

The ‘Market Connector’ User Role: Influencing Boundaries across Business Networks and User Communities

Annmarie Ryan
Department of Management and Marketing
Kemmy Business School
University of Limerick, Ireland.
annmarie.ryan@ul.ie

Debbie Harrison
Department of Strategy and Logistics,
Norwegian School of Management BI,
Nydalsveien 37, 0442 Oslo, Norway.
debbie.harrison@bi.no

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a new user role, the market connector, the performing of which alters the boundaries between the business network and the user community. Recent research in the network management literature focuses on the roles for firms within nets and how different roles can be played within different net configurations (e.g. Möller and Svahn, 2003; Möller et al, 2005; Heikkinen et al 2007; Kähkönen and Virolainen, 2011; Shipilov and Li, 2012). The customer or user is one actor which can play multiple roles, e.g. at different stages of the radical innovation process (e.g. Biemans, 1991; Story et al, 2011).

The paper presents empirical material in which some extreme enthusiast users of Land Rovers were found to be owners or employees of a ‘market connector user/firm’. Market connector users perform multiple roles including enthusiast, (re)designer, producer, modifier, reseller and retailer. They operate ‘betwixt and between’ (after Turner, 1969) the business/formal and informal market. The multiple roles played underpin the supply network, the after-market and user communities surrounding the Land Rover product.

A connector firm playing multiple roles does not operate as a hub ‘manager’. Instead, their capabilities are in influencing and altering the boundaries between the business network and the user community. They are active in re-making relationships; ending others, re-forming with a new partner, etc, and this re-configuring is on-going. Overall we engage in the debate around customer-supplier co-creation, co-existence and competition (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Cova and White 2010; Kucuk 2008; Simmons 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008) in our discussion of the market connector user role.

Keywords: Roles, users, network management, boundaries, market shaping, innovation

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the ‘market connector’; a user which plays multiple and overlapping roles, and by simultaneously disrupting and connecting, alters the boundaries between the business network and the user community. Recent research in the network management literature focuses on the roles for firms within nets and how different roles can be played within different net configurations (e.g. Möller and Svahn, 2003; Möller et al, 2005; Heikkinen et al 2007; Kähkönen and Virolainen, 2011; Shipilov and Li, 2012). The customer or user is one actor which can play multiple roles, e.g. at different stages of the radical innovation process (e.g. Biemans, 1991; Story et al, 2011).

There are parallels in the user innovation literature in that users can be designers, marketers and technical support providers in the innovation process, especially when embedded in user communities (e.g. Franke and Shah, 2003, Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2009; Urban and von Hippel, 1988, von Hippel, 2007) or brand communities (e.g. Cova et al, 2007; Fuller et al, 2007). There are a variety of roles for suppliers possible here (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004; von Hippel, 2005; Gronroos, 2008).

A connector firm playing multiple roles does not operate as a hub ‘manager’. Instead, their capabilities are in influencing and altering the boundaries between the business network and the user community. They are active in re-making relationships; ending others, re-forming with a new partner, etc, and this re-configuring is on-going. Activities include re-combining existing resources for innovation, which often takes place via tinkering or exploring the vehicle through use. This is not ‘only’ domestic tinkering: market connector firms actually sell their innovations. There are relationships in place with the main supplier Land Rover, others in the supply network, and a close embedding in the various user communities in place.

As such, the user communities we discuss here are not those in the early stages of product or service commercialisation, as in much of the user innovation literature, but are instead on-going, with the clear existence of a producer firm. The user communities are clearly exchange settings outside of formal business relationships. At some point an exchange with Land Rover has to take place (to actually buy the vehicle!), but this is not necessarily an on-going relationship. The communities are sites for informal market exchange without the direct presence or support of the main supplier actor, but there are links between the communities and commercial actors. In other words, user enthusiasts require a business infrastructure to be in place.

We address two related research questions. First, how does a user play market connector role, and secondly, how does such a user alter the boundaries between the business network and the user community? The paper considers what underpins the capability to play multiple roles and thereby to cross multiple boundaries by market connector firms. The roles identified are overlapping, and they require conscious movements from one to another role, learning how to play a role in a particular situation, etc.

We draw on the concept of liminality to help theories this 'betwixt and between' state (Turner, 1969). Moreover, the market connector role is not that of a classic intermediary which enables the flow between the supply and demand sides. Instead, it is one of disrupting and connecting simultaneously. We suggest that the multiple roles played represent overlapping forms of agency, acquired by the connector firm, which can "emerge as a stabilising effect across entities, but can [also] feature entities destabilising one another" (Fries, 2010). Our focus then is not on whether or not this connector firm blurs the boundaries between markets, networks and communities, but in how the boundaries are accomplished, and how the connector firm benefits from reproducing boundaries which they enact (Stark, 2009).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we provide an overview of the relevant literatures, before specifically discussing the market connector role in sub-section 2.2. Sections 3 and 4 of the paper outline the research methodology, and provide some general background information to Land Rover. Afterwards, we exemplify the various market connector roles and the implications for the boundaries involved. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the market connector role in other empirical contexts.

2.0 Role playing and boundary shaping in network contexts

Networking activities in business networks involve managing in a network via relational connections rather than the unilateral management of that network. That is, "all firms are simultaneously involved in the ongoing management of the network, and the resulting structure and performance is co-produced by their actions" (Ritter, Wilkinson and Johnston, 2004:177). The networking activities are performed by an actor playing roles in enacting multiple network positions simultaneously (Mattsson, 1989; Easton and Araujo, 1989; Snehota, 1990; Anderson, Havila, Andersen and Halinen, 1998). A network position develops over time through investments by the focal actor in relationships (Johanson and Mattson, 1985; Mattson, 1989). More recently the network position concept has been intersected with the idea of mobilising from an existing position, using inter-organisational

projects to influence existing positions, and playing multiple roles from multiple positions. Section 2.1 below considers these ideas in more depth, before the market connector role is presented in section 2.2.

2.1. Multiple roles playing by customers

Recent research posits that firms have multiple roles when managing within nets and different roles can be played in order to manage in different net configurations. Möller and Svahn (2003) discuss how hub firms can have multiple roles in different and related (often overlapping) strategic nets. Furthermore, strategic nets are considered to be interrelated as actors hold multiple roles in different related nets (Möller, Rajala and Svahn, 2005). This requires managers to be able to classify the types of strategic nets they are involved in and be aware of the managerial challenges that follow from this.

In taking a process perspective, it is argued that multiple roles can be played by customers at the various phases of the radical innovation process. For example, Heikkinen et al. (2007) develop and present a typology of twelve roles for managing in business nets over time. Story et al (2011) build on this and argue that inter-organisational actors play different roles at different parts of an innovation process. It supports Bieman's (1991:172) study of the role of users in the development of medical devices, whereby the intensity of interaction between a manufacturer and users "varies dramatically depending on the stage of the product development process..."

Indeed from a user-dominant innovation perspective it is well established that customer firms and users (both individually and user networks) have a central role in the product design and commercialisation phases of innovation processes (e.g. Shaw, 1985; von Hippel, 1976, 1986, 2005; Håkansson, 1987; Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2006; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2007; Harrison and Waluszewski, 2008). These studies underline how products (Rosenberg, 1982; Rothwell et al, 1974; Lundvall, 1988) and services (Alam, 2002; Magnusson, 2003, 2009) are developed in interaction with customers/users in the user's setting rather than via independent supply-side efforts.

Hence users/consumers/the customer firm can be idea generators, product or service designers, technical support providers and distributors in the innovation process. This is especially; (i) as the user firm in technical development projects taking place in business relationships (Biemans, 1991; Foxall, 1989; Håkansson, 1989, Lundgren, 1995; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002), (ii) when embedded in user communities (e.g. Franke and Shah, 2003, Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2009; Urban and von Hippel, 1988, von Hippel, 2007), (iii) as

value co-creators in brand communities (Cova and Cova, 2002; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Cova, Kozinets et al. 2007; Füller, Jawecki et al. 2007; Füller, Matzler et al. 2008; Cova and Dallı, 2009), or (iv) in commercialisation processes at the net level (Harrison and Waluszewski, 2008).

Users can also be differentiated by their level of involvement in the innovation process. While many users have the potential to develop new uses for existing products or have ideas for new ones, so-called lead users or customers are said to “face needs that will be general in a marketplace [...] months or years before the bulk of that marketplace encounters them” (von Hippel, 1986:796) when perceiving the benefits of an innovation. This user type thereby innovates more than other users (Ibid.) and may become user manufacturers (depending on the sector; see Baldwin et al, 2006).

The concept of lead user has been applied in a variety of industrial and consumer settings, e.g. scientific instruments (von Hippel, 1976), PC-CAD development (Urban and von Hippel, 1988), Apache software (Franke and von Hippel, 2003) and sports equipment (Franke and Shah, 2003). In the more recent empirical studies of multiple users operating with user communities or networks in areas as diverse as biotechnology (Harrison and Waluszewski, 2008), sports equipment (Franke and Shah, 2003) and Library OPAC systems (Morrison et al, 2000b), the central theme is that the lead user does not innovate alone, but is instead connected with other innovative users. These connections influence the rate by which an innovation diffuses (Urban and von Hippel, 1998; Morrison et al, 2000a, b; Jeppesen and Molin, 2003).

There are a variety of roles for suppliers here (Gronroos 2008). At one extreme, suppliers are required to be involved in such communities in order to benefit from the value created by users (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2004). For example, a supplier might establish a user community after a new product has been launched (Jeppesen and Molin, 2003; Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006; Harrison and Waluszewski, 2008), perhaps resulting in product modifications and ideas for new applications, or take on the production of a product developed by users (e.g. Cova and Cova, 2002). Alternatively, user communities might operate outside of a formal supplier structure (e.g Urban and von Hippel, 1988; Lakhani and von Hippel, 2003; von Hippel, 2007). For example, ‘outlaw’ user communities may transform existing technology without a role for the supply side (Flowers, 2008; Schulz and Wagner, 2008).

2.2. An additional user role: the market connector

In this paper we propose a new role for the user. The ‘market connector firm/user’ is a heavy user of a product which performs multiple roles, including user-enthusiast, (re)designer, producer, modifier, reseller and retailer. Market connector firms operate ‘betwixt and between’ (after Turner, 1969) the business/formal and informal market/community when playing these multiple and overlapping roles.

User communities interact both in face-to-face and on-line spaces for the sharing of experience, problem solving, free-revealing and learning between and across users (see section 2.1 above for examples). This can take place with little or even no role for the supplier firm (although others in the supply network might have involvement, as it is unlikely that only one supplier is in place). Furthermore, on-line spaces may be adopted for problem solving and advice sharing across user communities. This could result in a fluid re-configuring of boundaries between communities, depending on the nature of the problem to be solved. The user literature is unclear as to what a user is able to do when they have reached the limits of the informal advice available within a community setting. It is likely that they would then access the formal business network in order to be able to obtain a solution.

We argue that the multiple roles played by ‘market connector’ firms underpin the overlapping organising forms (formal business network and user communities). A connector firm playing multiple roles does not operate as a hub ‘manager’. Put simply, the central role function as we see it is quite literally as a *connector*; an actor which influences and alters the boundaries between the business network and the user community on an ongoing basis. They are active in re-making relationships; ending those that do not work out, re-forming with a new partner, etc, and this re-configuring is ongoing. It is different from studies which report how “...leading edge users taking over a number of support functions that the firm would otherwise have to maintain” (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2004:17) in firm-established user communities.

What is the impact of the market connector user on the boundaries between the business network and the user community? The subject of boundaries between an organisation and its ‘environment’ is not surprisingly a long standing one within IMP. As Thompson (1967) observed, boundaries provide buffering as well as bridging functions; they separate as well as join the firm to its environment. Kogut and Zander (1996) describe a firm’s boundary as distinctive because co-ordination, communication and learning are situated not only physically in a locality but also mentally in an identity.

The theme is typically implied in many IMP studies, but explicitly discussed in the activity dimension within the IMP literature (e.g. Dubois, 1994; Torvatn, 1997), in terms of strategizing action (e.g. Axelsson, 1992), and that there are multiple boundaries in place in any given relationship (Håkansson and Gadde, 2001; Araujo et al, 2003). For example, von Corswant et al (2003) analysed which parts of the activity structures in the development of the Volvo S80 remained unchanged, which were moved and how new boundaries were created as Volvo changed their relationships with key suppliers.

One way in which network evolution occurs is therefore through networking activities that move boundaries, i.e. by bringing in resources and activities previously perceived as existing 'outside' the network, or through exploring new ways of combining separate sections of the network (Gadde and Håkansson, 2001). From a social constructionist perspective, because organisational boundaries only exist relative to human participants, they are somewhat arbitrary phenomena. In other words, entities emerge when actors tie boundaries together in certain ways (Abbott, 1995). This implies that, although no boundary given by nature exists, a range of demarcations can be imagined for different purposes, and indeed whole organisational units designed around these, such as key account managers and other such so-called 'boundary spanning' roles.

In the empirical material we address how the market connector acquires legitimacy in each sphere through their on-going market and community orientated practices. The connector firm must immerse themselves in each sphere, but not completely in any one. The data exemplifies various ways in which a market connector user plays multiple roles simultaneously. In so doing, that user disrupts, alters and connects the boundaries between the business network and user community on an ongoing basis.

We suggest that the multiple roles played represent overlapping forms of agency, acquired by the market connector firm, which can "emerge as a stabilising effect across entities, but can [also] feature entities destabilising one another" (Fries, 2010). Our focus then is not on whether or not this connector firm blurs the boundaries between markets, networks and communities, but in how the boundaries are accomplished, and how the connector firm benefits from reproducing boundaries which they enact (Stark, 2009).

The next section of the paper describes the research design underpinning the study, which is followed by sections 4 and 5 which exemplify the market connector role and the boundary altering impacts of various activities underpinning the roles played by this user.

3.0 Research method

In this paper we present empirical material organised using a case study methodological approach. The benefits of the case study research methodology for addressing ‘how and why’ questions are well known (see Yin, 2009, and Easton, 2010). Central to case study research is the use of multiple data sources. In this study we are bringing together data collected by means of observation and in-depth interviews; supplemented by secondary research. Specifically, the study brings together three data sets, in order to form one large embedded interpretive case study (Yin, 2003). The focal object is the Land Rover vehicle(s), with the case conceived as the market for Land Rover vehicles.

Our attempts at understanding the market connector role involved examination of a) Landrover user enthusiast communities, b) the aftermarket for Landrover vehicles and c) the business network. The user enthusiast organising form was studied by means of an in-depth examination of one such club, the Hillbillies. It is one of the three embedded sub-case studies underpinning the paper. While having their own unique attributes, this club is typical of many Land Rover clubs; they meet regularly, go off-road driving and green laning, share expertise and help each other in their modification projects, and go on trips to both socialise and enjoy their Land Rovers. The first author and her husband are members of this group, which facilitated the gaining of access to the rest of the group. Data was collected by means of ethnographic interviewing (December 2006), with 2 whole days spent with the community, one day in the yard of one of the members (where vehicles were undergoing work); the other day involved accompanying the group off-roading. Nine participants were interviewed in the data-gathering process; these participants are all core members of the group, and some of them are families and partners of others. Data was recorded (audio and visual) and fully transcribed (12 hours of tape).

The aftermarket and business network were studied by means of two further embedded sub-cases. One involved a visit to the Land Rover Owner International Billing Show (in 2010). This involved experiencing the show, talking with traders and taking in the range of exhibits, from enthusiasts/specialist clubs, vehicle re-building and other related activities. Field notes were made of observations. Furthermore, by reading through many issues of the LRO magazine, including special issues on the Billing show, one firm stood out as playing what we identified as a ‘connector firm’ role. Our final embedded sub-case is a study of this firm, Devon 4x4, and its owner. Initial data collection for this involved a visit to Devon 4x4 (July 2012), a full tour of the operation, and 5 hours of interview with the owner. Data was recorded and transcribed in full.

4.0 Background information on user community, Devon 4x4 and Landrover

*“...their [driving] abilities and obviously the ability to be able to strip them, rebuild them, hold great residual value, you know we could talk about that forever” Simon,
Devon 4x4*

The foundation for our analysis is the nature of the focal object itself, the vehicle. Each member of the Land Rover fleet has different levels of modifiability. The Defender is the most modifiable. This is enabled by a level of consistency in overall design since its inception in the 1970s; but also going back to its predecessor, the Series Land Rover. Exhibit 1 below tries to capture this consistency, particularly in overall body shape.

This means that parts from a 1970s Defender is interchangeable with, for example, a 2000’s model. Every part that makes up a Land Rover is available for individual purchase. This allows a user to completely (re)build a vehicle in a workshop setting. The study of consumer modification of products, through their usage is well developed within consumer (e.g. Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2009) and innovation research (e.g. Franke & Shah, 2003). Similarly for users of Land Rover vehicles, modifications emerge out of driving the vehicle in different settings and for different purposes.

Four main different uses can be discussed: (i) off-roading (can include competitions), (ii) green lane-ing, (iii) heritage / exhibiting, and (iv) expedition. It is important to note that any one given user with their vehicle could engage in these four differences concurrently. Alternatively, a user may specialise in one or two uses.



Series 1 circa 1950s



Series III circa 1970s



Defender 90 circa 1990s



Defender 90 circa 2010s

Exhibit 1: The lineage of the Land Rover Defender

First, the use category ‘off-roading’ would be in place when most modifications were being performed. These can include simply adding, for example, a snorkel, winch, or specialist tyres. But it could also include re-working intrinsic parts, such as modifying springs, shock absorbers, and adding lift (raising height of vehicle for clearance). The second use category, ‘green lane-ing’ can be referred to as ‘soft-roading’. What is central here is driving skill to handle less well-used roads. Modification of the vehicle is not required. It is typical that users which go ‘off-roading’ also go green lane-ing.

Essentially this vehicle was designed in 1983 [indicates the 110] and everything bolts on and everything bolts off. Even to this day all Defenders are hand built, whereas most modern cars are robot built. So everything is spot welded on. Every panel on this can be taken off, and put to one side and put back on again. So what we essentially have here is ‘big boys’ mecano’. So it’s like that we can take it apart and bolt things on in different places and see if it works. Like Darrel’s Landrover down below, if you look at the blue roof [indicates a roof lying on the ground down the yard], that was the roof on his Landrover. That’s what it came with, and because of what we wanted to do, we needed a truck cab like that [indicates the 110 truck cab beside him in the yard], we just took the truck cab of another vehicle over there and bolted it on to that one. You can’t do that to a Nissan, you can’t do that to a Toyota, unless you have an awful lot of skill in panel beating or something like that. So it’s a modular system we have here essentially, we can start with a chassis and just bolt things on. And because the running gear on all Landrovers is essentially the same, we can take bits of a Discovery and bolt them to a Defender.(Kevin from the Hillbilly Landrover Community)

When engaged in ‘heritage/exhibiting’ a user is involved in exhibiting Series vehicles (pre 1970s), and also classic range rovers, but anything ‘not new’, or somewhat interesting, (e.g. 1960s series IIA fire truck, 1970 range rover ambulance, 1990’s camel trophy discovery) can have some heritage value. The fourth possible use, ‘expedition’, is somewhat specialist.

¹ A truck cab is a Landrover with an open ended back end and the solid roof over the driver and passenger only

It is a use which is close to the heart of many enthusiasts. It involves preparing the vehicle for long haul travel, for example, to drive from South Africa to Tanzania. Users can engage in expeditions either from land rover themselves, who run an adventure holiday tour operator (see <http://www.landroverexpeditions.com/tanzania-expedition/>) or self-organised (http://www.adventureandrew.com/africa/diary_safrica.html)

For any of these uses the owner/driver can engage in rebuild, refurbishment or restoration activities (arranged into projects) depending on the original state of the vehicle itself. Restoration refers to bringing the vehicle back to its original state, and fits with the heritage use outlined above. Refurbishment refers to taking specific component parts in order to either repair or enhance their capability. Rebuild refers to a significant remaking of the whole vehicle in order to enhance its capability and/or prepare the vehicle for off roading/green lane-ing/expeditions.

In the following quote one of the users, Kevin (in the Hillbillies), explains the design process involved in a major re-build of a Landrover, and indicates the kind of skills required to undertake this kind of work. The focus is how they worked on the back of the vehicle in order to develop light weight storage to keep their replacement parts on board. This is important for the ability to perform ‘field repairs’ while out off-roading:

Once we had the chassis cut we did a lot of mocking up, which isn't usual, we usually do a lot of 'seat of the pants stuff'. Our criteria were that there would be no overhang, the wheels would be the back of the vehicle and the front would be as is...you know. It's custom built and it suits exactly what we want. I mean Dermot is very good at the engineering bit and everything that was done mechanically or welding-wise Dermot would have done to it...[talking about tail lights] I mean we did those, they are unique we kept all Landrover parts, it still looks like a Landrover, and its identifiable as a Landrover, but there are unique bits on it. Quite a lot of people are doing something similar on 90's but no one has done what we have there. We've built a lot of stuff in that, there's a lot of room...we've all this built in stuff. As we've been doing a lot of off-roading we have to carry spare parts. We use the machines quite to the extreme, so invariably we are going to break stuff. We have to carry a good range of stuff. So we can carry what we need in there, all our oils, spares and all that. We were able to incorporate that into the design of the thing, whereas a standard vehicle all that has to be added afterwards, which increases the weight and what we were trying to do is to keep things as light as possible.

5.0 Findings

With some background detail on Land Rover and the user communities in place, in this section we will demonstrate that Simon and other employees of Devon 4x4 are also Landrover user enthusiasts, described here in terms of their club activities, driving activities,

and modifying activities. These will be compared with data from our user community to both elaborate on the user role and demonstrate Simon's user 'credentials'.

Simon remains involved in his local club, which he helped establish. This demonstrates that he maintains different roles in the market place, as user enthusiast, and as a trader (fabricator, distributor, retailer) etc.

[Interviewer: so you're not in the club, local clubs anymore, but you say like a lot of the staff is?] Ahm, Jake is, I'm the president, that means I can do hangings, floggings, marriages, divorce, anything like that [laughter], but basically the reason they made me president, I started it along with another chap but I'm not really involved with it that much, they need to keep me as a figure head because it's good for the club, and that means they can scrounge things off me, but it takes me away from being chairman that actually does anything, so it's a nice way of keeping me sweet, [laughter]

Even though Landrovers are his business he makes efforts to empathise with new Landrover enthusiasts, and "we used to go green-laning, all the kind of off-roading that everybody does, pay and play days, and I'm never trying to forget this because it's really important to remember what it was like when you were coming through, you know when you're dealing with the customers, and [who are saying] 'I desperately wanted to do this'"

Simon and other employees are involved in off-road driving competitions and other Landrover related driving events. This on-going interaction with the user community is a vital activity underpinning their reconfiguration practices. In the following quote Simon lists kinds of bush repairs that he has personally engaged in while competing. This kind of usage of the vehicles has led them to modify, and bring to market, a number of innovations.

you can weld as long as you have a couple of batteries and jump leads, ... we've used ratchet straps to replace shock absorbers to replace leaf springs, ahm, we've parked under a tree where we broke an engine mount so we've used a winch around the snatch block around the tree, lift the engine up to change it [yeah] in that case we were in Australia and we had to take a bent track-rod off, because our wheels were like that (indicates wheels at very different levels) a heavy duty one, and we found this big old gnarly tree with huge roots, so we put the track-rod through the high-lift jack and jacked it straight

Simon at Devon 4x4, and members of his staff can be considered user enthusiasts, and engage in similar sorts of activities as members of our focal user community; including driving, re-building, designing etc. For example, during our research visit, employees were observed working on a) what Simon termed the workshop scrap dog, a vehicle that had been

used as donor vehicle, and was now getting a new lease of life, and b) working on their own vehicle, in their own time, but using the workshop to do this.

“This actually belongs to us [pointing out vehicle in workshop], we’ve got tons of scrap, we call it the scrapyard dog, ... but I’ve owned it for years, I bought it, sold it to a customer, they had it for 6 years, bought a new one, we didn’t want to buy it back but we did, and we put a TDI [engine] in it, I’d never sell it again, it’s a topper, it’s the best vehicle we own and the fastest 300 TDI any of us have ever driven, it goes like the clappers, nobody can explain it...”

“Jake is normally in Sales, he’s on holidays and he’s here working on this, the truck essentially belongs to the business, but it’s kind of his and the local pursuit police driver is his co-driver and they build it, they steal or scrounge second-hand stuff, ex-development stuff, bits that have come off my truck, and they build it and they off-road it, and I support them”

The activities associated with restoring, refurbishing and rebuilding a Land Rover will be supported by user communities in varying ways, including: the trading in second hand parts and even vehicles, the sharing of case studies, including photographs, and in offering of advice to other members. Indeed while user communities will have important social uses, users will make use of these organising forms to learn about and carry out modification projects. Members within and across user communities share the experience of driving Landrovers and also, often receive help from each other to solve problems:

[When I first came along to Hillbilly], I was looking for people to go off-roading with, to go driving. It’s not so much fun to go by yourself if you get stuck. You need people to help, and also, kind of, information, contacts for the spare parts, and for help fixing the Land Rover. As I said, at that stage, we had just finished rebuilding our old Land Rover, and I knew how to fix it, but still learning as well, so the notion of some kind of people who can help was there.

Our analysis identified two key sites of community activity. These are the workshop and off-road respectively. Both can be places for the repair of vehicles, but larger modifications will take place in the workshop, where the group have access to tools, lifting equipment etc. Both the forums and the enthusiast communities themselves become sites for the sharing of knowledge and expertise regarding restoring, refurbishing and rebuilding Land Rovers. These kinds of sharing activities are further supported by Land Rover-related publications (e.g. Land Rover Owner International) and shows (e.g. Billing show <http://billing.lroshow.com/>). Exhibit 2 below is an example of a user project shared, in this instance on Landyzone (<http://www.landyzone.co.uk/lz/>), where responses and suggestions come from other members of the forum.

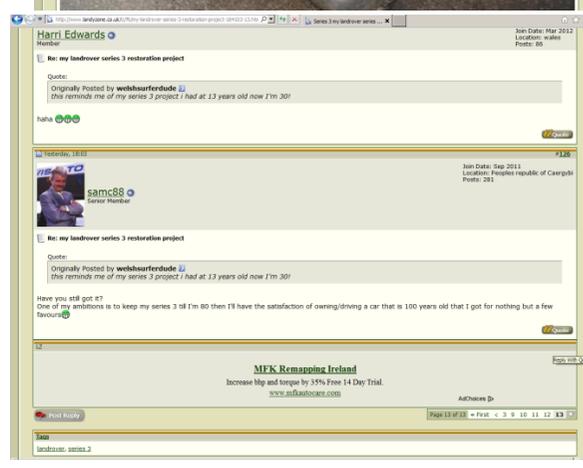
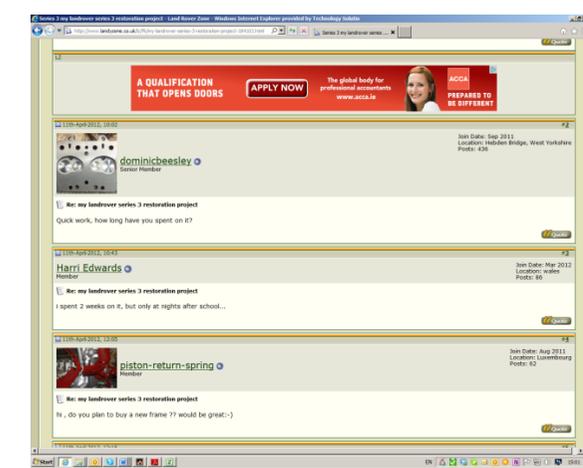
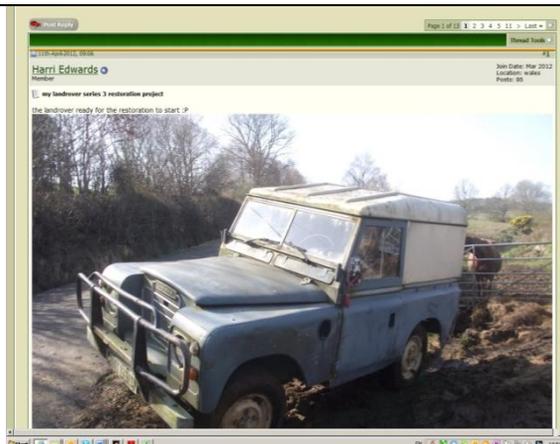


Exhibit 2: example of LR user sharing their rebuild project on an on-line community forum and getting helpful feedback from other members

The following quote from a Hillbilly enthusiast describes the use of the forum in the case of their club, which, at one time, had members in Ireland and the UK:

The forum would be our sense of point of contact, between ourselves and the lads in the UK, it wouldn't be as important to us here as we met each other regularly or would be on the phone. So it isn't that essential among ourselves, if we have an event we post it up, or if I am having a problem with something I would post it up. Like my tyres or something and Robert might see it [the post] who would say he'd talk to his dad who used to be in that field (to get advice). I subscribe to a number of forums in the UK for that same reason, if we had an issue that we couldn't resolve, then we'd take it there. I mean you're just into a bigger pot of expertise; there are some guys who have nothing and other guys who would give great advice. One of the things about the forms is working out the advice [in terms of which is better]. The forum is good fun, lots of peripheral things going on, which is good fun.

In the next quote Kevin illustrates that that boundaries between clubs are fluid, and members will reach out to different user communities for different purposes:

[Talking about another Land Rover community Hillbilly he used to contact]. There is no competition at all. [...] We all keep in contact; Tom [from another community] keeps in contact with people who can do really high technical jobs, so we can get a lot of connection from him. Even though we are doing the design by ourselves, we have huge skills in technology, but we still have backup. We have problem that we can't solve, then we go to get help from them.

The vast array of enthusiast user groups means that users can access much expertise and support gratis. However, there will be limits to both this kind of support, and the owners own expertise. It is at these limits where users will access the formal business network of Landrover related retailers, manufacturers/fabricators and service firms. Users can therefore look to different user communities for help and support in their Land Rover modification projects, (involving informal exchange) and/or turn to the formal business network (involving market exchanges).

Alongside the user enthusiast role described above, Devon 4x4 is actually a collection of different stand-alone businesses, which Simon as the owner has developed over time (see Figure 1 below). These include: a service station (selling fuel etc); a service business, which includes the workshops and servicing Land Rovers and other vehicles; D44 is the fabrication business including designing and producing bespoke parts and accessories; and D44 store which is, mainly, a mail order business retailing their own and other branded parts and accessories.

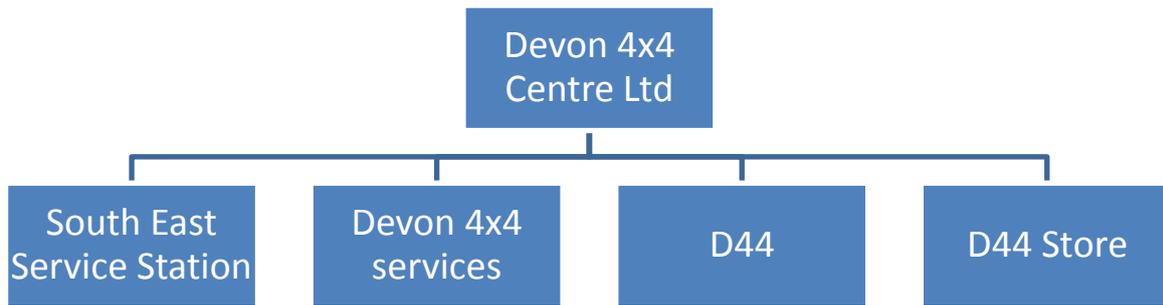


Figure 1: The multiple businesses that make up Devon 4x4

6.0 Discussion: Traversing Boundaries and Emphasising Difference

In the following section we will describe how Devon 4x4 intentionally traverse boundaries between user enthusiast and trader bringing together different role identities, for example (i) club member-retailer; (ii) driver-designer/services, and (iii) enthusiast-reseller.

For Simon it is important that his employees remain active in local Landrover user communities. For example, Jake who is in sales is supported in the refurbishment of his Landrover (donated by Simon). This is for commercial reasons, so he can get to know the vehicle from the inside out, but also to demonstrate a commitment to the local Landrover community.

Jake's a perfect example of what we do, Jake relocated from Slough to come in here and he came down and started in the Stores and now he's my top sales person when he isn't gallivanting or on holidays, scrounging bits for his off-roader [jovial attitude – pleasantries exchanged] but what they do buy, I think Jake would be the first to admit he knows not that much about the technical side of LandRovers or off-roading side but by going out and competing, and nailing this together [indicating the Landrover] he's learning, so when people phone up he's able to talk with authority about the way forward, or understand the problems or the requirements, so you know, that's why it's partly a loyalty thing, Jake works hard for me so we repay him with helping him go off-roading but you know it works both ways, also it's also an education process, so like the roll-cage is one of my old roll-cages, bumper's an old bumper, the suspension is off an earlier truck, do you know what I mean?

For Devon 4x4 design capabilities underpin both their off-road usage of the vehicle, but importantly, their commercial success. Combining their off-road usage, design capabilities and network contacts enables Devon 4x4 to commercialise their designs, of both vehicles and

parts/accessories; “now it came into existence because I needed to do it, so I made it, we got asked for it so you know it becomes a product” (Simon).

“I hate to say this, but what separates us from a lot of our competitors is we design it, we alter it, we trial it, we develop it, you know and we try to get it absolutely right before we release it, most people they get in their garage and come up with these few bits and pieces, they knock them out”

Devon 4x4 retail and re-sell many key brands in the Landrover aftermarket and accessories market. In this setting Simon has to maintain his trader and enthusiast role identities contiguously; that is you are dealing with people who are passionate about what they do, and what their products enable people to do, but at the same time are running a business in a highly competitive and dynamic market. In these situations you have to read which role identity to ‘play’ and it won’t be possible to always get it right. In the following narrative Simon is explaining the situation surrounding them losing the licence to sell a particular brand of off-roader accessories; in essence he pitched to get the sole UK licence, but by approaching it too informally, i.e. relying on enthusiast based ties, he misread the situation and pitched badly, ultimately losing the contract:

[I communicated with them] saying we would like autonomy because it had already been suggested, we do enough business to be stand-alone, and that triggered a whole raft of changes, and what I wasn’t ready for, what I wasn’t prepared for, I did... not a bad presentation but my presentation was very informal because I know [the guys] that came over [representing the company]

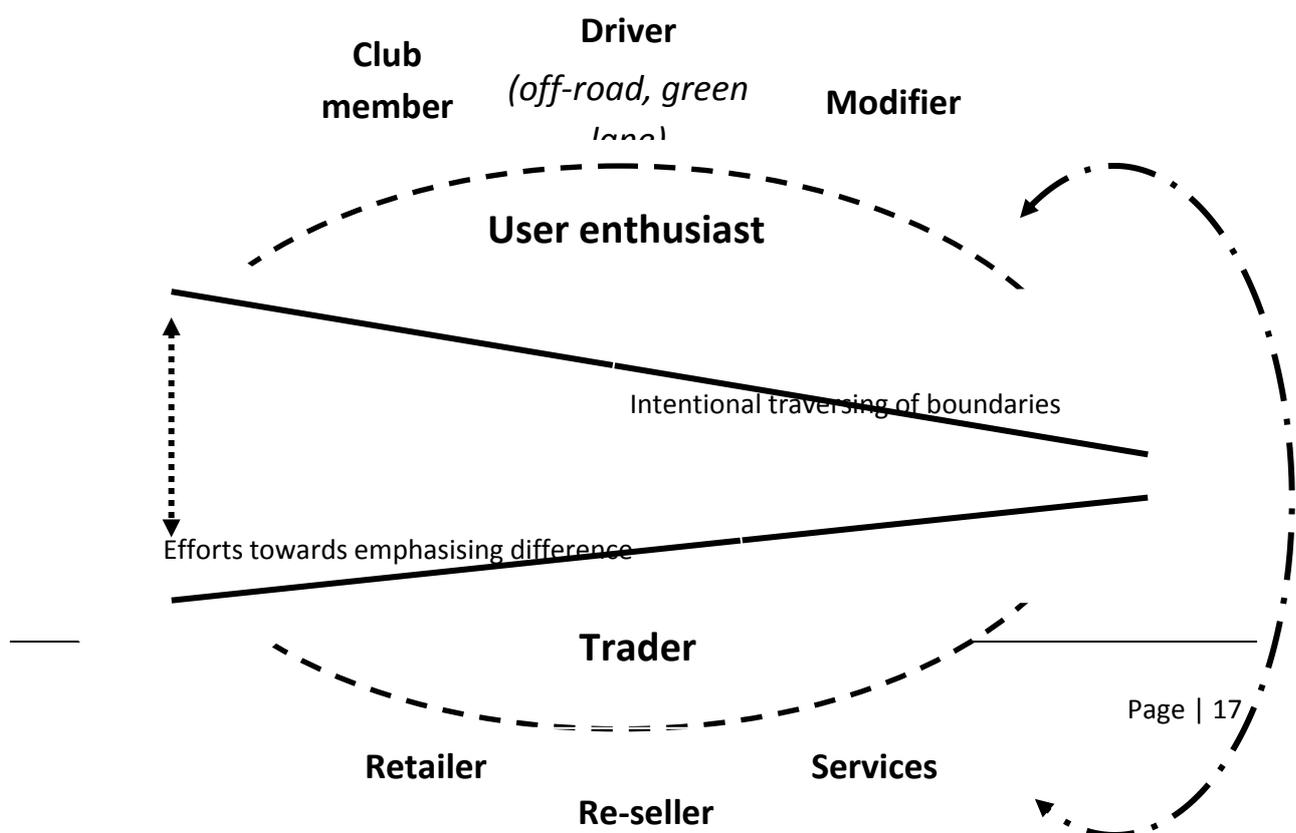


Figure 2: Boundary altering in the trader and user enthusiast roles

Simon as a market connector also works towards maintaining boundaries between user enthusiasts, after-market actors and Landrover. Devon's legitimacy as a market actor emerges out their ability to be traders and enthusiasts at the same time; both these role identities are required in the performance of their market shaping role. For example Devon is a preferred supplier to Landrover and Landrover experience. This is something that Simon is very proud of, and is testament to the quality of their products (design and production).

“Devon 4x4 has been supplying genuine Plasma 12 rope for many years. As a preferred supplier to the Land Rover G4 Challenge, Land Rover Experience and many utility companies such as the Environment Agency, we need to be sure that our synthetic winch ropes are better, stronger and more reliable. All winch ropes are NOT the same. Insist on genuine Plasma 12 rope” (from company website²)

For Simon though, he feels it is important that he is not seen as simply an off-shoot of Landrover; that he remains separate, independent. This independence provides a safe distance to be kept between Landrover and the user communities, who are not always positive about the firms' policies and plans.

There was a time when LandRover said ‘we don't mind you saying that you're a preferred supplier' but we don't, I don't want to queer my pitch by flying on their laurels, I would much rather it comes out organically. There are companies that employ somebody [and] all their paid to do is to go on forums, chat sites, and stuff like that, and pump up products, it's called sticky marketing... we don't do it, we watch it carefully, and we have people do it on our side, we can spot it, but I would much rather like on the D3 forum, you know, we were following a thread, we're not members at all but we were just watching it, ‘oh that's D44's kit they've got on there I recognise that', ‘yeah, I've got that', do you know- so that, that does it for us

...so we have a really great crew of Bluechip companies [incl Landrover, Landrover Experience, public services and aerospace companies] that I would never ever abuse, to market, insofar as, I never use them in ads or anything like that...off-roading is a means to an ends, it's work, I like certain.. I'm not interested in winch challenges, I just don't want to winch up and down muddy hills, it's just it's boring, and I want to drive, I'll winch when I get stuck, I do three peaks in Ireland because it's a great craic, a great group of people, a lot of camaraderie, it's non-competitive and you can just go off-roading because you can, because it's there [and the terrain is challenging] and my heart is there because that's where I started my first organised stuff, but off-roading is work, and the problem is that when you go to an event, ...you'll go to some competitions and get ‘I bought this', [or] ‘I bought this off you but I didn't think it was quite right so I made it like this, come and have a look', or ‘I bought this, I've had it

²http://www.devon4x4.com/index.php?page=shop.browse&category_id=201&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=14 accessed 13th March 2013

for 17 years and ... and it's just stopped working, what can you, can you come out and have a look at it', and you've got to do it, and you know it becomes a place of work, you've got to mind what you're saying, you've got to be – not politically correct – but you've got to... there are certain places you've just got to be right, and if somebody's in trouble you've got to go and help them, you've got your one spare bit, they've broken one and haven't got one, you've got to be seen [to give it to them].. and we do it, and do it with good grace...

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have introduced a new user role, that of the market connector. Our empirical material presented above as addressed two related research questions regarding how the role is performed and how boundaries are altered as a result. Market connector users perform multiple roles in networks. Our data shows the tension and efforts in playing out more than one network position simultaneously, and illustrates a different type of role in network contexts beyond that of the hub firm. The market connector user role also goes beyond that of a lead user and / or a lead user manufacturer currently discussed within the user innovation literature.

The impact of the market connector on boundaries links to a very long standing but somewhat neglected theme within IMP. It is typically investigated in terms of the activity dimension or in terms of network evolution. In the study reported here, the linking of boundaries and role playing highlights the intentional efforts of both maintaining boundaries and of trying to change these. It also shows how it is difficult to 'get it right' every time; sometimes the different role identities are too blurred. Further empirical work could consider both similar users to Devon 4x4 and how their role playing differed from what is analysed above, as well as consider other market contexts than that of Land Rover whereby particular users interface across user communities and business networks.

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