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The boundary spanning of managers within service networks

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how managers act as a boundary spanner in two types of boundary-spanning relationships and how their boundary-spanning activities provide support for customer value creation in service networks. Using an embedded case design in three shopping centers, the results from interviews with retail store managers and shopping center managers indicate that store managers span boundaries between both the parent organization and the shopping center and between the shopping center and customers. Analysis reveals six types of boundary-spanning activities. Four serve to represent the organization (service delivery, coordination, guarding, and external communication), while two are informational in nature (outbound information collection and relay, and inbound information collection and relay). This research highlights the wide range of activities a manager can undertake to improve the competitiveness of a company and service network by enhancing customer value.

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1. Introduction

A shopper walks into a retail store in a shopping center and tells the store manager that one of the elevators connecting the parking garage to the shopping area is broken. The manager apologizes to the shopper for the inconvenience and calls the shopping center management to notify them of the problem. The store manager also notifies his retail management so that they are able to track issues in the shopping center.

The store manager described in this vignette undertakes boundary-spanning activities intended to improve the customer experience both at the shopping center and at the store. This research investigates the boundary-spanning activities of retail store managers in shopping centers and their significance for customer value creation. The focus of such activities can be both internal (e.g., for the parent retail organization) and external (e.g., for the shopping center management and the customer). The general goal of this research is to move boundary-spanning literature beyond the dyadic retailer – customer perspective typical of many previous studies. To do so, the present study extends prior research into a service network context by empirically examining how managers act as

boundary spanners in two further types of boundary-spanning relationships: (1) between the parent retail organization and the shopping center in which its store is located, and (2) between the shopping center and customers. Previous research has not investigated these two types of relationships, yet they are critical in terms of delivering value to customers, which ultimately leads to the success of the shopping center and the center's businesses.

In today's competitive omni-channel retail environment, brick and mortar retailers increasingly compete on the basis of the customer experience they can deliver. Part of this experience occurs in the store, but part depends on the experience customers have in the surrounding environment. In a shopping center that brings together a wide variety of retail, entertainment, and dining options, the experience that the center offers to customers has the potential to be very rewarding if the network of offerings can collaborate to create a rich and enjoyable customer experience. This study provides an improved understanding of the ways store managers can effectively serve as boundary spanners in this environment and lead to an enhanced customer experience.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Shopping centers as service networks

This research operationalizes shopping centers as service networks. Shopping centers represent a form of service network in which each organization in the network can contribute to the overall customer experience with the network. By coordinating well (Verhoef et al.,

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2009; Windahl & Lakemond, 2006), these networks have the potential to more capably meet the needs of customers than the same organizations operating in a non-unified manner. The approach must be strategic with different organizations in the network taking on specific roles, and with agreed goals (Möller & Rajala, 2007). Yet, research into how service networks actually operate is limited (for exceptions, see Henneberg, Gruber, & Naudé, 2013; Tax, McCutcheon, & Wilkinson, 2013).

The shopping center is a set of interdependent operations located in close proximity to each other that provide a holistic service experience to consumers (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004). Shopping centers represent a commonplace form of a geographically bounded horizontal network that is of significant importance in the retail and service industry. Competitive advantage for the shopping center as a whole and for the businesses that operate within the center can derive from the development of relationships and from collaboration within the network (Lavie, 2006). Although the retail management literature has identified how such relationships can result in benefits and challenges for both retailer and center management (Howard, 1997; Roberts, Merrilees, Herington, & Miller, 2010; Teller, Alexander, & Floh, 2016), the nature of these relationships warrants more thorough evaluation from a network perspective.

Stores in the shopping center represent nodes in the network, while store managers and other store employees are representatives that undertake the role of network actors (Rigopoulou, Theodosiou, Katsikea, & Perdiki, 2012). Importantly, the objectives of parent retail organizations influence the activities of the store managers that participate in the network. Networks often operate by employing people to spearhead efforts on behalf of the network members. In the case of the shopping center, a center management team comes together with store managers to determine how to offer a rewarding experience that will attract customers to the shopping center and to the center's stores. Store managers can share the information they gain about other stores in the network and the network as a whole with the store's customers. Store managers can also share this information with the parent organization, which may then forward this information to other stores in that intra-company organization.

2.2. Store managers as boundary spanners in service networks

Through their position in the service network, store managers have the capacity to act as boundary spanners and as such can be key individuals (e.g. Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Teller & Alexander, 2014). As boundary spanners they connect their company with external factors: customers, the shopping center management, and representatives of other retail and service providers in the center (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). They represent the human face of the organization to outsiders and act as an organizational representative or brand ambassador (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). They can have an important influence on firm innovativeness (Woisetschläger, Hanning, & Backhaus, 2016).

Typical perspectives on boundary spanning consider how a front-line employee interacts with a customer, with attention given to the impact on company performance (e.g. Bell, Mengüç, & Widing, 2010; Bettencourt, Brown, & Mackenzie, 2005; Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Netemeyer, Maxham, & Lichtenstein, 2010). Research has focused on the characteristics of boundary spanners that interface with customers to determine how they perceive their role, and what factors may inhibit performance (Rigopoulou et al., 2012).

Boundary-spanning activities have been the subject of multiple definitions. Some define the actual activities, such as filtering, transacting, buffering, representing, and protecting (Adams, 1976), while others distill the activities into categories, such as external representation, internal influence, and service delivery (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). Yet others describe the activities as focused on representation and coordination tasks and on information search (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Marrone, 2010). Discussing the issue from the perspective of the communication

of information, Tushman and Scanlan (1981) argue that boundary-spanning activities involve both (1) relaying information in order to represent the organization to individuals outside of the organization and (2) collecting information from outside the organization and disseminating the information gathered within the organization. Based upon this literature, the present paper defines boundary-spanning activities as including both a representational element (e.g. being an advocate of the company and the company's goods and services) and an informational element, with clearly some overlap between the two elements (Aldrich & Herker, 1977).

2.3. Service networks, boundary spanning, and customer value creation

The conceptual model in this study focuses on the informational and representational activities in two types of boundary-spanning relationships: (a) between the parent organization and the service network; and (b) between customers and the service network (see Fig. 1). In the relationship between the parent organization and the service network, store managers convey information between the shopping center and the parent retail organization. Informational activities involve collecting and conveying information from the shopping center to the parent organization, as well as gathering and conveying information from the parent organization to the shopping center. Representational activities are of an ambassadorial nature and involve representing the parent organization and conveying retail information to the shopping center.

In the relationship between the service network and customers, store managers convey information between customers and the shopping center management. This relationship involves collecting and conveying information, this time from customers to the shopping center, as well as from the shopping center to customers. As in the previous case, this conveyance also includes representational activities.

Based on the retail and services marketing and management literature concerned with boundary spanning in the retailer – customer dyad (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Bowen & Schneider, 1985), this paper proposes that such activities help to enhance the customer experience and thus create value for customers. Customer-experience management is a “strategy to engineer the customer's experience in such a way as to create value both to the customer and the firm” (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 38). Customer-experience management involves all the contact points between a customer and retailer (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009), with the location of the retailer clearly being a moderating factor between the strategy of the retailer and the experience of the customer (Verhoef et al., 2009). This research explores how the boundary-spanning activities of a store manager can help to enhance the customer experience and thus create value for the store, the shopping center, and the parent retail organization.

3. Methodology

This study uses an embedded case design, where the embedded cases are both the stores and the related shopping centers, thus revealing potential differences between shopping centers. The cases include all stores in the shopping centers and the store managers serve as the key informants. Reflecting the embedded case-study design, the researchers also conducted interviews with the respective shopping center management.

3.1. Participants

The sample includes three shopping centers in the South East of England: a regional shopping center with 121 stores (CTR I), a sub-regional shopping center with 32 stores (CTR II), and an enclosed Factory Outlet Center with 71 stores (CTR III). All three employ a shopping center management team.

The researchers conducted 20 store manager interviews in CTR I, 14 in CTR II, and 15 in CTR III, as well as 3 interviews with the shopping

Conceptual Model

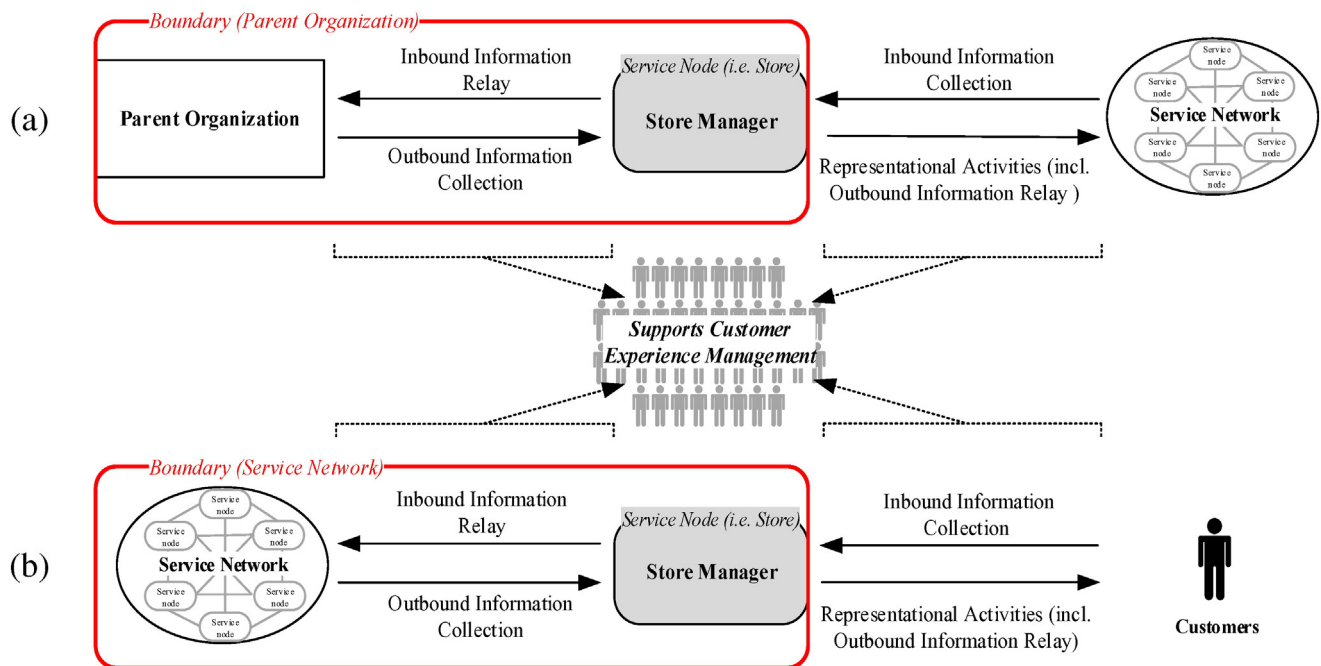


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

center management (one from each center). The choice of store managers as key informants reflects Lusch and Serpkenci's (1990) view that store managers "occupy an indispensable boundary role between the corporate organization, the store operations, and the marketplace" (p. 99). Store managers are valuable sources of managerial information on store environments (Teller & Alexander, 2014; see also Oppewal, Louviere, & Timmermans, 2000). More generally, store and center managers are more likely than their senior management to be able to provide detailed insight into the interactions that underpin the boundary-spanning activities of interest (Holmlund, 2004).

On average the interviewees had 4.6 years of experience in the role of store manager in general (*s* [standard deviation], 3.9) and 2.7 years in their current role in the respective center (*s*, 3). The interviewees represented stores with an average of 5.3 full-time (*s*, 7.7) and 9.9 part-time employees (*s*, 14.3). Most of these stores sell apparel (28.6%), food (specialties) (16.3%), and toys (12.2%). In terms of affiliation, 78% of the stores belong to a retail chain, 14% are franchise organizations, and 8% are independent. The study found no difference in the boundary-spanning activities across the three centers, so the results are reported collapsing across the centers.

3.2. Data collection

Researchers used a semi-structured interview guide reflecting boundary-spanning activities. Such qualitative methods are well suited to generating in-depth insights about management and operations processes that lead to particular outcomes, for example boundary-spanning activities and related customer value creation. To investigate the type and extent of the boundary-spanning activities of store managers, interviewees asked probing questions to get interviewees to fully convey their views, including questions focused around representational and informational activities. All interviewees participated extensively in the discussion. The result was over 45 h of recorded interviews transcribed

onto 750 single spaced pages. Each interview lasted 41.3 min on average (*s*, 11.6).

3.3. Qualitative analysis

3.3.1. Analysis approach

To provide a systematic representation of the findings, the present study followed Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) suggested approach for content analysis. This procedure allows categories to emerge from the data—a characteristic in the reasoning of qualitative inquiry. Part of this approach involved application of a directed content analysis.

The first step consisted in developing the coding scheme, more generically beforehand, and more specifically during the analysis. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, coders followed the broad notions of representational and informational boundary-spanning activities to structure the textual data. This generic distinction between types of boundary-spanning activities allowed the use of theory to develop a preliminary version of the coding scheme.

In the second step, the analysis focused on exploring types of representational boundary-spanning activities. This stage required identification of the shared characteristics of outbound informational relay and the emergent representational-type external communication. The extent of shared characteristics led to the merging of those two nodes during the coding process. The final coding scheme represents a typology of boundary-spanning activities, rather than a selective classification. Thus, a certain degree of overlap exists between the different types of activities (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The determining factor in allocation of a certain code to a particular text element was the main property of the boundary-spanning activity described therein.

3.3.2. Coding process

Due to the significant amount of data gathered, the coding process employed a computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis application (QSR NVIVO 10). Three researchers coded the data on each boundary-

spanning activity to help to ensure inter-coder reliability in terms of stability, reproducibility, and accuracy (e.g., Creswell, 2009). The authors examined the agreement percentages between the coders as provided by the analysis software (for a critical view of this reliability measure, see Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007), to deal comprehensively with those parts of the interview text coded differently. At the beginning of this iterative coding process the inter-coder agreement percentages were from 61% and above, depending on the particular boundary-spanning activity under analysis. As a rule of thumb, the authors revisited and discussed coded text showing less than 95% agreement across the coders during both coding stages. A discussion of the respective coding differences followed until the coders confirmed a final set of coded references with 93% and more agreement recorded on all coded activities.

3.3.3. Data presentation

To show the derivation of conclusions from the data, this paper presents selected direct quotes in the results section as well as a figure based on a quantification of the qualitative data. Such quantification requires careful interpretation but helps to provide an overview of the emphases in the store manager interviews with respect to each type of boundary-spanning activity.

4. Findings

This study investigates how the store manager acts as a boundary spanner in two types of relationships: (a) between the parent retail organization and the service network and (b) between the service network and the network's customers. The first relationship (parent retail organization ↔ store manager ↔ service network) totaled 2965 coded activities, while the second (service network ↔ store manager ↔ customer) totaled 1456. The results confirm that boundary-spanning

activities do not relate solely to the retailer – customer relationship but also apply to the shopping center as a service network.

The results reveal support for four types of representational activities (service delivery, coordination, guarding, and external communication) and two types of informational activities (outbound information collection and relay, and inbound information collection and relay). All types are present in both of the boundary-spanning relationships, with more emphasis on certain activities in different relationships (see Fig. 2).

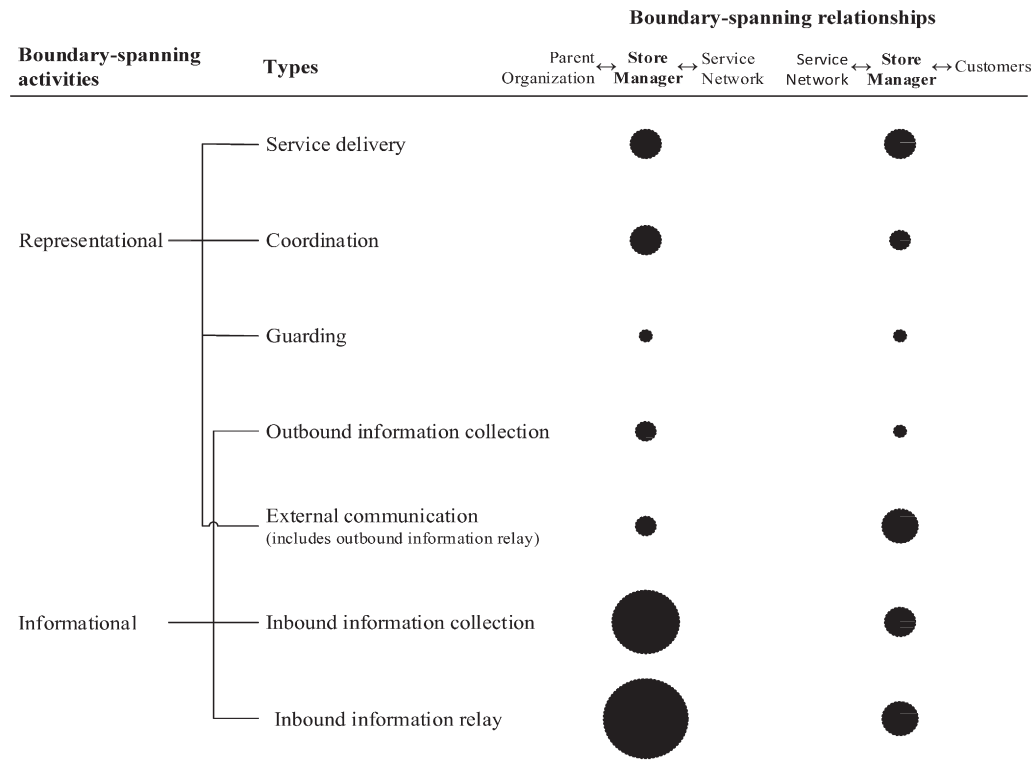
4.1. Boundary spanning between the parent retail organization and the service network

4.1.1. Representational boundary spanning – Service delivery

Store managers represent their parent organization (the retailer) to the shopping center management and to fellow tenants of the center. In the interviews they emphasize that the way a retailer treats customers in the store represents an important element of the implied contract between the retailer and shopping center because of the significant influence of such treatment on the atmosphere of the wider shopping center. As one store manager explains in his interview:

“[W]e provide good customer service and those people that visit our store when they come to the centre leave with a lasting and positive impression... and that’s my like commitment to the centre...” (Fashion (Men) 2 (CTR III)).

Store managers must ensure that the other employees in the retail store provide the agreed-on level of customer service, or the level expected by the shopping center. Of course, since all members of the shopping center have to adhere to the same expectations, this requirement creates an overall atmosphere in the center.



Caption: Symbols represent the relative share of node references (column wise) within each coded boundary-spanning relationship flow; in terms of boundary-spanning relationships the relative share of node references is Parent Organization ↔ Store Manager ↔ Service Network (n, 2,965) > Service Network ↔ Store Manager ↔ Customers (n, 1,456).

Fig. 2. Frequency counts of boundary-spanning activity discussion by store managers.

Store managers also described their role in encouraging and facilitating the parent organization to contribute to the shopping center management's planning and execution of marketing strategies. Some explained how they themselves actively engaged in contextualizing this information for the shopping center management teams. For example, one store manager interviewee explains:

"[W]e're quite a different brand from a lot of other brands ... so we can give them quite an insight into sort of more the high end luxury market.... We have sit down meetings with them where we all share our figures, ... we sort of compare them, maybe why there are similarities and maybe why there are differences, help them drive their footfall, things like that." (Food 1 (CTR I)).

Shopping center management interviewees also offered several examples of such information sharing by store managers. Typical among these is the following:

"I can think of a promotion we did with [retailer name] for example. They had a database of [retailer name] customers in the area, we had a database that was useable, we combined the two...." (Center Manager, CTR III).

An additional dimension of store managers' representational boundary spanning through service delivery relates to the sharing of information with fellow store managers about basic operational matters within the shopping center.

4.1.2. Representational boundary spanning – Coordination

This type of boundary-spanning activity relates to interactions with the shopping center management and with fellow tenants associated with specific collaborative tasks that involve information sharing. Specifically, managers explained how they embody their parent organization when participating in events.

In this context, as elsewhere, store managers identify their store as being part of a wider network and are aware of the interdependencies between the performance of their own organization and that of the shopping center. Store managers frequently described a proactive element to this boundary-spanning activity, including on occasion seeking cooperation from fellow tenants that they considered offered benefits to their own brand. One store manager explains his experience thus:

"[T]he company hired someone externally to help with a big marketing event... and we got involved in it, and actually by them coming down and having a conversation, I suggested that we could actually get [retailer name] involved with what we're doing as well um, and it was great. We went over there, the manager there was brilliant you know, she was really open to it...." (Toys 2 (CTR I)).

Shopping center managers acknowledge the importance of store managers carefully coordinating their retail brand with that of the shopping center in relation to center marketing events. One shopping center manager explains this perspective:

"[I]t's down to our retailers to maximise on that [the enhanced footfall resulting from events] and we do ask them to sample, do demonstrations and it's a way of them representing their brand and us, because you know we're quite precious of our brand and we wouldn't select those to partner with us in those events if we didn't feel that they represented our brand as well." (Center Manager, CTR I).

4.1.3. Representational boundary spanning – Guarding

Unlike the other three representational activities that involve the sharing of information, store managers also guard sensitive information about their parent organization and employees from access by outsiders. This activity reveals the store managers' role of gate-keeper between their

parent organization and the wider shopping center network. Of course, such boundary-spanning activity is typically hidden from center management. However, guarding activity can also extend to careful management of the release of information that both promotes and protects the parent organization's image. One store manager expresses her view of the relevance of the store manager in this regard as follows:

"[I]f there's changes in the [retail] company ... that sort of hit the press before they hit, you know, them its making sure that they [shopping center management] get that information ... it probably should really be the manager in store making sure that they've sent on a press release that they can know about." (News/books 2 (CTR I)).

4.1.4. Representational boundary spanning - External communication

Common descriptions of this boundary-spanning activity include two main elements. The first, informing the shopping center management of store performance-related information, helps the center management to evaluate store performance and hence that of the center. Nonetheless, some of the retailers in the sample, including some large anchor tenants, prohibit their store managers from providing such information. In the second, store managers promote their retail brand and goods and services to the shopping center management. This activity assists the shopping center management in being able to relay information to customers.

Interestingly, some managers feel the need to impress the shopping center management with performance metrics, such as for weekly sales and mystery shopping, to obtain the center's support in promoting the retailer. One store manager explains this perception:

"[W]e need to prove our worth which so far we have been doing because we've been quite high up on the leader board and things like that. So I sort of see it as the more we impress them and show them that we are a good tenant ... they [are] going to see us as a good brand and want to have us more around the centre...." (Food 2 (CTR III)).

Store managers also explain the opportunity to enhance organizational legitimacy through boundary spanning in relation to adopting key performance indicators (KPIs) connected with center engagement. One manager explains her retailer's scheme as follows:

"[I] have spent time building a relationship with the centre. We have a KPI [Key Performance Indicator] as well which requires us every month to have been involved in some way with the centre or the community...." (Food 1 (CTR I)).

Store managers also promote their parent organization's brand to fellow retailers within the center. This activity includes offering discounts and special offers to shopping center staff, as well as word-of-mouth communication that the retail store is a good place to work.

Shopping center management interviewees are consistent in emphasizing the importance that they place on store managers' boundary-spanning roles in communicating about the parent organization to the center. As one center manager explains:

"[T]he majority of contact is with local store managers and local management team... first point of contact tends to be the store manager...." (Center Manager, CTR 1).

The analysis of this type of boundary-spanning activity clearly shows that store managers engage in more than simple information relay, taking on a more ambassadorial role towards fellow members of the shopping center network.

4.1.5. Informational boundary spanning – Outbound information collection

Representing the parent organization to the shopping center management involves store managers in an information collection activity from within their own organizations. Prominent examples of such activities include store managers collecting wider marketing-related information

about their store brand (the store's goods and services) as well as data from the parent organization on sales and footfall. Store managers then use this information in the representational boundary-spanning activities described above. Interviews with shopping center managers confirm the importance of this aspect of boundary spanning. One shopping center manager sums up this part of the discussion as follows:

“[T]hey [store managers] need to know how valuable their information is to us to be able to strategise....” (Center Manager, CTR II).

4.1.6. Informational boundary spanning – Inbound information collection and relay

Such activity involves collecting information from shopping center management and fellow tenants and relaying the information to the parent organization. This facet of information collection is the subject of significant discussion in the interviews and represents an important element of store managers' boundary-spanning activities. The information gathered and relayed typically relates to operational matters and changes in shopping center marketing activities. Store managers also highlight their role in filtering and contextualizing information gathered from the shopping center before relaying that information to the parent organization. The following quote is indicative of the descriptions of such boundary-spanning activities provided by the interviewees.

“Ultimately if we had sort of a bad week I would look at the information from the centre and see if there was a specific reason, ... maybe something to do with the car park like a certain level is closed or something, lack of footfall through the centre.” (Fashion (mixed) 5 (CTR I)).

The center manager respondents confirm the active role of store managers in boundary spanning to collect information about the center. One summarizes his experience thus:

“[T]hey [store managers] are very keen to know what we're doing to market and they're very keen to know what we're doing about our empty units or voids, and they want to know is footfall up or is it down, is the spend up, are we targeting the right catchment, what are we targeting, whose coming?” (Center Manager, CTR III).

4.2. Boundary spanning between the service network and customers

The 1456 coded activities show that store managers recognize that they represent both their parent organization and the service network (see Fig. 2). As a result, they serve as a conduit between both of those organizational entities and the customer. The coding again reveals the four types of representational boundary spanning and two types of external information collection and relay activity—in this case collecting information from the shopping center for relay to customers, and collecting information from customers for relay to the shopping center management.

4.2.1. Representational boundary spanning - Service delivery

Store managers seek to ensure that the service delivered meets the standards of both the parent organization and center management. Store managers contribute to the shopping center service delivery through their own store-based service delivery. Store manager interviewees frequently describe how both the store and center operations co-create the service offer in a center. The following quote from one store manager highlights this interdependence:

“The only way I can say is giving customer service, making sure my shop is always, always giving the best customer service that we can. That way obviously people are going to want to come into the

centre into our shop. ... [L]et's say you come to my store and you have a bad experience, you're not going to want to come in my store again and because you're not coming into my store, you're not going to want to go into the stores next to me....” (Fashion (men) 1 (CTR I)).

Interviews with center managers confirm this perspective. Regarding store managers and their staff, one center manager explains that:

“[they need to be] welcoming to all our customers. I can't do that on my own. The brands that we have and the staff we have represent us as much as they're representing their own brands to be honest, we're in partnership.” (Center Manager, CTR III).

4.2.2. Representational boundary spanning – Coordination

Store managers represent the service network by contributing to the center's marketing events for customers. Although they do so with the expectation of direct benefit for their store, some store managers describe the significance of taking part in such events to help to promote the center more widely. One store manager describes this activity as follows:

“[I]f it's an event that ... a lot of people are out there representing the whole shopping centre so you've got to [be] enthusiastic and really make sure you're taking full advantage of the opportunity to like not only represent your own brand but you're the whole entire brand of the shopping centre and we have to take on board what the shopping centre is trying to achieve....” (Fashion (mixed) 1 (CTR I)).

Center managers also clearly express the notion of a partnership between store and center in this regard. As one center manager explains in relation to coordination of shopping center marketing events:

“So it's a mutual thing. They've got to look good, they've got to be good, we've got to look good and got to be good, and it's a partnership that works.” (Center Manager, CTR I).

4.2.3. Representational boundary spanning – Guarding

In perceiving themselves as part of a network, store managers guard members of the shopping center network and their reputation. In this regard, store manager most commonly discuss activities related to service failures outside their direct control, such as infrastructural problems in the center. This concern further indicates that the store managers identify with the shopping center in addition to their own parent organization. The following quote from one of the store manager interviews illustrates the point very clearly.

“[W]e had to relay that [information on disturbance due to refurbishment work] back to customers, explain what was going on and we did have to apologise for the noise on behalf of the centre really, because we did get a couple of complaints. Which wasn't really down to us, but you feel like because you're in this centre you represent and apologise for them.” (Footwear 1 (CTR II)).

4.2.4. Representational boundary spanning - External communication

Store managers recognize that through their communications with customers they not only represent the store, but also the shopping center. They describe their remit in this context as broader than guarding alone, extending the discussion into matters related to center marketing and identifying themselves as fulfilling an ambassadorial role in this context. The following quote is indicative of the views of many of the store manager respondents.

“[I] believe it is in our interest to relay what, what [shopping center] you know, would want us to relay. Because we're pretty much ... like

their megaphones, because they don't really have people in the mall talking" (Fashion (baby) 1 (CTR II)).

Many store managers articulate the close link between the effectiveness of such communication and their own store performance. Some store managers consider gaining information about the shopping center and the center's activities as part of their job.

Our shopping center manager interviewees confirm the role of store managers in this context. One center manager describes this activity as follows:

"They're also able to communicate what we communicate, so you know if we've got a promotion coming up they will know that we're going to start clearance on the 18th of the month, they'll be saying that to their consumers to draw them back...." (Center Manager, CTR III).

4.2.5. Informational boundary spanning – Outbound information collection

Representing the shopping center to customers through external communication involves store managers in collecting information from the shopping center for onward relay. Such collection and relay is an external boundary-spanning activity. Some store managers actively seek out such information and view this role as important. One store manager explains the significance of her activities in this regard as follows:

"Yes you should know to a point what's going on because ... you should know what's going on outside your front door if a customer has an issue with something...." (News/books 2 (CTR I)).

Our center manager interviews confirm that some store managers are proactive in collecting such information from the center but qualify that such boundary-spanning activities are not universal among their store managers. One center manager provides an example:

"[Y]ou'll get what I call the 'same old ones' that will turn up, and be as enthusiastic, like [retailer's name]. That's it, she's got a little shop, she's passionate, and she comes to every meeting, 'What can I do?'. We'll talk about a campaign and she'll be on the phone in the afternoon, 'How can I get involved with it? Can I give out leaflets? Can I do this?'" (Center Manager, CTR II).

Store managers stress the pragmatic nature of their collecting information from the shopping center to relay to customers. They collect information for relay that is relevant to their retail brand and the brand's operations. Although some parent organizations restrict store managers freedom to do so, most managers are able to collect and relay information promoting the shopping center's activities to customers. One manager provides this example:

"I mean when they done the [center name] festival they [center] gave us leaflets, booklets, and things like that to give out to customers so it makes it a lot easier to tell them what's going on...." (Fashion (men) 1 (CTR I)).

Some store managers indicate that they favor an enhanced flow of information from the shopping center about the center's marketing initiatives to enable them to better plan whether and how to promote such initiatives to customers.

4.2.6. Informational boundary spanning – Inbound information collection and relay

This activity involves collection of information from the customer and conveying that information to the shopping center management. Store managers report that shopping center management perceives

them as a source of valuable information. One store manager explains this observation as follows:

"[T]hey [center management] always come in after an event and ask us what we thought of it, was it successful for us, how did we measure the success and that kind of thing." (Food 1 (CTR I)).

Overall, the collection, processing, and filtering of information about customers' attitudes and behaviors towards the shopping center typically appear to take place on an ad-hoc basis. The trigger is generally the self-interest of the store manager in having the center environment optimized to meet customers' requirements and minimize complaints. Store managers stress that transmitting or conveying that information to the shopping center management typically occurs through more informal means of communication whenever possible. For instance, one store manager interviewee tells us:

"I wouldn't sort of sit down and write then an official email and say I have noticed that, you know, I would probably just mention it ... But on the whole again it's because we communicate pretty much chatting all the time...." (Fashion (Women) 1 (CTR III)).

Shopping center managers confirm the significance of this informational boundary-spanning activity by store managers:

"[F]rom that point of view they're absolutely vital. They give us an indication of how business is, they give an indication of what the customers are saying, of what they're thinking about the way we run the centre, so yes I mean it's ongoing all the time." (Center Manager, CTR III).

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

This paper examines the boundary spanning of store managers within service networks, which this study operationalizes as shopping centers. The study extends the boundary-spanning debate beyond the dyadic retailer – customer perspective that is typical in the retail marketing literature (e.g. Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Bettencourt et al., 2005) by investigating the boundary spanning that store managers undertake between the parent retail organization and the shopping center of which the store is part, as well as between the shopping center and the store's customers.

The results provide substantial empirical support for each of these boundary-spanning relationships and reveal their importance to service networks. Both relationship types include significant evidence of representational and informational boundary-spanning behaviors. Further analysis of representational boundary-spanning activities reveals four types of activities: service delivery, coordination, guarding, and external communication. This research is the first to reveal and characterize the significant boundary-spanning roles of managers within a service network such as a shopping center. Through their representational activities store managers are customer relations ambassadors for both their parent organization and the shopping center.

The informational boundary-spanning activities reveal how store managers serve as knowledge informants for management decision-making and as messengers to both the shopping center and the parent organization. The magnitude of references to inbound informational collection and relay (see Fig. 2) demonstrates the importance of this activity to store managers and the significance of such collection and relay as a boundary-spanning activity (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). The store managers' role in this information sharing can lead to better performance (Teigland & Wasko, 2003) and enhancement of the shopping environment both at the level of the shopping center (e.g., improved central services) and the parent organization (e.g., better product and service offers).

Boundary-spanning activities are critical in helping to create an enhanced customer experience. By effectively communicating the needs and interests of both the parent organization and customers to the shopping center, and from the shopping center back to the parent organization and customers, the store manager can play a critical role in helping to create a richer customer shopping experience. Interview data from both store managers and center managers clearly reflects such a focus, and provide rich illustrations of the various ways in which store managers' representational and informational boundary spanning can assist the parent organization and the shopping center in promoting customer value creation.

The data analysis reveals two types of store managers' boundary spanning activities; activities that assist the parent organization and shopping center in the *facilitation* of customer value creation and activities that support and enhance the parent organization and shopping center in the *co-creation* of customer value. Facilitation of value creation occurs "where resources for customers' use are developed, designed, manufactured and delivered without interactions with customers" (Grönroos, 2011, p. 291). Co-creation of value occurs when store managers create value jointly with the customer through direct interactions (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

In relation to facilitation, prominent examples include boundary-spanning activities in the coordination of planned shopping center events, and in the collection, filtering, and relay of information about shoppers and the parent organization to the shopping center management to support the center's marketing strategy development. As an example of boundary-spanning activities that support the center in co-creating value with customers, store managers identify how excellence in customer service in their store can also lead to beneficial spill-over effects for the center as a whole. Similarly, through guarding activities, store managers can seek to limit the potential for value destruction that may arise due to events such as infrastructural failure at the center rather than at the individual-store level.

This study addresses the paucity of research on the relationships between retail tenants and shopping center management (for an exception, see Roberts et al., 2010). The findings demonstrate that store managers contribute significantly to flows of service and information within the shopping center and represent far more than only a compliant executor of processes (Levy & Weitz, 2011). While store managers recognize that their primary responsibility is to their parent organization, they also recognize their responsibility to the shopping center.

Furthermore, this research adds to the literature on benefits and challenges resulting from relationships between tenant stores and shopping center management (Howard, 1997; Roberts et al., 2010; Teller & Alexander, 2014). While some constraints exist for information sharing (e.g., sales performance information), such restrictions do not preclude store managers from conducting boundary-spanning activities that support service quality and programs for innovation.

5.2. Managerial implications

Not all store managers act as boundary spanners, and only some undertake all of the representational and informational activities involved with boundary spanning to a complete extent and consider such activities as a necessary function of their job. This shortfall might reflect a lack of motivation or of capabilities, including those related to organizational systems. Thus, retailers and shopping center management companies should encourage and support managers with suitable competences to undertake these activities. The potential benefits for all parties (customers, parent organization, shopping center management, and the store managers themselves) are considerable. Several initiatives can help accomplish this goal: communicating the nature and potential of the network role, identifying boundary-spanning champions, and facilitating boundary spanning.

5.2.1. Communicating the nature and potential of the network role

Store managers must be aware of their responsibility towards the shopping center in order for their stores to benefit from synergies. Parent organization and shopping center management should offer education and training in this role, for example by detailing the types of information that are useful to share and illustrating how combined efforts in the past have resulted in benefits both for the store and the shopping center.

5.2.2. Identifying boundary-spanning champions

Managers who embrace a certain attitude towards their job role, one that incorporates a macroscopic perspective of the service network as a whole, are more likely to be effective boundary spanners. Given the potential of boundary-spanning individuals to generate opportunities for customer value creation in service networks like shopping centers, management should allocate resources to enable their identification.

5.2.3. Facilitating boundary spanning

In addition to personal motivation and capabilities, boundary-spanning store managers require an organizational environment that facilitates and supports their endeavors. Networking activities that enable store managers to identify and form relationships with members of the service network and the provision of efficient communication mechanisms are both vital in facilitating boundary spanning.

5.3. Directions for future research

The present paper describes, categorizes, and provides some explanation for the extent of store managers' boundary-spanning activities in the service network setting of a managed shopping center. This study is a necessary and important first step in understanding the implications and potential influence of boundary-spanning activities in the current research context. Future research could undertake a quantitative approach and measure the occurrence and the intensity of the boundary-spanning activities, and develop a scale to measure boundary-spanning activities.

Furthermore, future research should explore the effectiveness of boundary spanning and measure the impact of boundary spanning on store and network performance. In this current study, assessment of the impact of boundary-spanning activities is limited to the recorded opinions of store and center managers. Future research could also explore the characteristics of managers who are effective boundary spanners in service networks. Understanding those characteristics could help organizations to hire people who fit well in that role. Lastly, this research topic shows promise for extension to other types of service network, such as museum quarters and convention centers.

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