The role of internal communication in influencing retailers' views at a shopping center

O papel da comunicação interna na influência das opiniões dos varejistas em um shopping center

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ABSTRACT
Corporate internal communication represents a critical success factor in the face of great economic and political instability. For the important economic sector of Brazilian retail, shopping centers are responsible for a large part of total revenue. This success is based on the relationship between the malls and their tenants, who play a role both as a customer...
and an internal public. In light of the crisis caused by covid19, the relationship between malls and their tenants became a crucial point for the sector's resilience. Thus, this research aimed to analyze the perception of shopkeepers of the internal communication adopted by a large shopping center located in the city of Recife. To achieve the objective, the research used a quantitative approach with an online questionnaire with closed questions for a universe of 407 shopkeepers. Through the use of multivariate statistical analysis, it was possible to analyze the internal communication adopted by the mall in the face of the perception of 370 storeowners. Through the results, it was possible to verify that the relationship between the evaluations made by the tenants, divided between two distinct dimensions, named "organizational identification" and "360º integration", were significant in influencing the tenants in their recommendation of the mall to other entrepreneurs. The results also suggest that good organizational practices, including internal communication integrated with ethical behavior and receptive to feedback, can directly influence the organizational identification of storekeepers with the mall.

**Keywords:** internal communication, shopping center, shopkeepers, integration.

**RESUMO**
A comunicação interna corporativa representa um fator crítico de sucesso diante da grande instabilidade econômica e política. Para o importante setor econômico do varejo brasileiro, os shoppings são responsáveis por grande parte da receita total. Este sucesso é baseado na relação entre os shoppings e seus inquilinos, que desempenham um papel tanto como um cliente e um público interno. À luz da crise causada pela covid19, a relação entre os shoppings e os seus inquilinos tornou-se um ponto crucial para a resiliência do setor. Assim, esta pesquisa teve como objetivo analisar a percepção dos lojistas da comunicação interna adotada por um grande shopping localizado na cidade do Recife. Para atingir o objetivo, a pesquisa usou uma abordagem quantitativa com um questionário on-line com perguntas fechadas para um universo de 407 lojistas. Com o uso da análise estatística multivariada, foi possível analisar a comunicação interna adotada pelo shopping ante a percepção de 370 vendedores. Pelos resultados, foi possível verificar que a relação entre as avaliações feitas pelos locatários, divididas entre duas dimensões distintas, chamadas de "identificação organizacional" e "integração de 360º", foi significativa ao influenciar os locatários em sua recomendação do shopping a outros empreendedores. Os resultados também sugerem que boas práticas organizacionais, incluindo comunicação interna integrada com comportamento ético e receptiva ao feedback, podem influenciar diretamente a identificação organizacional dos lojistas com o shopping.

**Palavras-chave:** comunicação interna, shopping center, lojistas, integração.
1 INTRODUCTION

Corporate internal communication has evolved considerably to represent a critical success factor in a competitive market. The way dialogue between departments within an organization occurs is a strategic planning option for efficiency, effectiveness, and the efficacy of processes among stakeholders. Consequently, internal communication is a determining factor for the achievement of organizational strategic objectives (IBEIRO, 2019).

As one of the fundamental processes constituting the basis for all activities in organizations, internal communication is considered a dynamic system. Mapping this system must be thought of as a means, instrument, and vehicle, as well as the relationship between the sender and the receiver of the message. The success of any organization depends on its ability to operate in a highly competitive external environment, and internal communication provides the means to streamline management processes clearly and objectively (KUNSCH, 2009).

An efficient and transparent company in its internal processes has a competitive advantage in various external areas and the development of its human resources. Success in efficient internal communication in organizations must be grounded in creating and continuously developing a two-way relationship with internal stakeholders. This relationship involves the integration of the parts that make up companies and has a direct impact on the motivation of their internal audience (QUIRKE, 2016).

There is a positive relationship between the management of internal communication and the level of employee productivity. As a driving force for performance in institutions, companies seek to manage their form of interaction with their internal public as part of an endomarketing program. Therefore, internal communication as an impactful factor on internal public productivity must be strategically managed in an organization's planning (ALMEIDA; CAPUCHO; RIBEIRO, 2016).

Communication is also part of the essence of retail trade, as the forms and different target audiences form a network that illustrates how commercial establishments in this sector operate. Shopping centers are an example of a successful network interacting in various ways by different agents with convergent purposes. According to the Brazilian
Association of Shopping Centers (2019), the first shopping centers appeared in the United States in the 1950s, establishing structural and operational models that were immediately copied by other organizations in different locations. According to the same Association, in Brazil, the sector accounts for 20% of retail activity and represents approximately 2.7% of the national Gross Domestic Product, and in 2019, the sector's total revenue reached a record R$192 billion.

Growth before the coronavirus pandemic resulted in a 7.9% increase in sales in 2019, according to the Brazilian Association of Shopping Centers (2020). The annual turnover of the sector reached R$ 192.8 billion. The observed growth shows a highly profitable sector that has grown at higher levels than the Brazilian Gross Internal Product. The high rates of growth and turnover reflect a unique and highly profitable business model.

A shopping center, once built, can originate two distinct ventures: the first involves a real estate investment by an agent who manages and promotes institutional marketing while renting spaces for commercial activities. The other modality includes the transfer of commercial spots through direct sale to interested entrepreneurs who rent or develop their own businesses on-site, maintaining the physical characteristics typical of shopping centers. Under this organizational aspect, a shopping center has its internal audience segmented into administrative employees who work in internal departments, retailers who rent commercial spots, and direct suppliers of products and services for the shopping center (CASSIMIRO, 2019; SANTORO, 2019).

For companies that have internal communication as an operating strategy, the internal public is recognized as an internal customer. Among its customers, the group of retailers that make up a shopping center has special interest due to their potential and participation in turnover. Along with the external public of shoppers and frequent visitors to the mall, retailers are part of the shopping center's revenue composition by renting space to set up their stores. However, unlike external customers, retailers are integrated into the commercial enterprises' internal communication system (BASILIO, 2005).

Like the public that frequents large shopping centers, retailers have a significant participation in the shopping centers’ revenue through the income generated, for example,
by rental payments, condominium fees, marketing contributions, and a percentage of sales from commerce. Therefore, shopping centers are interested in both the quantity and quality of entrepreneurs carrying out economic activities in their establishments (LIMA, 2020).

To have this strategic relationship efficiently and profitably for the parties involved, a good relationship between the retailers and the strategic direction of the shopping centers is crucial. Thus, this research aimed to analyze the perception of retailers of the internal communication adopted by a large shopping center located in the city of Recife.

To achieve the objective, the research used a methodology involving the application of a questionnaire with closed questions, employing a Likert scale and using multivariate statistical analyses to understand the influence factor of internal communication in the decision to recommend the shopping center by retailers to other entrepreneurs.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
2.1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AS A COMPETITIVE EDGE

Corporate internal communication has always been present in various types of organizations. In business activity, communication takes various forms and means through which it can be used. According to Torquato (2004), an organization is a complex system that relates to various integral parts of a society. Companies are socio-economic systems formed by norms, policies, work, capital, and technical nature.

The relationship between the elements that make up an organization is crucial for its success. Communication is an organizational system as it is also formed by interdependent factors aimed at a goal, to convey a message. Being considered an open system, communication interacts with the external and internal environment, exchanging experiences that can influence either the environment or the system that is part of it (KUNSCH, 2009).

For Duarte (2012), communication can be understood as any form of manifestation with a purpose; it can be transmitted orally, written, through symbols or
even electronically. An organization, as a system composed of sectors, needs communication to survive. Through interaction in the internal environment, the company will communicate through various means among its sectors and, in the external environment, the organization will interact with clients and the community in which it is inserted.

According to Ibeiro (2019), the way companies are organized, usually in departments, causes many flaws in processes and interpersonal relationships. This aspect can create obstacles for efficient corporate communication. Therefore, communication must be planned involving all its components: people, messages, meanings, and purposes. This process involves the knowledge and application of various areas such as: public relations, journalism, press advisory, lobbying, advertising, promotions, research, endomarketing, and marketing.

Organizational management models have evolved over recent decades; however, an efficient internal communication model is a challenge for organizations of various sizes and fields. Organizational culture plays an essential role in adding strategic value to companies and has an impact on how organizations use internal communication to integrate the entire internal public (BIENENSTEIN, 2009).

The growth of the shopping center sector in Brazil, and especially in the Northeast region, represents the evolution of a market that becomes more competitive with the opening of more commercial establishments. Offering the best business conditions and organizational climate can influence entrepreneurs' choice for developing their economic activity in certain establishments where the integration between shopping center administration and retailers is beneficial (CARVALHO; ISABELLA; MAZZON, 2018).

One factor has contributed more significantly to this competitive scenario, the process of "internalization" of Shopping Centers, which has proven to be a strategic trend throughout Brazil. Among the reasons for the growth of this process are real estate speculation in large metropolitan regions, saturation of the offer of such commercial establishments in concentrated regions, and the popularization of the model among lower classes. As a competitive strategy to attract good product and service stores for Shopping
Centers, internal communication becomes a vital instrument for creating value for retailers (FERREIRA, 2020).

A competitive market for the Shopping Center sector means, in addition to a battle for the consumer, an effort to attract the best retail chains, anchor stores, and entrepreneurs who add value to the commercial center's brand. Therefore, retailers form a fundamental part of the shopping center operations and need a favorable environment to develop their activities productively. For this, shopping center administrations have in endomarketing an important tool to motivate their body of retailers (BIENENSTEIN, 2009; OCHOA, 2014).

2.2 ENDOMARKETING AS AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Every planning execution requires an alignment of actions and control interactions, and without the engagement of the involved internal agents, companies could not successfully implement their strategies. For this reason, internal employees must be seen as clients of the organizations and, as such, also require marketing actions. The development of marketing aimed at the internal public can be called endomarketing (KOTLER, 2000).

Endomarketing can be defined as a set of processes aimed at attracting and retaining the internal client, the employees. The internal audience is not only the organization's internal employees but also the families and friends surrounding each member of the organization, as well as suppliers. Endomarketing has an impact on various areas of companies, being a form of strategic management based on traditional marketing but applied to companies' internal environment. It has a direct impact on the Human Resources area (SCROFERNEKER, 2007).

As an ally of the human resources area, endomarketing influences the internal public's perception by adding value to the company image, reducing turnover rates, and improving talent attraction. The organizational climate is also strongly influenced by the internal marketing process adopted by companies. Therefore, endomarketing aims to develop organizational identity, fostering an integrative organizational climate (BRUM, 2007).
In this internal marketing process, it is essential that shopping centers convey healthy values as a strategy for awareness, emphasizing the importance of retailers as the internal audience for business success. After all, retailers are part of an important process that makes up the company and has a direct impact on revenue. Contradictions should be avoided in conveying a positive image to the external public without the same engagement and perception by the internal public. This contradiction is the result of a failure in internal communication work (OCHOA, 2014; CARVALHO; ISABELLA; MAZZON, 2018; FERREIRA, 2020).

Therefore, it is necessary that the organization's discourse aligns with the information expectations and engagement level of the retailers in the strategic planning process of the shopping centers. The effectiveness of internal communication depends on how retailers perceive the impact of the company's strategies on their work and life (CARVALHO; ISABELLA; MAZZON, 2018).

Internal communication is an essential part of the endomarketing system practiced in companies. Through the development of positive relations by clear, open, and participative communication, the internal public, the agents involved in the communicative process, feel valued and respected and begin to value global behavior and share organizational values. Therefore, endomarketing is an important strategic action for motivation, engagement, and developing a positive relationship between shopping center management and retailers (CENERINI, 2009).

Good management in these shopping centers uses internal communication and endomarketing as a way to engage retailers in the company's decisions and actions, creating strong organizational identification. Endomarketing, as a form of relationship between various hierarchical levels, is an instrument for promoting good practices and attention among managers and all those who make up the organization.

2.3 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

Organizational identification is a direct consequence of a successful endomarketing program and effective internal communication. It expresses a strong identification relationship that the internal agent feels when sharing the values, interests,
and culture of the company. Through organizational identification, the employee attributes an emotional value to the company, which is associated with a sense of belonging to the organization where they work (ALI et al, 2021).

The worker's perception regarding organizational identification also results in a feeling of received support. The feeling of organizational support relates to an employee's belief that their actions are valued by the company they work for, and that the organization, in turn, cares for their well-being (EDER; EISENBERGER, 2008).

Well-managed internal communication is a factor that yields a positive result in organizational identification. These actions are part of a rich endomarketing process that has a significant impact on the engagement of the internal public and productivity. For companies with a broader internal audience, such as shopping centers, organizational identification fosters assimilation among retailers with the management style of these establishments. This, in turn, leads to brand loyalty in shopping centers and encourages retailers to recommend that others open their commercial establishments in the same shopping center (RUCK; WELCH; MENARA, 2017).

3 METHODOLOGY

For the formulation of a research paper, there is no single method to be followed or considered the best for all types of research. According to Gil (2008), it is necessary for the method to be coherent with the problem and the objectives set by the researcher.

3.1 CLASSIFICATION ACCORDING TO THE TARGET AUDIENCE

For this research, the target audience chosen was the managers responsible for the stores present in a Shopping Center in the city of Recife-PE. Both the establishment and the respondents were not identified, as agreed upon between the research participants and the authors. Some stores are managed directly by the partners or are administered by responsible managers. This research aimed to apply the data collection tool to decision-making agents and those responsible for the administration of the commercial establishments vis-à-vis the Shopping Center management. The list of such managers was
obtained through registration with the Association of Store Owners in the Shopping Centers of Pernambuco.

3.2 POPULATION AND RESEARCH SAMPLE

For this research, the universe considered consists of the primary stakeholders (entrepreneurs or managers) of 405 fully operational stores in a large shopping center located in the city of Recife-PE. The sample calculation used a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. The planned sample size, provided by the sample size calculation formula \( n_0 = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2} \), was 192 cases. The population selection process aimed for a census by sending the data collection tool to all establishments. After a specified time for collection, the research obtained 378 responses from the population of 405, making the process of defining the sampling technique no longer necessary (HAIR, 2009).

3.3 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

Data collection was carried out from July to December 2020 through structured questionnaires with 20 statements on a linear scale from 0 to 10, where the respondent assessed aspects of the internal communication adopted by the shopping center. The statements followed the model validated by Baptista (2009) and Pinto (2013), relating various aspects of internal communication in organizations through the perception of participants from an internal organizational audience.

The questionnaires were made available on a Google Forms online platform from July 2020 to December 2020 and sent via registered email directed at store owners for voluntary participation in the research. Respondents had to agree with the Free Consent Form and were not identified in the data collection tool. After receiving 378 completed questionnaires, 8 were discarded due to the absence or inconsistency of data, resulting in 370 questionnaires for the research database.
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The results were processed using the SPSS software version 18, where Exploratory Factor Analysis techniques were used for variable reduction, correlation analysis among the statements, and construct formation. Therefore, through this technique, it was possible to identify associations among the 20 evaluated statements to identify common factors between them.

Before using exploratory factor analysis, it is necessary to check if the studied sample is suitable for the use of statistical methodology. For this, the Bartlett's test of sphericity was used, which according to Garson (2013), is a statistical test applied before using exploratory factor analysis to identify the presence of correlations among the analyzed variables. Another test performed on the obtained responses was the KAISER-MEYER-OLKIN (KMO) index. The reference values for the tests are 0.5 for acceptability for KMO and for Bartlett, the requirement is a value lower than 0.05 to reject the null hypothesis (H₀) that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix (HAIR et al, 2009).

The result of the exploratory factor analysis allowed the researcher to work with the behavior of just 4 dimensions instead of the 20 statements evaluated by the 370 validated respondents. After constructing the 4 dimensions, the Multiple Linear Regression technique was then used to identify if the independent variables (constructs obtained from factor analysis) explained a significant variation of the dependent variable, which in the case of the research was the variable "Recommendation of the Shopping Center to other retailers" (MALHOTRA, 2001).

4 DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The multivariate analysis of the data identified larger dimensions of latent evaluations present in the responses. These 4 dimensions, also called factors, contain the 20 specific variables in the questionnaire, the statements included in the questionnaires. Within larger groups/dimensions, it was possible to analyze, describe, and interpret the information obtained.

With a value of 0.825 in the KMO test, the database shows robust acceptability for the application of exploratory factor analysis technique, demonstrating a high level of
correlations between the statements. The result of the Bartlett's test showed a significance of 0, resulting in the rejection of the hypothesis of no correlation between the variables, thus confirming the acceptance of the multivariate technique.

Through exploratory factor analysis, it was possible to group 19 statements according to their correlation indices into 4 dimensions. Only one variable from the research was not included in this first stage of grouping, "Willingness to Recommend the Shopping Center to Other Retailers," which was set aside to be used as the dependent variable in the regression technique.

The 4 dimensions were named "Relationship with the Shopping Center's Communication Department," "Use of Internal Communication Tools by the Organization," "Organizational Identification," and "360-degree Integration." A structure of 4 dimensions accounted for an explained variance of 70.42%. The factor loading, as well as the evaluation given by the 370 respondents, are represented below:

Table 1 - Dimensions 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertive / Variable</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
<th>Assertive / Variable</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My relationship with</td>
<td>0.862</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>The quality of</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the person responsible for organizational internal communication.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>information provided through the organizational internal communication tools.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cordiality of the person responsible for organizational internal communication.</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Promotion of integration between store owners and the internal staff of the organization.</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment of the internal communication manager in addressing and resolving queries.</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Use of electronic communication by the organization with the store owners.</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response of the communication department to requests made by store owners.</td>
<td>0.887</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>The use of personal communication, meetings, briefings, and telephone.</td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall assessment of the organization's internal communication department.</td>
<td>0.921</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Variation and integration of organizational internal communication tools.</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the results obtained from the factor analysis, it was possible to identify 6 variables with strong correlation, as evidenced by factor loadings above 0.500. The variables that formed Dimension 1 consist of 6 assessments from store owners that describe the relationship between the shopping center's internal communication department and the store owners.

This Dimension showed a high degree of correlations, and the average score of the assessments was 7.1. Notably, the score of 6.1 was given to the operating hours and availability of the customer service department for store owners, which received the lowest score and factor loading within the analyzed group. Dimension 2 was formed by respondents' evaluations for items that created a conceptual set focused on the use of internal communication tools. The quality of information provided by these tools, integration as a form of dialogue between store owners and organization staff, direct personal communication between participating agents, variation and richness in the use of forms of communication, and finally, an evaluation of the quality of meetings as impactful factors in the relationship. This last variable received the highest score of all other variables in the survey questionnaire, indicating that store owners highly value direct contact. However, the use of electronic communication received the lowest score in the questionnaire, posing a challenge for the shopping center's communication in an emergency health scenario where establishments were closed at the time of the survey, and communication had to be carried out remotely.

Due to social distancing measures prompted by the coronavirus pandemic, direct contact between people has been avoided. In a context where face-to-face meetings between store owners and shopping center management are considered highly important by the store owners, technology could bridge this gap by maintaining closeness between store owners and management. However, the manner in which the shopping center's strategic management utilizes electronic means received the lowest score in the survey.
The remaining variables were also grouped according to the degree of correlation determined by the application of exploratory factor analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assertive / Variable</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
<th>Assertive / Variable</th>
<th>Factor Loading</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valued Relationship Between Management and Retailers.</td>
<td>0.899</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>My Relationship with Other Retailers.</td>
<td>0.639</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Satisfaction in Belonging to the Shopping Mall's Retailer Roster.</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>My Relationship with the Shopping Mall's Internal Staff.</td>
<td>0.813</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Stance of Management Towards Retailers.</td>
<td>0.739</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Openness from the Company's Strategic Management in Receiving Criticisms and Contributions from Retailers.</td>
<td>0.802</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means of Access that Retailers Have with the Organization's Strategic Management.</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Research Data (2020).

For Dimension 3, the variables "Valued Relationship Between Management and Retailers," "Feeling of Satisfaction in Belonging to the Retailer Roster of the Mall," and "Ethical Stance of Management Towards Retailers" showed strong correlation and were thus conceptualized as Organizational Identification. This construct addresses the degree of satisfaction that retailers feel in being part of the shopping center, through actions taken by the mall's management to develop a communication relationship.

The evaluation with the lowest score was in relation to the ethical posture perceived by the retailers from the management. The concept of ethics refers to the deep subjectivity that is implicit in each individual's moral values. However, as Ferreira (2020) states, a commercial and legal relationship between businesspeople and the mall management should be based on fair and reasonable treatment regarding contractual clauses and a pandemic scenario where commercial establishments were closed. The low evaluation indicates that retailers do not perceive the behavior of the mall as ethical.
The final Dimension (4) resulting from the exploratory factor analysis correlated the variables of the questionnaire that addressed aspects of integration in the relationship between the various levels and hierarchy of agents that make up the internal audience. The authors named this construct "360-degree Integration," for the analysis of the relationship between retailers, internal employees of the mall, and management. Special attention to this factor was given due to the low evaluations attributed to the accessibility of the mall's management, the receptiveness to criticisms from them, and a result that indicates a weak relationship between retailers and the internal employees of the mall. As one of the factors pointed out by Scrofernereker (2007), endomarketing is an instrument that promotes integration among the internal public and has its direct impact on the identification that retailers have with the organization. A low level of integration corresponds with the low level of organizational identification perceived by the respondents, making it necessary to evaluate the impact of these constructs on the retailers' recommendations.

The technique used to assess the effect of the variables on the recommendation was multiple regression analysis, with the dependent variable being "Intention to Recommend the Mall to Other Retailers," and the independent variables being the 4 dimensions obtained through factor analysis. Through regression, it was possible to verify that 40% of the dependent variable (Intention to Recommend to other retailers) is explained by the total variation of the 4 dimensions used, which was concluded through the analysis of the adjusted coefficient of determination (adjusted $R^2$). To determine which dimensions have the most and least influence on recommendations from retailers, the standardized coefficient index, Beta, was used.
Table 3 – Influence Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Beta - β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Relationship with the Shopping Mall’s Communication Department</td>
<td>0.281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Use of internal communication tools by the organization</td>
<td>0.432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Organizational Identification</td>
<td>0.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 - 360-degree Integration</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Research Data (2020).

Regarding all 4 dimensions used in the model, the constructs named "Organizational Identification" and "360-degree Integration" were the only ones that showed a satisfactory and significant degree of influence on the dependent variable. The analysis allows us to assert that an increase in ratings from store owners in the questions addressed by dimensions 3 and 4 leads to an increase in their recommendations and may also influence their willingness to open another store in the same shopping center.

The questions that formed dimension 3, "Organizational Identification," addressed business owners' assessment regarding satisfaction with being part of the shopping center's roster of store owners, the evaluation of the management's ethical stance, and the perception of recognition from management. The internal communication adopted by the companies allows their internal public to develop a sense of organizational identification. For store owners, this fact was reflected in the results, in line with what Eder and Eisenberger (2008) claim when describing organizational identification as a fundamental factor for good performance and motivation within organizations, consequently impacting productivity.

The pandemic scenario brought on by COVID-19 had a direct impact on the operation of commerce in shopping centers. The prohibition of gatherings was among the reasons why public authorities mandated the closure of commercial establishments. In a scenario where face-to-face contact is absent (an aspect valued by store owners), the relationship between shopping centers and their tenants needs to be as transparent as possible for both interdependent parties. Some shopping centers proactively adopted measures to mitigate the crisis caused by the situation, such as structural assistance for business operation through electronic platforms (e-commerce) and drive-through services. However, the most sensitive points in the relationship between the establishment...
and the studied population, such as financial aspects, had to be addressed through negotiation between the association of store owners and that of shopping centers.

This type of connection between the two parties was also described in the research as a significant factor impacting the dependent variable, "Intention to Recommend to Other Store Owners." The 4th Dimension dealt with issues related to evaluations in the context of integration between store owners and the entire organization. A healthy relationship between the parties should be constructed among the participants. In contrast to the top-down communication of the shopping center, the store owners' perception of the relationship among their peers received the highest evaluation score, which indicates that there is unity and a positive relationship within the sample used in the research.

However, the assertions that described the relationship between the store owners and the shopping center's staff, as well as the openness on the part of the shopping center's management to criticisms and the means of access that store owners have to the organization's strategic direction, received the lowest evaluations in the study. This fact presents a challenge that needs to be overcome by the shopping center's strategic leadership with regard to the internal communication adopted with the store owners.

The relevance of this 4th dimension is confirmed by the regression analysis, which obtained a coefficient of 0.621, pointing to a significant explanatory index between Dimension 4 and the intention to recommend. The result highlights a large area that needs to be addressed by the shopping center, as described by Ibeiro (2019). The way a company is structured has a strong effect on internal communication. The absence of dialogue in receiving feedback between the parties suggests a mechanistic structure with strong characteristics of inequality in the power relationship.

Dimensions 1 and 2 showed a weak explanatory relationship with the dependent variable, thus not revealing statistical significance. However, despite the low relationship, they should not be neglected. Dimension 1 included evaluations associated with the department responsible for managing internal communication and its manager. The ratings were positive, with an average score of 7.1, the lowest score being for operating hours. The corporate structure process needs to be planned with a focus on communication among its stakeholders; designating a specific department does not
absolve other parts of the company from investing in improving communication. The shopping center under study has an internal communication department that is well-rated by the retailers, which can contribute to the proper development of communication, in line with what Ferreira (2020) states when holding such departments responsible for coordinating communication actions.

Dimension 1 had the lowest relationship with the dependent variable; it included the retailers' evaluations of the communication tools used by the shopping center. Despite its weak explanatory relationship with the dependent variable, it is necessary to point out the low rating for the statement "Use of electronic communication by the organization with the retailers." The importance of electronic communication is crucial at a time when social distancing is of utmost importance for the functioning and productivity of companies. According to the retailers' evaluations, this is a factor that needs to be improved.

5 CONCLUSIONS

An internal communication program should be capable of interacting with and motivating its employees. To exist and be effective, the breadth of the relationship between a company's strategic management should range from online media to face-to-face meetings, in a satisfactory manner among the participants in the communication process.

The presented research demonstrated that through the analysis of the applied model among the respondents, retailers in a shopping center, approximately 40% of their intention to recommend the shopping center to other business owners is influenced by the internal communication management adopted by the shopping center. The factors that most influenced this result are related to the statements that made up the constructs "Organizational Identification" and "360º Integration." The result can be used as a guide for investments and improvements. The other two constructs did not show significant explanatory power in the recommendation; however, the statistical technique used showed a positive impact.
Internal communication must be aligned with a company's strategic objectives. In a scenario of great economic instability, like the one generated by the global pandemic, the negative impacts for merchants with physical stores can be mitigated through integrated relationships. Retailers and shopping centers have an interdependent relationship. As a specific internal public group, retailers are at the same time customers of the shopping center and internal collaborators, as they can not only recommend the commercial establishment to other business owners but also open another store in the same shopping center.

The research shows that as integral agents of stakeholders, stores that develop a good internal relationship with the strategic direction of shopping centers are more likely to recommend it to other merchants. Therefore, internal communication should integrate an endomarketing system aimed at expanding functional identity bonds through the provision of objective information and a healthy context for discussions and feedback. In a situation of instability, the survival of organizations depends on their communication capabilities.

Internal communication in organizations is widely addressed in academic studies, focusing on the internal employees of organizations and the impact on motivation and engagement. However, the internal audience is made up of unique extensions across various organizations. In the case of commercial centers like shopping malls, there is a vast and rich field to be explored due to the convergence of various internal public segments with their peculiar interests and impact on business organization.

The importance of this research lies in its specific focus on business owners who purchase or rent spaces to conduct commercial activities in shopping centers. A sector extremely important to the Brazilian economy, shopping centers in Brazil face enormous challenges, and as this research has pointed out, internal communication plays a fundamental role on the path to market recovery. This research was conducted in a scenario of extreme stress for the shopping center sector in Brazil.
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