, 2004)</b> ( $\alpha = .83$ ; CR = .84; AVE = .56)	
I feel happy when I am working intensely	0.701
I am immersed in my work	0.775
I get carried away when I am working	0.768
It is difficult to detach myself from my job	0.746

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**Customer Service Performance (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005)**

**( $\alpha = .84$ ; CR = .84; AVE = .64)**

I surprise customers with an excellent service	0.794
I do more than usual for customers	0.836
I deliver an excellent service quality that is difficult to find in other hotels	0.775

**Service Orientation**

**(Bettencourt, Gwinner & Meuter, 2001)**

**( $\alpha = .82$ ; CR = .82; AVE = .54)**

I enjoy helping customers	0.739
The best job I can imagine would involve assisting customers in making satisfactory decisions	0.599
I pride myself in providing courteous customer service	0.82
It is natural for me to be considerate of customers' needs	0.758

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**Hotel-Level**
**Customer Complexity (Menguc et al., 2017; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014)**

**( $\alpha = .79$ ; CR = .80; AVE = .58)**

Our customers' needs and wants are diverse	0.75
Our customers require customized services	0.88
Each of our customers wants to be treated as a unique entity	0.63

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**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.Customer Empowering Behaviors (level 1)													
2.Employee Absorption (level 1)	.226**												
3.Customer Complexity (level 2)	.194**	.202**											
4.Customer Service Performance (level 1)	.400**	.370**	.227**										
5.Male	.034	-.056	.048	.059									
6.Age	-.051	-.055	-.081	-.025	.105*								
7.Overall Work Experience (control)	-.022	-.011	-.065	.052	.140**	.780**							
8.Industry Experience (log) (control)	.017	-.033	-.009	.069	.096	.581**	.741**						
9.Hotel Experience	.008	-.005	.140**	.065	.029	.430**	.484**	.653**					
10.Education Level (control)	.109*	-.119*	-.180**	.081	-.128	.001	-.012	-.013	.019				
11.Service Orientation (control) (level1)	.375**	.390**	.317**	.491**	.046	-.006	.032	-.054	-.054	.152**			
12.Business Customers (control) (level 2)	.007	-.111*	-.479**	-.061	-.048	-.059	-.036	-.093	-.165**	.060	-.221**		
13.Stars Level (control) (level2)	-.186**	.044	.007	-.119*	-.070	-.037	-.007	-.043	-.042	.008	-.115*	.060	
Mean	3.61	3.41	4.44	3.96	.54	29.81	101.75	3.97	2.94	3.67	4.28	.14	1.84
Standard deviation	.82	.94	.32	.81	.50	6.95	75.06	1.23	1.28	.61	.72	.35	.37

Note: Employee-level n=421; hotel-level n=37; \* p<.05; \*\*p<.01 (two-tailed test).

**Table 5.** Mean Score Differences for Criterion Variables Among Hotels in the Study

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Absorption	<u>Between hotels</u>	57.267	36	1.591	1.942	.001
	<u>Within hotels</u>	314.620	384	.819		
	Total	371.88	420			
Customer Service Performance	<u>Between hotels</u>	53.973	36	1.499	2.593	.000
	<u>Within hotels</u>	222.058	384	.578		
	Total	276.036	420			

### Hypothesis tests

According to the study's results, H1 posits that customer empowering behaviors have a direct and positive effect on employee absorption. The study findings indicate that customer empowering behaviors relate significantly and positively to employee absorption ( $\gamma = .11, p < .05$ ). H2 posits that employee absorption has a direct and positive effect on customer service performance. The findings indicate that employee absorption relates significantly and positively to customer service performance ( $\gamma = .18, p < .05$ ). These results lend support for H1 and H2.

H3 posits that customer complexity negatively moderates the effect of customer empowering behaviors on employee absorption such that the relationship between customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption will be weaker when there is a high level of customer complexity. The findings do not report a statistically significant effect of customer complexity on the relationship between customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption ( $\gamma = .0264, p > .05$ ). Therefore, H3 is not supported.

H4 posits that customer complexity negatively moderates the effect of employee absorption on customer service performance such that the relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance is weaker when there is a high level of customer complexity. Findings do not report a statistically significant moderating effect of customer complexity on the relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance. ( $\gamma = .0521, p > .05$ ). Therefore, H4 is not supported.

### Mediation Analysis (Post hoc Test)

Study's post hoc test results are presented in order to demonstrate whether employee absorption acts as a mediator between customer empowering behaviors and customer service performance. To test the mediating role of employee absorption between customer empowering behaviors and customer service performance, Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step mediation analysis method is used. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analysis consists of a

three- step procedure. In the first step the mediating variable (i.e. employee absorption) should be regressed on the independent variable (i.e. customer empowering behaviors). In the second step, the dependent variable (i.e. customer service performance) should be regressed on the independent variable. In the third step, the dependent variable(s) should be regressed on both the dependent and mediating variables. For a full mediation, the independent variable (i.e. customer empowering behaviors) should have a significant effect on mediating variable (i.e. absorption) in step 1, and on dependent variable (i.e. customer service performance) in step 2. In the final step (step 3), the mediating variable (i.e. absorption) should markedly affect the dependent variable(s) and with the introduction of mediating variable, the effect of independent variable on dependent variable should now become non-significant.

If the effect of independent variable on dependent variable in the third step becomes weaker but remains significant, this would be a partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

**Table 6.** Results of the Mediation Analysis

Mediation		$\gamma$	$p$	$\beta$	Sig.
Step 1	Model 1	.107	.039	.032	s
	Customer empowering behaviors - employee absorption				
Step 2	Model 2	.201	.001	.056	s
	Customer empowering behaviors - customer service performance				
Step 3	Model 3	.174	.000	.057	s
	Employee absorption – customer service performance				
	Model 4	.183	.005	.061	s
	Customer empowering behaviors - employee absorption				

*Note:* Robust standard errors (S.E.) are reported. Deviance (df) for null models: Absorption=1138.52 (2)\* ; Customer service performance=1002.43 (2)\*

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed test for both hypothesized directional relationships and control variable

Table 6 presents the findings of the mediation analysis. The same control variables are used (employees' work experience, tenure in the tourism industry, tenure in the current hotel, hotel star rate, gender, age, customer types, education level, and service orientation) in the model. According to the findings of the

mediation analysis customer empowering behaviors relate in Step 1, positively and significantly to employee absorption ( $\gamma = .107, p < .05, \beta = .032$ ). In step 2, customer empowering behaviors relate positively and significantly to customer service performance ( $\gamma = .201, p < .05, \beta = .056$ ). In Step 3, employee absorption relates positively and significantly to customer service performance ( $\gamma = .174, p < .05, \beta = .057$ ). With the introduction of employee absorption as a mediator in the model, findings report that customer empowering behaviors is still related positively and significantly to customer service performance but a weaker effect ( $\gamma = .183, p < .05, \beta = .061$ ). Therefore, the effect of customer empowering behaviors on customer service performance is partially mediated by employee absorption.

## **5. Conclusions**

The findings of the study show that customer empowering behaviors have a significant direct effect on employee absorption. During the service context, involving customers' decision process, their beliefs about employees' ability to handle difficult tasks, expressing to employees' confidence about their talent to serve, and allowing the employees to provide service on their way make employees increase their absorption. In other words, toward customer empowering behaviors, employees feel motivated and happy, highly concentrated on their work, and they reveal a better performance in the hotel. Furthermore, it can be considered that time passes quickly during working in the hotel, they like involving customers' decision-making process and keeping in contact with customers when they feel empowerment behaviors from customers. According to this result, it can be considered that customer empowering behaviors increase employee absorption in the hospitality industry.

When the results are checked, it is clear that employee absorption has a direct and very significant effect on customer service performance. If employees feel motivated, happy, and work intensely, they perform better than they do as usual. In addition to these results, these two direct hypotheses are also affected by service orientation which as covariance is added in the model. When employees feel satisfied in their job, they like helping customers, they are proud of themselves to give a polite customer service and try to meet customer needs during the service process, their service performance increases in the hotel as well. Employee absorption directly and positively affects customer service performance.

The study also claimed that customer complexity negatively moderates the effect of customer empowering behaviors on employee absorption likewise the relationship between customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption will be weaker when there is a high level of customer complexity. However, when the results are checked of this hypothesis, customer complexity has not any impact on the interaction of customer empowering behaviors and customer complexity on employee absorption. This means that high demanding customers, increased expectations, a large number of customer communication, and diversification of customers' needs do not affect customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption relationship in the tourism industry. Even though the tourism industry



has increased customer complexity which has complex service content, required individualized and immediate solutions against the problems, the results of the study couldn't find any impact on customer empowering behaviors and employee absorption relationships.

The last finding of the study is related to the moderation of customer complexity on employee absorption and customer service performance relationship. The research advocated that the relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance is weaker when there is a high level of customer complexity. Additionally, developing customized solutions against service problems, trying to make one customer be felt like a unique entity, and setting a balance in large amounts of customers required to be able to handle stress during the service may cause to employees' over effort and spend long working hours in the hotel. Nevertheless, the results show customer complexity does not moderate the relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance. When employees feel motivated, they enjoy helping customers and find these high demanded expectations as part of their job in the service industry. Therefore, it can be concluded that customer complexity has not any effect on employee absorption and customer service performance in the hospitality industry.

### **Theoretical Implications and Contributions to Literature**

The confirmed relationships further show consistencies with the findings in extant literature. First, in line with the previous studies in marketing (Menguc, Auh, Yeniaras & Katsikeas, 2017; Menguc, Auh, Fisher & Haddad, 2013) have found that job engagement (i.e. employee absorption) influence positively employee's job performance, which was confirmed in the study. Additionally, the study of results also indicated that there is a positive relationship between employee absorption and customer service performance which is another confirmation on previous studies in the literature. In addition to the above consistencies, the mediating role of employee absorption between customer empowering behaviors and customer service performance introduces a previously unmentioned contribution in marketing literature.

Customer complexity, which the study conceptualizes as job demand, is a rather new concept in marketing literature, which did not receive much attention other than Schmitz and Ganesan (2014). While the study combines this concept with customer empowering behaviors, contrary to the study's expectations, findings indicate that there is no significant effect of hotel-level customer complexity on the employee-level relationships between customer empowering behaviors and customer service performance. The reason for customer complexity having no effect on the employee-level relationships could be due to the possibility that customer empowering behaviors increases the employee motivation and creativity (Dong et al., 2015) so much that having different customers with unstandardized demands would not create a burden on an employee that would hinder the employee absorption and performance.

### **Managerial (Practical) Implications**

Due to the service industry's inseparability feature, customer empowering behaviors can be a common phenomenon in the literature. Particularly in the tourism industry, employees and customers have to be at the same place while service is created, so frontline employees interact with customers during their stay in the hotel. Each customer wants to be delivered unique service and demand a smooth stay from their arrival until they check out. Getting consultancy about hospitality services is in the nature of the service industry. Customers ask about the hotel's services before they have decided to visit and generally trust employees' opinions. As a result, employees feel more comfortable during interaction with customers and more immersed in their work. Furthermore, empowered employees feel free and motivated to handle problematic issues and are capable of making significant decisions about their work (Dong et al., 2015). In case, employees do not hesitate to serve customers in their own way, they tend to develop stronger customer commitment in achieving positive service delivery in the hotel and they feel absorbed in their work.

In the service industry, highly absorbed employees feel more energetic, more active, and feel positive emotions about their jobs (Bakker et al., 2014). This may provide more productive and cheerful service delivery in the hotel. Service employees who feel immersed in their job are well organized and more creative, as a result of this, they are willing to serve unstandardized service to customers and feel a high level of organizational commitment (Taştan, 2014). In addition to this, highly absorbed employees feel that time passes quickly on duty and finds difficult to detach themselves from their work (Mauno et al., 2007). Service employees ignore everything else around them while they feel absorbed and naturally this commitment results in having long working hours in every type of service industry.

This study also provides that customer empowering behaviors are positively related to employees' job performance by encouraging employees' creativity which is a part of leadership empowering behaviors (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). While customer empowering behaviors are related to external influences (i.e. customers), empowerment, or leadership empowering behaviors are about internal marketing strategies. In order to enhance employees' productivity and performance, internal strategies need to be provided by managers. Managers should encourage employees to participate in the decision-making process by making meetings, planning open communications weekly, or attending forums together (Raub & Robert, 2010; Hill & Huq, 2004). Alongside sharing responsibility with employees, granting flexibility and latitude to employees help them build trust. As a result of this, employees think that they are important people for their current position (Hassi, 2018; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Managers also should provide feedback and training programs in order to improve employee's organizational commitment and creativity against service-related problems.

Finally, the results showed that customer empowering behaviors increase employee absorption, which, in turn, affects customer service performance

positively. Under highly competitive service industry, employees cannot detach themselves from their daily routine and they have to be dedicated to their work. Moreover, advanced technological devices such as smartphones, iPads, or laptops make employees to be involved in their business even while they are at home which is another reason for employee absorption. In banking, health, retail sectors, or online services, employees have to answer their e-mails or phone calls even they are off-duty. In the service industry managers can regulate working conditions which may increase employees' job performance and creativity. Supervisors, coworkers, and teammates have to interact and work in a harmony in different areas of the service industry. Physical conditions, long working hours, or work overload are also related to the organization's internal features that managers may regulate and control in the service industry. Managers should also listen to employees all kinds of needs and try to understand their expectations to improve better creativity and service performance (Dong et al., 2015).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The first limitation lies in the use of third party (i.e., hotel chain's frontline department managers and contact persons in each hotel) to distribute the questionnaires to the employees at the hotel. Even though, the surveys were transmitted to front line employees who work as guest relation employees and receptionist in a closed envelope and later have been collected from them in the same way, employees could have felt psychological pressure and insecurity about returning their responses throughout their managers in the hotel (i.e., contact persons and frontline department manager). This pressure and insecurity may influence employees' answers to the survey since they think that their managers are likely see their answers. To be able to solve this problem, future studies could annihilate the third parties and contact the service employees directly.

Second limitation comes from the generalizability of the findings to other context and regions. Put differently, the hypothesized relationships were examined by collecting data from employees who work in different branches of Turkish hotels. Furthermore, this study was conducted in hotels with frontline employees who work either at the reception desk or in guest relations in 4 or 5 star hotels in the South and South Western districts of Turkey (i.e. hotels located at the coast side of Turkey). For future studies, employees in business hotels could be observed, which may conceive different results.

The final limitation is related to cross cultural differences among countries. If customer empowering behaviors concept is applied in any Western country, the study's results may change. According to Hofstede (1993) due to decentralization of low power distance cultures (most of western countries and USA), employees expect to be consulted about all types of decision making process in the organization and they can explain their opinions clearly (Eylon & Au, 1999). However, in high distance cultures (most Eastern countries, Japan etc.) it has quite low possibility that an employee can express his opinion to the manager. Because

(s)he afraid of any disagreement with his supervisor and thinks that this conflict may affect his work in the organization (Benlier & Yıldırım, 2017). In these premises, the study may display differences according to cross cultural varieties, therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other cultures.

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