THE EMPOWERMENT OF HOTEL EMPLOYEES AS A MEANS OF ACHIEVING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the role of hotel employees' empowerment in achieving a competitive advantage during crises. The literature review and analysis of the research hypotheses support the importance of human resources empowerment for hotels to a) effectively manage the impact of successive crises (the 2009-2018 economic recession in Greece and the Covid-19 pandemic) and b) gain a competitive advantage over their competitors.
Methodology/Design/Approach – Human resources executives and general managers of five-, four- and three-star hotels in Greece completed two hundred and twenty-three questionnaires. The methods of Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis were followed for the data analysis.
Findings – The paper's results confirm the connection of human resources empowerment with the enhancement of work performance, its contribution to reducing the negative impact of crises and improving the competitiveness of hotels.
Originality of the research – The scientific contribution of this paper can be found in the synthesis of theories from the fields of hospitality management, economics, and human resources management, which, combined with field research findings, created original data on the empowerment of hospitality human resources. On a practical level, this paper showcases methods for implementing the appropriate human resources empowerment strategy on the part of hotel managers in adverse conditions.
Keywords human resources management, employee motivation, crises, employee performance, competitive advantage, employee empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

The cumulative effects of the consecutive economic, migration and health (Covid-19) crises (Kakarougkas et al., 2023; Matanzima & Nhiwatiwa, 2022; Ivanov & Stavrinoudis, 2018), the rapid technological progress in robotics and Artificial Intelligence (Ozdemir et al., 2023; Pencarelli, 2020), together with global geopolitical events such as the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East (Kucher et al., 2023; Plzáková & Smeral, 2022), have led to a new socioeconomic landscape. To address issues such as rising operating costs, high employee turnover and evolving labour relations due to crises, hotel businesses (Balli et al., 2022; Stavrinoudis et al., 2022) should adopt human resource (HR) empowerment strategies to improve their performance and secure a competitive advantage. This paper aims to investigate the role of empowerment strategies in the performance of hotels' HR when dealing with the effects of socioeconomic and health crises and their contribution to achieving competitive advantage.

To achieve this goal, a literature review was initially carried out, in which the concept of HR empowerment was analysed and its connection with the smooth operation of hotels during crises was explored. A field study was then conducted using a prototype questionnaire from October 1, 2020, to January 31, 2021, in three, four, and five-star hotels in all administrative regions of Greece. The data collected were processed using Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis and applying Structural Equation Models (SEM). This led to valuable and interesting conclusions regarding the empowerment of hotels' HR during crises with significant scientific and practical contributions. Scientifically, this research provides holistic conclusions regarding the empowerment of hotels' HR during crises, thus filling a significant gap, since research to date in this field has focused in a fragmented manner on various areas such as the connection of empowerment with: HR performance (Widodo et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2021), dealing with the negative consequences of crises (Hanaysha, 2016; Kruja et al., 2016) and the acquisition of competitive advantage for hotels (Al-Refaei et al. 2023; Sulistyo, 2016). Furthermore, scientifically, this research also led to the creation and validation of a prototype research tool in the form of a questionnaire that researchers can use in the future. On a practical level, hotel executives can benefit from the findings and conclusions presented in this paper by gaining an in-depth understanding of employee empowerment. This knowledge can help them achieve a competitive advantage for their business by implementing effective HR empowerment strategies in times of crisis.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first scientific reference to HR empowerment was made through the ideas of Mary Parker Follett (Martins & Martins, 2022), who proposed the increase of power based on solidarity and mutual support (Magasi, 2021; Mathie et al., 2017; Yang & Choi, 2009). The scientific interest in the empowerment of HR started in the early 1990s and peaked in the following years with several publications of scientific papers concerning different categories of companies whose employees do not share common characteristics in terms of age, number and skills (Stavrinoudis & Psimoulis, 2021). According to Al-Sabi et al. (2023), HR empowerment refers to the supervisor's behaviour that empowers employees, but also, to the psychological state of employees resulting from the application of this empowerment (Suominen et al., 2005) differentiates it to three main categories: a) Verbal Empowerment, b) Employee Behaviour Empowerment, i.e. the ability to work together to solve problems, and c) Results Empowerment, which includes finding the elements that create problems and their corresponding resolution.

In recent years, HR empowerment practices have been extensively studied by Human Resources Management (HRM) experts (Yin et al., 2019), while many researchers such as Lin et al. (2020), Hanaysha and Tahir (2016), Ruiz-Palomo et al. (2020) and Stavrinoudis and Psimoulis (2021) point out the need to apply them to HR. The psychological empowerment of the employees is enhanced by the methods of HRM, as through them, innovative companies can reduce their turnover and increase their commitment (Ali et al., 2022; Bhatnagar, 2012). Empowerment supports both HR and the business itself because it results in the improvement of working conditions (Guchait et al., 2012; Marin-Garcia & Bonavia, 2021), the reduction of stress (Choi et al., 2016), the enhancement of self-development (Peng et al., 2022; Namasivayam et al., 2014), employee confidence (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019b), the improvement of customer service (Al-Sabi et al., 2023) and the enhancement of business productivity (Alshemmari, 2023). Huertas-Valdivia et al. (2019a) point out that businesses, through HR empowerment, convey value to employees, while service businesses empower HR to gain more power to use their skills in dealing with customers, thus enhancing their position (AlKahtani et al., 2021).

Research on HR empowerment in the hospitality industry was primarily initiated in the mid-1990s by Lashley (1995) and Anastassova and Purcell (1995). Today, HR empowerment is an important field of research, with most scientific papers published after 2011 and a dynamic publication rate increasing dynamically (Stavrinoudis et al., 2022). The empowerment of hotel employees is essential because it leads to their satisfaction and commitment, reduced mobility, service quality, and high profits for the company (Chiang & Chen, 2021). In the hospitality industry, customer satisfaction depends heavily on the service quality; therefore, employees are empowered to take initiatives and offer immediate solutions by improving the service experience (AlKahtani et al., 2021; Pelit et al., 2011). Quratulain et al. (2021) add that the establishment of an HR empowerment system in hotels is necessary, while Stavrinoudis and Simos (2016) point out the influence of empowerment on hotel HR satisfaction revealing that employees feel that their role is essential, their skills influential and that they have more autonomy. Finally, the connection between HR empowerment and employee satisfaction is also supported by Al-Refaei et al. (2023)) who concluded that empowerment contributes to improved performance as HR resolves cases and crises to effectively respond to customer needs.

During economic crises, companies try to reduce their costs by pushing HRM departments to prove the efficiency of their methods, their actual benefit for HR, and that they do not cause an additional financial burden (Iwu & Benedict, 2013). Peters et al. (2022) adds that while reducing HR in such periods is expected to limit costs, the economic recession contributes to the interruption of the psychological empowerment of employees, possibly leading to their intense mobility and resulting in significantly reduced chances for innovation on the part of the companies (Ali et al., 2022; Bhatnagar, 2012). In the same context, Sulistyo (2016) states that the empowerment of HR contributes to the achievement of business innovation, while, through its participation in decision-making processes, organisations will gain competitive advantage in production procedures.

In the hospitality industry, if hotel management has no interest in the well-being of employees, then the employees' loyalty will decrease (Kravariti et al., 2022). HR empowerment is an appropriate method that will strengthen the commitment of HR to face future challenges (Hanaysha, 2016). Therefore, hotels whose viability and success rely heavily on customer service must place particular emphasis on the empowerment and emotional health of HR to gain a competitive advantage (Huertas-Valdivia et al., 2019a), as the skills of the employees are, essentially, the factors that regulate the quality of the services provided (AlKahtani et al., 2021; Pelit et al., 2011). In the same context, Caruajulca & Khalilzadeh (2024) agree with this assumption by pointing out that the empowerment of hotels' HR will improve service quality so that customers' needs are met immediately.

Following the financial crisis, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 directly impacted the hospitality industry (Psimoulis et al., 2023), with many hotels shutting down or remaining open with a minimum number of employees and guests. This resulted in significant changes in the way of employment and the daily life of employees (Högberg, 2021). As it is recommended that the needs of employees must be recognised by hotel management (Stergiou & Farmaki, 2021), it was necessary to introduce measures to limit the transmission of coronavirus in order to increase the willingness of HR to be employed during the pandemic. Working conditions and outcomes after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic are partially unexplored due to their uniqueness and the novelty of this phenomenon (Tagliaro & Migliore, 2022). However, at an organisational level, it was deemed necessary for hotels to adapt to the current conditions (Kakarougkas & Stavrinoudis, 2022), in which the empowerment of HR could emerge as a means of dealing with the effects of the pandemic on working conditions and of achieving a competitive advantage for hotels.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Identifying research gaps and research questions formulation

The empowerment of HR contributes to their commitment to the company and the effectiveness of their operation (Ma et al., 2021). HR empowerment is realised through sharing knowledge and improving intellectual capacity and autonomy in the decision-making process (Debyla & Putra, 2021) while also requiring a long-term plan that will promote participation, trust, and the recognition of the importance of the people employed in the hotel (Stavrinoudis & Simos, 2016). In addition, the empowerment of HR is correlated to the development of innovation to achieve a competitive advantage in the business (Ngo, 2023). Rani et al. (2021) argue that HR empowerment improves job performance, while Widodo et al. (2023) consider the psychological approach to empowerment to be only related to employees' perception of self-determination without referring to the organisational approach, something which is equally important based on the literature review. Furthermore, AlKahtani et al. (2021), Amoako et al. (2023) and Pelit et al. (2011) measure job satisfaction on par with HR empowerment. However, the role of empowerment in employee performance needs to be tested comprehensively during crises. Based on the above, the research's first question (Q1) can be formulated as follows: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of employees' performance?"

According to the literature review, a company needs to support HR during economic or health crises to ensure its efficient operation. Ali et al. (2022), Hanaysha (2016) and Bhatnagar (2012) focus on employee engagement, which declines during economic downturns, while Kruja et al. (2016) point out that organisations need to create the right conditions that will promote employees' ability to act through empowerment, thus emphasising its relationship with the work environment. Based on previous research, it emerges that the role of HR empowerment in dealing with the effects of health and economic crises on hotels has not been sufficiently investigated to date, which gives rise to the second question (Q2) of this research: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of hotel business performance?" which examines the contribution of HR empowerment in dealing with the consequences of crises on hotels.

The third research question addresses the possibility of gaining a competitive advantage through HR empowerment. The research of Stor (2021), Waseel et al. (2025), and Sulistyo (2016) examine the role of HR empowerment in company performance. Al-Refaei et al. (2023) also highlight a positive relationship between hotel employee empowerment and service quality. However, none of the aforementioned research has been carried out in the hospitality industry under crises conditions, so the role of HR empowerment in acquiring the competitive advantage of hotels over their competitors has not been thoroughly examined. The results that will be obtained through the analysis of the third research question (Q3): "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the achievement of a competitive advantage of hotels?" are significant since they contribute to the answer of the main research question of the paper regarding the achievement of competitive advantage on the part of hotels due to the empowerment of HR.

2.2 Participants and Sample Design

The survey started on October 1, 2020, and ended on January 31, 2021. It involved HR Managers or General Managers of three, four, and five-star hotels, comprising 150 rooms or more, from all the administrative regions of Greece. The researchers did not address hotels of lower categories as it was assumed that the specific companies were not familiar with the concept of HR empowerment and, in general, with HRM issues due to the small number of employees they employed and the absence of sufficient organisational structures and administrative procedures (Maroudas et al., 2013). The survey was carried out during the curfew due to the COVID-19 pandemic by emailing each participant, including an online questionnaire created with Google Forms. During the survey, the researchers, based on the number of completed questionnaires they received, sent reminders by e-mail to executives of companies and regions that showed reduced or minimal participation to achieve the stratified proportionality of the sample. Therefore, the sample of the empirical research represents the total population of the country's hotel potential and can extract data and elements that illustrate how HR empowerment is perceived and implemented in the Greek hospitality industry. During the survey period, the number of five-, four-, and three-star hotels with more than 150 rooms in Greece was 484, according to the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels. Based on this, a sample of 215 fully completed questionnaires defines a confidence level of 95%, with a marginal error of 5% and a response distribution of 50%, which is satisfactory (Lohr, 2019; Levy & Leme-show, 2013). Finally, 223 valid questionnaires were collected, constituting the research sample exceeding the minimum satisfactory limit. In addition, it satisfies the quota of 200 responses, which is deemed necessary for an analysis with SEM (Weston & Gore, 2006). The number of responses was considered sufficient and satisfactory given the difficult conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry and the notable circumstances under which the survey was conducted.

2.3 Research Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire comprised twenty-five (25) closed-ended questions using a Likert scale from 1: Strongly Disagree to 5: Strongly Agree, thereby measuring respondents' opinions and meeting the empirical research needs for data analysis with SEM. The empirical analysis chosen is quantitative, the main objective of which is to find the causes for changes in social phenomena through numerical analysis and objective measurement, as well as to verify a research question relying on numerical facts by gathering data from a sample of the population and based on these, to carry out analyses with scientific accuracy (Ghanad, 2023). The seventy-nine questions were divided into eight groups, while an additional six related to the demographics of the respondents were added. The specific groups of questions do not follow the order of the three research questions but the basic concepts: a) Human Resources Management, b) Human Motivation, c) Crises, d) Competitive Advantage of the Hotel, and e) Empowerment of HR.

The processing of the data for the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) of the three research questions was carried out through the statistical program SPSS - version 25, while the analysis of the SEM was done using the programming language "R" (R Statistics Software) – version 4.0.3. In detail, regarding the statistical methods used to check the reliability of the Likert Scales research tools, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency was used. At the same time, the EFA was applied using the Varimax rotation, and values above 0.7 were considered acceptable (Cortina, 1993). To test the appropriateness of the structural equation model, the Chi-square test (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardised root mean residual (SRMR) were employed.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Research results for the first research question

The EFA of the first research question (Q1) was carried out through Principal Components Analysis. All statements had an MSA above 0.7, their loading was above the value of 0.4, and the associations were not low. Bartlett's test of sphericity rejected the hypothesis that the data correlations are zero, and the resulting CMO value was 0.869, indicating that factor analysis can be applied. The number of factors to be extracted was decided to be two since, up to one factor, the eigenvalues were greater than one (>1). In detail, the optimal two-factor model explained 61.14% of the variance. The two factors that emerged after rotation were:

- The flexibility and autonomy of the HR of the hotels (HR empowerment, flexibility, initiatives). This factor had an eigenvalue of 3.082, explained 34.24% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a = 0.849.
- The trust of the hotel's management towards the employees and the creation of a climate of cooperation within the organisation (Trust, cooperation). This factor had an eigenvalue of 2.421, explained 26.90% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a = 0.744.

In the CFA of the first research question, in terms of model fit indices, the p-value of the χ^2 test was found to be less than 5% (not acceptable), the CFI was equal to 0.935 (marginally acceptable), the TLI was equal to 0.909 (acceptable), the RMSEA equal to 0.093 (not acceptable) and the SRMR equal to 0.048 (acceptable). Alavi et al. (2020) emphasise that the χ^2 fit index is a) sensitive to sample size (larger sample sizes decrease the p-value), meaning that chi-square leads to a preference for smaller samples. and b) non-parsimonious, meaning that the model fit improves as the model size increases (increasing the model size may lead to unnecessary model complexity). Therefore, other fit indices should also be assessed. In the same context regarding the RMSEA index, Kenny et al. (2015) argue that it is strongly influenced by sample size and Degrees of Freedom (df), thus the model fit should additionally be assessed based on the CFI, TLI, and SRMR indices. Consequently, although the χ^2 and RMSEA indices are not acceptable, the model is generally quite suitable because the other criteria show acceptable values. All model parameters and the co-variance of the factor "HR Empowerment, Flexibility, Initiatives" with the factor "Trust, Cooperation" are statistically significant. Therefore, through the results, the first research question, Q1: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of their performance?" is answered as it is found that the empowerment of employees, ultimately, has a vital role in improving their performance and in creating a working environment within hotels where such methods are applied in an organised way.

Table 1: **Results of EFA and CFA of the first research question**

Results of EFA			**Results of CFA**				
In times of crisis, the performance of hotel employees is enhanced when human resources management supports:			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Std.
Factor 1: HR flexibility and initiatives							
Active participation of employees in problem-solving (I1.1)	.796	.163	0.563	0.047	11.890	<.001	0.727
Flexibility at work (I1.2)	.760	.152	0.531	0.052	10.247	<.001	0.649
Employees autonomy (I1.3)	.753	.187	0.447	0.041	10.786	<.001	0.675
Employees' initiatives (I1.4)	.695	.375	0.568	0.044	12.879	<.001	0.770
Strengthening of the Human Resources department (I1.5)	.600	.395	0.488	0.047	10.468	<.001	0.660
Assumption of responsibilities (I1.6)	.565	.488	0.476	0.042	11.303	<.001	0.700
Factor 2: Trust, cooperation							
Development of trust between employees and management (I1.7)	.226	.790	0.480	0.042	11.332	<.001	0.739
Assignment of specific roles to employees (I1.8)	.213	.776	0.474	0.046	10.282	<.001	0.682
Creation of a collaborative environment (I1.9)	.208	.758	0.443	0.042	10.433	<.001	0.690
Eigenvalues	3.082	2.421	Chi-square	76.093	RMSEA [95%CI]		0.093 [0.069, 0.118]
% Variance	34.24	26.90	df	26	SRMR	0.048	
Cronbach's alpha	.849	.744	p	<0.001	AIC	3625.912	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.869		CFI	0.935	BIC	3690.649	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	784.421, p-value<.001		TLI	0.909	SSA-BIC	3630.435	

Figure 1: **The structural equation model of the first research question**

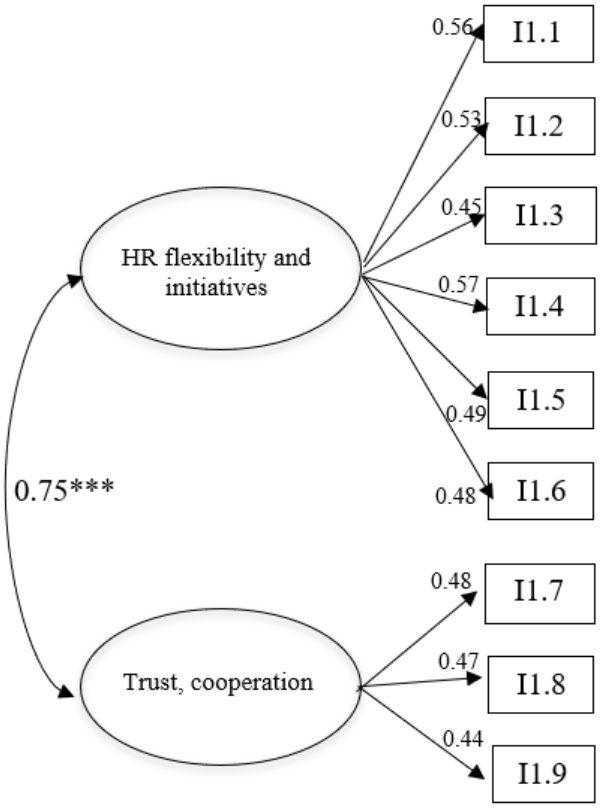


Figure 1 shows that the enhancement of HR performance in times of crisis in hotels is positively correlated with HR empowerment policies that promote HR flexibility and initiatives, on one hand, and trust and cooperation among employees, on the other. Specifically, it was found that HR flexibility and initiative derive from policies that primarily (according to the Factor Loadings FL) support employee initiatives (I1.4, FL: 0.57), involve employees in resolving issues (I1.1, FL: 0.56), and promote workplace flexibility (I1.2, FL: 0.53). Secondarily, enhance the HR department (I1.5, FL: 0.49), encourage HR to assume responsibilities (I1.6, FL: 0.48), and foster employee independence (I1.3, FL: 0.45). Trust and cooperation rely on policies that promote the fostering of trust between first-line employees and leadership (I1.7, FL: 0.48), the allocation of specific responsibilities for team members (I1.8, FL: 0.47), and the creation of a cooperative atmosphere (I1.9, FL: 0.44).

3.2 Research results for the second research question

Regarding the EFA of the second research question (Q2), all statements had an MSA above 0.7, their loading was above the value of 0.4, and the associations were not low. Bartlett's test of sphericity rejected the hypothesis that the data correlations were zero, and the resulting KMO value was 0.866, indicating that the factor analysis can be applied. The number of factors to be extracted was decided to be two since, up to one factor, the eigenvalues were greater than one (>1). In detail, the optimal two-factor model explained 65.33% of the variance. The two factors that emerged after rotation were:

- The creation of a good working environment by the management within the hotel (Good working environment). This factor had an eigenvalue of 2.265, explained 37.74% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a=0.742.
- The relationship between the hotel's management and HR (Management-employee relationship). This factor had an eigenvalue of 1.655, explained 27.59% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a=0.714

Table 2: **Results of EFA and CFA of the second research question**
8651

Results of EFA			**Results of CFA**				
In times of crisis, the performance of hotel businesses is enhanced when human resources management supports:	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Std.		
Factor 1: Good working environment							
Strengthening trust between employees and management (I2.1)	.794	.249	0.494	0.041	11.996	<.001	0.761
Creating a collaborative environment (I2.2)	.749	.248	0.445	0.042	10.699	<.001	0.694
Training and development of employees' skills (I2.3)	.746	.196	0.381	0.045	8.566	<.001	0.652
Factor 2: Management – employees relationships							
Recognising the work of employees with rewards (I2.4)	.129	.898	0.433	0.044	9.901	<.001	0.582
Creating strong bonds between employees and management (I2.5)	.508	.598	0.505	0.043	11.598	<.001	0.747
Offering stable jobs: commitment of the company towards employees (I2.6)	.492	.574	0.493	0.046	10.752	<.001	0.701
Eigenvalues	2.265	1.655	Chi-square	5.163	RMSEA [95%CI]		0.000 [0.000, 0.057]
% Variance	37.74	27.59	df	8	SRMR	0.018	
Cronbach's alpha	.742	.714	p	0.740	AIC	2318.321	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.866		CFI	1.000	BIC	2362.614	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	408.724, p-value<.001		TLI	1.013	SSA-BIC	2321.416	

For the CFA of the second research question, in terms of model fit indices, the p-value of the χ^2 test was found greater than 5% (acceptable), the CFI was equal to 1.000 (acceptable), the TLI was equal to 1.013 (acceptable), the RMSEA was equal to 0.000 (acceptable) and the SRMR equal to 0.018 (acceptable). All parameters of the model are statistically significant, as well as the co-variance of the "Good working environment" factor with the "Management-Employee Relationship" factor. According to all the data presented, the second research question, Q2: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of hotels' performance?" can be answered as it confirms that the magnitude of the impact of the economic recession on the hotels can be significantly reduced if the implementation of methods for HR empowerment is promoted, contributing to the improvement of their performance.

Figure 2: **The structural equation model of the second research question**

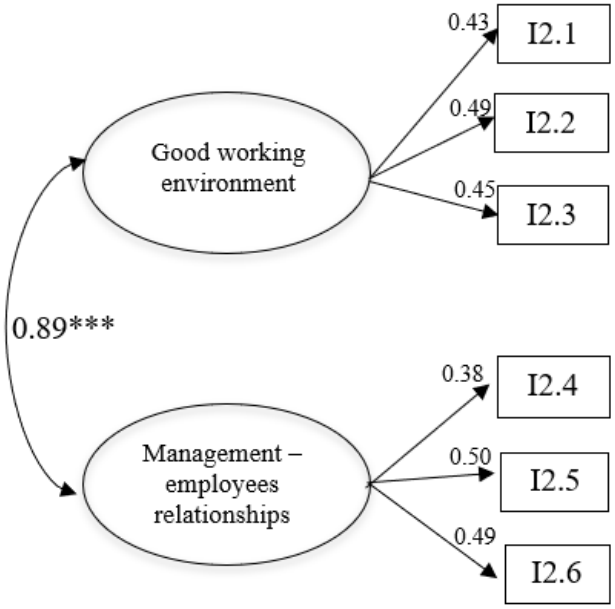


Figure 2 indicates that the enhancement of hotel performance during times of crisis is positively correlated with HR empowerment policies that promote a healthy working environment, on one hand, and effective relationships between management and employees, on the other. Specifically, it was found that the promotion of a healthy working environment stems from policies that enable the creation of a collaborative atmosphere (I2.2, FL: 0.49), the training and development of employees' skills (I2.3, FL: 0.45), and the strengthening of trust between employees and management (I2.1, FL: 0.43). The effective relationships between management and employees are grounded in policies that encourage the formation of strong bonds between employees and management (I2.5, FL: 0.50), the provision of stable jobs through the company's commitment to employees (I2.6, FL: 0.49), and the recognition of employees' contributions through rewards (I2.4, FL: 0.38).

3.3 Research results for the third research question

In the EFA of the third research question (Q3) through Principal Component Analysis, it is observed that all the statements had an MSA above 0.7, their loading was above the value of 0.4, and the associations were not low. Also, Bartlett's test of sphericity rejected the hypothesis that the data correlations were zero. The resulting CMO value was 0.903, indicating that factor analysis can be applied. The number of factors it was decided to be extracted was two because up to one factor, the eigenvalues were greater than one (>1). The optimal two-factor model explained 60.07% of the variance. The two factors that emerged after rotation were:

- The management role of the hotel (Active role of management). This factor had an eigenvalue of 3.090, explained 30.90% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a=0.843.
- Strengthening the role of HR in the hotel (Active role of the employee). This factor had an eigenvalue of 2.917, explained 29.17% of the variance, and its reliability index was equal to a=0.804.

Table 3: **Results of EFA and CFA of the third research question**

Results of EFA			**Results of CFA**				
In times of crisis, the achievement of hotels' competitive advantage is enhanced when human resource management supports:			Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Std.
Factor 1: Active role of the hotel's management							
Promoting open communication between employees and management (I3.1)	.772	.172	0.427	0.042	10.139	<.001	0.643
Creating a collaborative environment (I3.2)	.738	.160	0.391	0.041	9.492	<.001	0.610
Training and development of employees' skills (I3.3)	.717	.298	0.472	0.041	11.563	<.001	0.710
Development of cooperation between employees and management to exchange information (I3.4)	.698	.317	0.500	0.043	11.637	<.001	0.714
Harmonisation of employee and hotel goals (I3.5)	.530	.535	0.542	0.045	12.038	<.001	0.732
Creating a common vision of employees and the hotel (I3.6)	.524	.507	0.485	0.042	11.532	<.001	0.709
Factor 2: Active role of the employees							
Promoting the ability of employees to make more decisions (I3.7)	.191	.807	0.535	0.045	11.915	<.001	0.735
Promoting the active participation of employees in problem solving (I3.8)	.209	.801	0.578	0.048	12.150	<.001	0.746
Promoting work flexibility (I3.9)	.251	.735	0.557	0.052	10.778	<.001	0.681
Encouraging taking on more responsibilities (I3.10)	.499	.544	0.477	0.043	11.163	<.001	0.700
Eigenvalues	3.090	2.917	Chi-square	81.330	RMSEA [95%CI]		0.079 [0.057, 0.101]
% Variance	30.90	29.17	df	34	SRMR	0.048	
Cronbach's alpha	.843	.804	p	<0.001	AIC	3961.892	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.903		CFI	0.948	BIC	4033.443	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	926.057, p-value<.001		TLI	0.931	SSA-BIC	3966.891	

For the CFA of the third research question, in terms of model fit indices, the p-value of the χ^2 test was found to be less than 5% (not acceptable), the CFI was equal to 0.948 (acceptable), the TLI was equal to 0.931 (acceptable), the RMSEA was equal to 0.079 (not acceptable) and the SRMR equal to 0.048 (acceptable). Although the χ^2 and RMSEA indices are not acceptable, because the other criteria show acceptable values, it was decided that the model can be used (Alavi et al., 2020; Kenny et al., 2015). All parameters of the model are statistically significant, as well as the co-variance of the factor "Active Role of the hotel's management" with the factor "Active Role of the Employee". Based on data analysis, the third research question, Q3: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the achievement of a competitive advantage of hotels?" can be answered. It has been found that the methods of strengthening HR contribute to the competitiveness of hotels, as both management and the strengthening of the role of the employees within hotels can be the appropriate means for obtaining a competitive advantage.

Figure 3: **The structural equation model of the third research question**

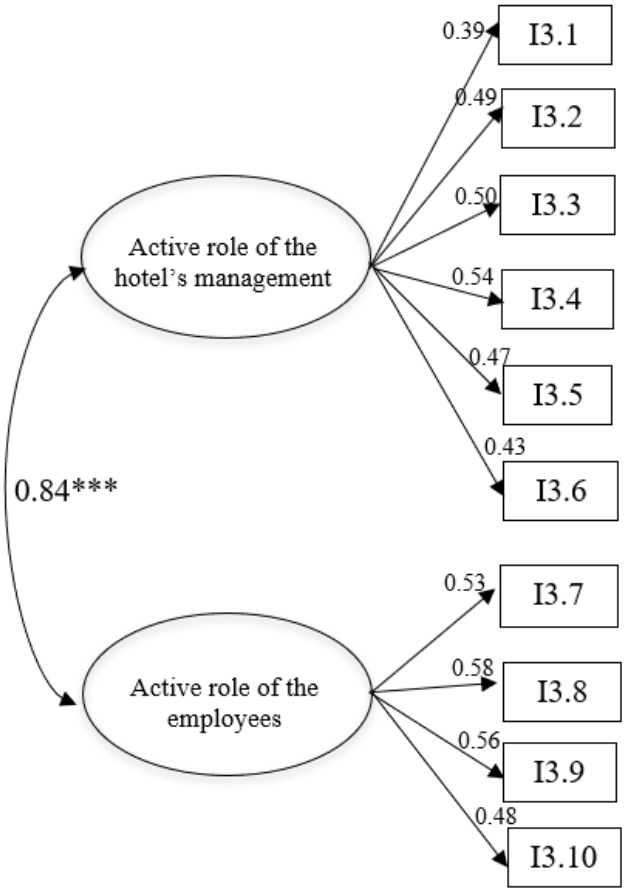


Figure 3 indicates that the achievement of a competitive advantage of hotels during times of crisis is positively correlated with HR empowerment policies that promote the active role of the hotel's management on one hand, and the active role of the employees on the other. Specifically, it was found that the active role of the hotel's management derives from policies that primarily (according to the FL) support the development of cooperation between employees and management to exchange information (I3.4, FL: 0.54) and the improvement of employees' skills through training and development (I3.3, FL: 0.50). Second, foster a collaborative environment (I3.2, FL: 0.49), align employees and hotel goals (I3.5, FL: 0.47), and develop a shared vision for employees and the hotel (I3.6, FL: 0.43). Third, encourage open communication between employees and management (I3.1, FL: 0.39). The active role of the employees is supported primarily by policies that promote the active participation of employees in problem solving (I3.8, FL: 0.58), work flexibility (I3.9, FL: 0.56) and the ability of employees to make more decisions regarding their work (I3.7, FL: 0.53) and secondly by policies that encourage the assumption of more responsibilities (I3.10, FL: 0.48).

CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of the survey for the first research question Q1: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of their performance?", hotel employees aspire to work collaboratively, fostering an environment where mutual support and assistance are the norm. They believe that teamwork enhances their efficiency and job satisfaction, leading to a more harmonious workplace. At the same time, executives demonstrate confidence in their staff's skills and abilities, recognizing their expertise and encouraging autonomy. This dual commitment to collaboration and trust creates a culture of empowerment, where employees feel valued and inspired to contribute to the hotel's success. The results of the research on this specific question are in accordance with that of Rani et al.(2021), who emphasise that empowerment improves the performance of HR, as well as with that of Widodo et al. (2023), who state that the psychological empowerment of hotel employees positively affects their performance. Additionally, it confirms the findings of AlKahtani et al. (2021), Amoako et. (2023) and Pelit et al. (2011), who point out that the empowerment of HR is linked to job satisfaction. Based on the analysis presented, it is concluded that the empowerment of the hotel's HR has a significantly positive impact on its overall performance. By empowering employees, management can foster a work environment that encourages initiative, creativity, and job satisfaction, ultimately leading to enhanced service quality and operational efficiency. Therefore, the management of hotels, should consider all the factors that govern their operation and organisation, to enhance the performance of employees through the implementation of HR empowerment policies.

The economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic struck a blow to the performance of hotels, and they also caused insecurity in HR. Hence, their commitment to the business and developing good relationships with the management was a primary necessity. The research data of the second question, Q2: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the enhancement of hotel business performance?" coincide with those of Ali et al. (2022), Hanaysha (2016) and Bhatnagar (2012), who focus on work engagement and commitment which are critical issues in times of economic and health crises. The former posits that empowering HR professionals leads to a significant increase in organisational commitment among employees. This empowerment often manifests through participative decision-making and fostering a sense of ownership within the organisation. On the other hand, the latter highlights that psychological empowerment serves as a critical factor in reducing employee turnover, a typical repercussion of crises in the hospitality industry. Furthermore, creating a collaborative environment matches that of Kruja et al. (2016), who highlight its relationship with HR empowerment. The empowerment of employees is necessary to strengthen hotels in a period of economic crisis. Empowering HR by fostering a culture of autonomy, providing training opportunities, and encouraging innovative thinking can lead to higher job satisfaction and commitment. This approach enhances employee morale and translates into improved customer service and operational efficiency. Moreover, this research revealed that empowering employees positively impacts hotels' overall performance, even amid crises that threaten human health and safety, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building strong relationships based on mutual respect and trust is crucial for operational effectiveness in the hotel working environment. Open communication encourages employees at all levels to freely express their opinions, fostering collaboration and innovation. Continuous information exchange enhances teamwork and alignment with the hotel's goals, strengthening team dynamics and providing a competitive edge in the industry. The data for the third research question Q3: "In times of crisis, which human resources empowerment policies are positively correlated with the achievement of a competitive advantage of hotels?" find common ground with the conclusion of the research of Al-Refaei et al. (2023) highlighting the link between the empowerment of hotels' HR and the quality of services provided. Additionally, the research results agree with those of Sulistyo (2016), Waseel et al. (2025) and Stor (2021), who report that the means of enhancing HR empowerment, namely the autonomy of employees, their participation in the decision-making processes of the organisation and their training, are positively correlated with the performance of the business. Finally, the findings of this research ultimately validate the research conducted by Kuo et al., (2022), which emphasises that essential elements such as a shared vision, effective collaboration, and HR empowerment are vital components of organisational competence and capability. These elements play a significant role in driving competitive advantage within the hospitality sector. Through the analysis of the gathered data, it became evident that employee empowerment serves as a critical resource for delivering exceptional quality services. This research highlights that when HR empowerment is strategically implemented, it enhances employee engagement and satisfaction and fosters a culture of innovation and service excellence. Consequently, empowerment is instrumental in enabling hotels to achieve and sustain a competitive edge in the industry during crises.

Scientific and practical implications

This paper makes a significant scientific contribution by thoroughly examining the crucial role of HR empowerment in fostering a competitive advantage for hotels, particularly during challenging economic crises and the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time, this study integrates key concepts from HRM, economics, and business administration, including employee empowerment, crisis management, work performance, and the pursuit of competitive advantage in the hotel industry. By systematically developing and interpreting these concepts, the research creates an organised framework that elucidates their interconnections and highlights critical scientific findings. This research was underpinned by designing and implementing an innovative and comprehensive questionnaire aimed at conducting extensive studies within three-, four-, and five-star hotels. Until this point, existing HR empowerment analyses have not conclusively established their significance in enhancing crisis management capabilities and overall competitiveness within the hotel industry. Previous studies, such as those by Amoako et al. (2023), Rani et al. (2021), Sulistyo (2016), and Kuo et al. (2022), have approached this topic but lacked a holistic perspective. As a result, this paper represents the inaugural effort to thoroughly investigate and scrutinise the multifaceted role of HR empowerment in driving both resilience during crises and a competitive edge in the hospitality sector.

Regarding practical contributions, hotel executives can significantly benefit from the insights and conclusions articulated in this paper. The research provides a comprehensive understanding of employee empowerment, which is crucial for attaining a competitive edge in the hospitality industry, particularly during times of crisis. By implementing relevant methodologies that stem from the findings of this study, hotel management can navigate challenges more effectively. The literature review, combined with the findings obtained from the primary research data analysis, underscores the vital role of HR within the hotel sector. It highlights how empowerment initiatives not only enhance the morale and productivity of employees but also foster a culture of innovation and adaptability that is essential during turbulent times. The findings presented here equip hotel management with actionable strategies to identify and adopt the most suitable HR empowerment methods tailored to their unique operational contexts. This strategic empowerment approach can lead to improved decision-making, heightened employee engagement, and, ultimately, more efficient operations during crises. By distinguishing themselves through these empowerment practices, hotels can effectively set themselves apart from competitors, ensuring sustained success and resilience in a challenging environment.

Future research

Separate research should be conducted in the future on year-round and seasonal hotels. Since the HR of a year-round hotel differs in characteristics and needs from that of a seasonal hotel, the methods and strategies of HR empowerment are likely to differ. In the same context, it would be useful to conduct similar research in the future on small hotels (<150 rooms) since the methods and strategies of HR empowerment are likely to differ from those of large hotels (>150 rooms), which formed the sample of this research. Therefore, useful information and data will be obtained through the results of these separate future research studies to further clarify the implementation of HR empowerment.

The current research provided a new insight into the necessity and effectiveness of HR empowerment applications in hotels, but even more valuable conclusions could emerge if, in the future, the effect of other HRM practices in HR empowerment, such as employee training or evaluation, work-life balance etc were studied. Finally, Necessary Conditions Analysis (NCA) could be chosen as an alternative research methodology to examine the role of employee empowerment. It is a technical analysis for identifying necessary-but-not-sufficient conditions in data sets. The characteristic of this method is that it can be applied in combination with regression analysis and qualitative comparative analysis (ERIM, 2023).

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