

Experts' Viewpoints on Luxury Frontline Employees: What competencies to deliver service quality?

Abstract

The interaction between luxury salespersons and clients has been the subject of several recent studies. This study questions not only the role of salespersons but also the role of every employee who interacts with clients in the luxury sector. What attitude should luxury frontline personnel adopt? What skills should they master? To shed light on these questions, this study is the first to present luxury experts' viewpoints, drawn from an exploratory qualitative study. The thematic analysis identifies five main competencies and twenty sub themes illustrated by verbatim and frequency of appearance, and then related to previous results in the literature.

Key words: Luxury frontline's role, Experts sales force management, Service competencies, Luxury Service experience, Service quality.

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1. Introduction

The importance of the sales team is especially relevant in the luxury sector, as Merk (2014, xviii) points out: "Salespersons, especially in service-driven industries such as luxury, stand directly between the customer, the brand and its product." They are therefore liable to have a strong positive or negative influence on the sales encounter outcome. In the luxury sector, the customer's experience is of paramount importance (De Lassus and Freire 2014). Luxury clients are not just seeking a satisfying experience but they are looking for an extraordinary experience (Collier et al. 2018). As the authors point out, luxury customers have higher service expectations than in the past. They are more demanding due to bloated egos and expectations of a "best in class" service and product (Voorhees et al. 2017). In this context, frontline employees play a central role to achieve extraordinary experiences.

In the Luxury sector, salespersons and frontline employees in general participate in the founder's storytelling and the brand personality (Dion and Arnould 2011). They deliver the brand experience and shape brand perceptions (Harris and de Chernatony 2001, 441; Kreutzer and Salomon 2009, 36). They are the brand's personification (Merk 2014, 1) and the interface for its external stakeholders (Harris and de Chernatony 2001, 441; Okonkwo 2007, 164). Luxury brand salespersons and frontline employees are brands most important assets, but not always trained to the brand's customer orientation and marketing strategies (Fitzgerald and Moon 1996, Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Insufficient training and poor interaction with the client could harm the brand image. Recent research on luxury salesperson-client interactions (Wang, Chow and Luk 2013; Ward and Dahl 2014; Kim, Park, Lee and Choi 2016) indicates that while researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of the salesperson's role, many of them still question the nature and effectiveness of these interactions (Wang, Chow and Luk 2013; Ward and Dahl 2014; Wieseke et al. 2016; Chiou J.S., Hsiao C.C. 2017). What attitude should salespersons and frontline employees adopt? What competencies should they master? Should they display arrogance? Should they be snobbish? Should they adopt a "Devil sells Prada" attitude to bolster clients' aspirations or should they be friendly (e.g. encouraging friendly commercial relations between the sales personnel and customers) as advocated by Rosenbaum, Russell-Bennett, and Drennan (2015)? Should they create an emotional experience of exclusivity and prestige? What communication should they pass on? Should they use informative or emotional communication (Wieseke et al. 2016)? These questions focus on interactions employees could have with customers at different touch point during the whole customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Interactions are essential, but needs more investigation to improve the selection and training of salespersons and frontline employees.

As mentioned by (Ehbauer and Gresel 2013), most of the past research has analyzed the interaction patterns of luxury salespersons with customers mainly from the customers' viewpoint. However, the experts select and train frontline employees. As Gurzki and Woisetschläger (2017; 161) recently argued, "Research in the managerial perspective could provide insights into, for example, how luxury brands make use of new technologies in production, marketing, and sales, or how they manage and orchestrate a network of partners to deliver their customer experience." Previous research has not yet produced a comprehensive framework built of expert accumulated experience that identifies the key skills required to ensure the level of performance luxury salespersons and frontline employees need in order to produce an extraordinary service experience. Teaching a luxury salesperson and frontline employees to become a true brand ambassador requires the holistic experience of confirmed experts that have spent their working lives managing salespersons in large luxury firms. These experts consider the whole service experience that goes beyond the focus on customer-salesperson interactions and beyond the question concerning an arrogance versus friendliness' attitude, or the question of emotional versus informative communication style. Based on an exploratory qualitative analysis of the viewpoints of European academic and professional experts, our study provides an integrative framework that identifies the key dimensions of the luxury service experience. Thematic analysis of their discourse unpack the main themes used by experts to organize their knowledge about the salesperson and frontline employee's skills and training needed to achieve service excellence. More specifically, this paper draw a list of the competencies luxury experts deem necessary in their vision of the role of a salesperson and frontline employees able to create a memorable customer experience. The results advocates expanding the role of the salesperson beyond a mere sales objective and aligning it with a strategy that aims to create lasting relationships with customers. To become a true brand ambassador, salespersons and frontline employees need continuous training combined with clear performance indicators. We contribute to this goal by delineating twenty competencies themes clustered under five main areas resulting from the thematic analysis of luxury experts' viewpoints.

In the first section, we review the literature to pinpoint the advances and remaining gaps to build a general framework for evaluating luxury salespersons through the application of a service-oriented approach. The second section presents the main findings of a qualitative thematic analysis of experts' discourse. In the third section, we discuss the results, their practical implications, their limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining luxury services

It is not easy to define luxury. Cristini et al. (2017, 105) argued that luxury “owns a complex meaning; it has more than one meaning depending on the context.” The literature does not offer a unanimous definition. Ghosh and Varshney (2013) believe that luxury product consumption can be defined by (1) product specificities (superior quality, aesthetics, high price, history, utility and perceived exclusivity); (2) consumer characteristics (income level, culture, generation) and (3) consumer motivations: hedonistic, ostentatious and self-expressive motivations. Dubois et al. (2001) add exclusivity and rarity to a luxury, resulting from the quality of materials and homemade expertise. Finally, aesthetics and poly-sensuality characterize both the product and the sales environment. Kapferer and Michaut (2016) review a large number of definitions of luxury. They suggest that luxury can be defined as: “access to hedonistic, very high-quality objects, experiences and personal services, sold at a price well above what their functional value would command, which represent sources of a sense of privilege, taste and refinement, and produce recognition by relevant others due to the power of the brand.” These two definitions of luxury emphasize the role of personal services. They invite us to develop a better conceptualization of the specificity of services rendered by luxury frontline and salespersons.

2.2. Luxury: a service approach

Research in luxury marketing generally focuses on brand management, consumer values and perceptions of luxury product characteristics (Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012, 2014; Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels 2009). As Gurzki and Woisetschläger (2017, 161) recently observed, there is relatively “little research on luxury retailing, sales and services compared to studies in other related fields”. In a service driven industry such as luxury, few researches mobilizes the service marketing literature. As Vargo and Lush (2004) point out, the luxury industry’s business model, initially oriented towards product and brand valuation, is progressively moving towards a service-dominant logic. As noted by Ahn, Park and Hyun (2018), nowadays many luxury brands seek to evolve into luxury service brands. Delivering the service is a process that includes interactions between the salesperson, the customer and the physical environment, which forms the “servicene” needed to deliver the brand’s specific universe (Bitner, 1992). There has been little research to date on the internal organization and interaction of all these elements in the luxury sector at the encounter of service delivery (Lovelock and Wirtz 2016). Following Kapferer and Bastien (2009), the specific features of luxury marketing require specifically adapted service dimensions. Service experience is a useful concept to understand the importance of the salesperson’s role in the luxury sector (Grewal, Levy and Kumar 2009, Lemon and Verhoef 2016, Puccinelli et al., 2009, Verhoef et al., 2009). A service experience occurs when a customer experiences emotion and acquires knowledge through interacting with a salesperson within a context created by the service provider (Pullman and Gross, 2004). The concept of internal brand management (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; King and Grace, 2009), predominant in the service brand literature (Kreutzer and Salomon, 2009; Scheys and Baert 2007), acknowledges that, ultimately, it is the frontline staff who delivers the intangible offering and the brand promise.

2.3. Luxury service and frontline employees role

The service literature emphasizes the concept of customer orientation. Staff behavior is an integral part of the production of services and a key aspect of successful business-customer interactions. Two major concepts emerge in the literature: customer orientation (Saxe and Weitz, 1982) and salesperson adaptability (Weitz et al., 1986). Customer orientation is a set of customer support behaviors that facilitate purchase decision. Salespersons are “customer oriented” when they engage in behavior leading to long-term client satisfaction (Kelley, 1992). They show flexibility in adjusting the offer to customer needs over time. The recurrent nature of the relation favor the development of “commercial friendship” with frontline people as noted by Price and Arnould (1999), leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty. A study conducted in the field of luxury catering (Juhee and Hyun, 2012) underscored the central role of employees’ customer orientation, particularly the capacity to generate positive word of mouth. The authors tested the impact of two different communication styles corresponding to “dominant” or more “friendly” behaviors. The results show that a friendlier, open and casual style reinforces the customer’s perception of being catered. A friendly attitude reduces social intimidation and enhances the client’s position in the social hierarchy (Dion and Borraz, 2017).

In the luxury sector, it is not enough to satisfy customers (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder and Lueg, 2005). It seems that “a truly extraordinary service experience” (Collier et al., 2018) is necessary to provide “a memorable experience” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The concept of Idiosyncratic Service Experience (ISE) encompasses three interpersonal aspects “1) the perceived effort the employee exhibits in meeting customer needs, 2) the ability to surprise customers in the service process, and 3) the perceived empathy to customers during the experience” (Collier et al., 2018). Luxury companies focus on their exclusive, top-flight service to create emotional engagement with the luxury brand (Shukla et al., 2016; Prentice and Loureiro, 2018). According to Cervellon and Coudriet (2013), the seller is like a real ambassador, the country represented being the brand, with its own culture, and the store being the embassy that protects the brand and its culture. The ambassadors welcome customers to the world of the brand. For these authors, the sellers and their interactions with the customer form part of the brand’s identity. Frontline employees are the human contacts between the brand and the customer. In fact, the brand’s expertise and power has to materialize through the seller-client relationship.

Since luxury’ salespersons interact directly with the client, their role is emotionally demanding. Delcourt et al. (2016) use the term emotional competency to qualify it. They need to adjust their appearance based on what their employer and their customers expect (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). They must “be” the brand. Sirianni et al. (2013) speak of branded service encounters to describe the staff’s alignment with the brand’s positioning. This positioning can manifest itself in several ways: the salesperson’s appearance, their knowledge of the brand and their personality that must be congruent with the luxury brand’s personality.

For Dion and Borraz (2017), the language and attitude of the seller towards the customer is a way of positioning the luxury brand and filtering a clientele that does not feel it belongs to the brand’s “superior” social class as represented by the seller. Thus, for Ward and Dahl, (2014), the “devil should sell Prada” by having a distant and haughty demeanor. However, Dion and Borraz (2017) also highlight the possibility that some clients refuse to submit to this social intimidation, with the risk of losing target clients. In fact, according to Kim and Kim (2014), it is better if the staff is friendly. In the same line, a recent study about frontline staff demonstrate that employees should also be authentic in their interactions (Lechner and Paul, 2019). This research also pinpoints the variability in customer perceptions of frontline employee emotion authenticity according to customer affect and thinking style.

The literature emphasizes the positive impact of salesperson brand identification (Adidam, 2009; Merk, 2014). The retail literature praises salespeople with brand identification (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, and Gruen, 2005; Badrinarayanan and Laverie, 2011; Hughes and Ahearne, 2010; Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008) but recently Berger-Remy and Michel (2015) and Merk and Michel (2019) demonstrated that excessive identification could generate deviant behavior, uncovering the “dark side” of sales people with high brand identification. These sales people present high resistance to change and develop a selling approach with strong brand centrality but little customer orientation. This in turn generates negative perceptions among customers with high brand and product expertise.

This leads us to question the specific nature of luxury service, and the behaviors and attitudes that salespersons and frontline staff should adopt in this sector. We tackle the issue from a new angle by analyzing the viewpoints of luxury experts rather than adopting the consumers’ perspective as most of the literature do. According to Burton, Gruber and Gustafsson (2020) researchers need to understand better the issues the companies faced and thus should cooperate with managers. Merk and Michel (2019) outline equally the need to include interviews with managers. Given their extensive years of experience in recruiting and coaching luxury frontline employees, it will be illuminating to see if the opinions of managerial luxury experts confirm or extend what is known so far from the customers’ viewpoint. The next section describes the qualitative study conducted with a sample of professionals and academic experts with professional experience. The main themes and sub themes of their discourse structure our panel member experience on how the frontline employee should conduct a luxury encounter and the competencies required.

3. The qualitative study: data collection and analyses

We conducted a qualitative study with professional experts and researchers with over 20 years of experience in the luxury sector. We selected experts to be different as possible with respect to the luxury industry and gender as well as their area of expertise to cover a broad range of professional backgrounds. Appendix 1 lists the experts’ names and job titles. An expert is an individual who has special knowledge or skills in a specific area; in contrast, a novice is an individual with no knowledge of the area in question (Glaser and Chi, 1988). Decaudin and Elayoubi (2009) distinguish two types of experts: (1) academic experts, professors and researchers, whose expertise come from theoretical knowledge and the

results of their research; and (2) expert managers or professionals specialized in a category of products/services, who have accumulated their expertise over several years of experience. This experience gives them extensive expertise in the specific aspects of the role of vendors and frontline employees of luxury products or services.

From this perspective, the experts convey the culture and subcultures to which they belong, and so form a representative sample (Michelat, 1975). These experts have internalized practices, experience and knowledge in their activity sector. At the same time, anecdotes, affect and detail give us in-depth insights into these cultures. The replication or originality of the bundles of anecdotes and short narratives enable us to disentangle the different threads, providing us with insights for a global understanding. Our aim is therefore to highlight the most significant aspects of the interactions of salespersons and frontline employees in the luxury sector to gain a better understanding of the notion of luxury service. Diverse luxury industry experience and different theoretical background in management, economy or marketing provide a better representability¹.

An interview guide served as a framework for the interviews. A specialist of in depth interview conducted 11 of the interviews while the authors conducted the last two. The interviews began with an introductory sentence; "In your opinion, what makes a service a luxury service?" During the interviews, we were careful to let our experts develop their ideas freely, at times probing them further to clarify certain concepts or ideas that seemed useful for our study. This process gave us a deeper understanding, while addressing the two main topics listed in our interview guide: the specificities of luxury services and the salesperson's role.

Thanks to the data collection support from Luxury Attitudes, 13 individual semi-structured interviews were achieved: seven with professional managers from seven luxury industries (fashion, hospitality, jewelry, cosmetics and consultancy) and six with academic researchers specialized in this field from different disciplines (sociology, management, economy, marketing, anthropology) and with extended consultation activities in the luxury sector. Our aim was to make the interviews as close as possible to natural conversation and to help experts express themselves freely about their vision and experience of the luxury service in their industry. With their agreement, we recorded and transcribed all of the narratives. This freed us from note taking that limits and selectively filters discourse. The interviews lasted between 55 to 75 minutes. Using the Sphinx IQ software, a lexical and thematic analysis on the corpus of 65224 words was conducted. The lexical analysis lists the vocabulary and highlights the various views of the luxury service experts, while the thematic analysis synthesizes the input. The professionals tended to express themselves more abundantly, both in the length of their speech turns (60 words against 45 for academics) and in terms of the length of sentences (8 words against 6 for academics). Feelings analysis shows a more positive slant by professionals, while academics tend to be more critical. Our experts unanimously devoted most of their discourse to the role and competencies expected from salespersons as part of the luxury service. From our in-depth analysis of the entire corpus, we drew up a list of five themes and twenty sub-themes, resulting in 8,954 words, classified into the 20 sub-themes by the three coders. Discrepancies among coders were checked and resolved. Overall, the academics and professionals agreed. We noted some discrepancies however between academics and professionals, summarized in Figure 2. The five themes and 20 sub-themes describe what the experts expect from salespersons and frontline employees in the field of luxury. More precisely, they highlight 1) the ability to offer a service that guarantees an emotion of prestige and exclusivity 2) the ability to personalize the relationship with customers, 3) "savoir-être", 4) the ability to manage temporality, and 5) knowledge of the brand's offer. Figure 1 displays the frequency of occurrence of the 5 themes and 20 sub-themes.

¹ *Luxury Attitude helped us to access their network of professional experts.*

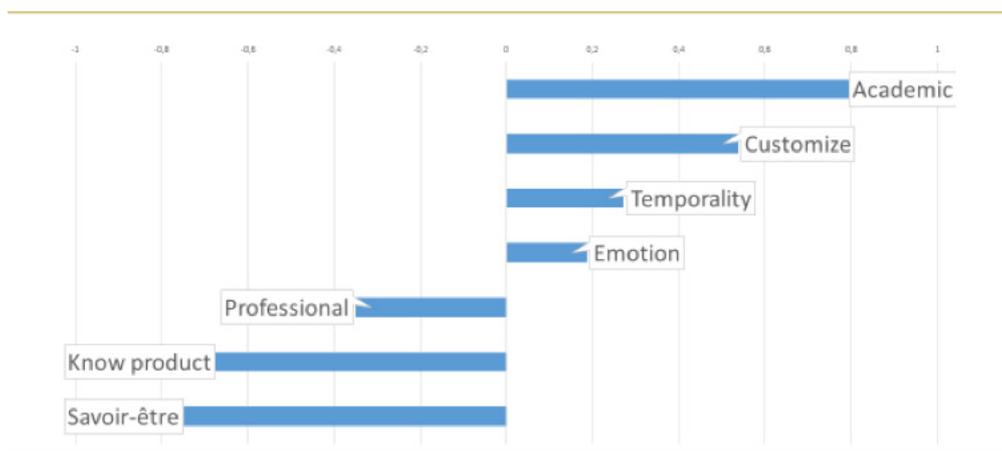
Figure 1. The five themes and 20 sub-themes from the thematic analysis

1. Create an emotion of exclusivity and prestige	(135 citations: Univ=46; Pro= 89)*
1.1 To enjoy an extraordinary experience.	44
1.2 Of the highest quality.	28
1.3 Of the highest desirability.	25
1.4 Through the functional quality of the environment.	19
1.5 Through the aesthetic quality of the environment and salesperson.	12
2. Personalize the relationship	(117 citations: Univ=50; Pro=67)
2.1 Adapt the service (listen, be attentive, incorporate available information)	56
2.2 Adapt to the person (individualize the service, tailor it, make the customer unique, and give them the impression of exclusive personal treatment)	35
2.3. Adapt to the customer's culture (respect differences)	6
3. "savoir-être"	(108 citations: Univ=10; Pro=98)
3.1 Kind, warm, empathic.	37
3.2 Understanding, intuitive, sincere.	29
3.3 Ambassador of the brand.	26
3.4 Discreet, mild, non-intrusive.	16
4. Manage temporality	(47 citations: Univ=17; Pro=30)
4.1 Synchronize with customer expectations.	16
4.2 Be fast, responsive, immediate.	14
4.3 Anticipate desires.	12
4.4 Enhance rarity	5
5. Know the product	(17 citations: Univ=2; Pro=15)
5.1 Stage it, dramatize its presentation.	8
5.2 Demonstrate, be rigorous and show expertise.	4
5.3 Know how to explain, be sophisticated.	3
5.4 Know how to act, to conclude.	2

* "Univ" stand for University experts with professional experience; "Pro" stand for Professional expert

A correspondence analysis arrayed the five themes along a main axis, opposing customization, managing temporality and creating an emotion of exclusivity on the right side with knowing the product and "Savoir-être" on the left side. Academic experts appear on the right side, while professional experts position themselves on the left side as shown in Figure 2. We explore these findings in the next paragraph, using excerpts to illustrate the competencies and attitude expected from luxury salespersons and frontline employees.

Figure 2. Joint positioning of themes and expert's function on the first axis of a correspondence analysis



4. Aiming for excellence in luxury service: the five competencies expected from frontline employees

4.1. Creating an emotion of exclusivity and prestige

Verbatim from our experts tell us that the luxury experience encounter should create an emotion that meets customers' intrinsic desire for exclusivity and prestige.

4.1.1. Through the experience created by the store environment...

In the field of luxury, service occupies a central place, to the point of being considered by Nolwen-Pro as *"the overall packaging of a product offer,"* designed to make the consumer experience prestigious and exclusive. Professionals and academics agree that the background and the sales environment are vital. The unique experience that occurs in the boutique is crucial. For Gabriel-Univ: *"The luxury service in the stores is accompanied by an aesthetic quality of the environment, the place, the architecture of the store; it's accompanied by the quality of the staff, but there's a lot to say, a quality of presentation, etc."*

4.1.2. ... as well as through emotion...

What makes a strong contribution to the prestigious and exclusive side of a luxury brand is also the emotion that the customer feels through the experience offered by the brand, such as product launches combined with events that accentuate the brand's exclusive and prestigious nature. Sophistication also plays a prominent role in the staff's service delivery, as Owen-Univ notes: *"Luxury service should be exclusive, extravagant, and emotionally strong. The sophisticated side is not easy to do; a kind of art or a specific way. If we take the example of the butler, he has a particular way of moving and serving dinner, he's very sophisticated. He not only puts the plate down. He has a specific type of order. You can really show that you know how culture works, and what's important is this sophisticated part."*

4.1.3. ... while thinking about the sophistication of the service

Service sophistication requires a lot of training and frequent knowledge certification to acquire the expertise that naturally conveys the prestigious side of the service offered. Elisa-Univ portrays this sophisticated service in a high-end jewelry store, without which the prestigious and exclusive aspect of the experience would not take place: *"I'm welcomed, she shows me things with white gloves, she gets the jewels (from the window or from the coffer) and puts them on a nice silver tray. The pleasure I wanted, all the intelligence in the words she chose, the vocabulary, the ceremonial: it was never too much, not enough, it was just beyond, and that's perfect."* The key is sophistication but done in such a way that the client feels the experience was authentically empathetic. Establishing a relationship with a unique customer not only supports the exclusive and prestigious approach that characterizes the field of luxury in its entirety, but above all, conveys excellent service by putting the customer at the center.

To recap our expert's citations in the first theme, the overarching duty of a salesperson is to create an emotion of exclusivity and prestige by offering customers an extraordinary experience of the highest quality and the highest desirability, backed by the functional and aesthetic quality of the environment. In the same vein, Kim (2018) explains the preference for a luxury experience over the purchase of a luxury product because the former satisfies the desire for exclusivity better than the latter.

4.2. Personalizing the relationship

Our experts clearly pointed to the role of personalizing the relationship

4.2.1. Through the tailor-made...

This aspect demonstrates the importance of personalization in luxury service. Haute couture was a precursor in service personalization and an example to follow. To reach the pinnacle of tailor-made luxury service, the personalized approach unobtrusively seeks out as much information as possible on the customer in order to act in a personalized and individualized way. Paola-Pro said: *"Personalization aims to make the customer unique. It creates a privileged link with the customer, and involves building a history of the relationship, for example; knowing intimate, personal elements about the customer in a privileged relationship."* Here, the staff are expected to be attentive, to listen to the clients, to adapt to their expectations and desires, and to serve them not just in a satisfactory way but also with an aim for excellence.

4.2.2. ... and adapted staff training...

The skills of frontline employees come from specific training, tailored to the requirements expected in the production of a luxury service. As Gabriel-Univ said: *"We can't trust human nature alone. It's normal. We need training. Some people do it naturally, but we can't trust everybody, so we must be radical."*

Training is also required for the acquisition of intercultural sensitivity so that staff can adapt to the culture and operating codes of each client's country of origin. *"We need to take the culture into account and to adapt to it. We can't touch or perfume a woman directly in the USA, for instance, she would feel assaulted (...). Humanity, empathy and respect are universal expectations but should be adapted in different ways."* Nolwen-Pro; Floriane-Pro: *"We adapt our services to the customers' nationality. A Japanese person, for example, will want a particular tea in his room. It's part of his culture. Our wish is to meet the wishes of the customers. And to please a Japanese customer is to adapt to their culture. The contact staff must integrate cultural norms. It's perfectly normal for a Japanese person not to smile. He can say that he's happy with words and in fact not be happy at all. That's why we have international teams: all languages are spoken, and several cultures are represented. This allows us to decipher all national codes. We have 3 or 4-hour training courses per nationality."*

This attentiveness to the cultural aspect of each client goes beyond simple language learning. It involves decoding expectations in terms of the delivery of luxury for each typology of customers and being able to meet them appropriately and in a differentiated way compared to the services offered by competitors in the sector. As Pierre-Univ explains, the challenge for large luxury companies is not just to know the cultural specificities and to respond to them automatically, but also to compare the services offered to this type of clientele by rival firms.

This differentiation, considered as the "backbone" of luxury companies, aims to ensure a unique and distinctive positioning. The staff need to provide a dual-purpose delivery, considering cultural specificities, while offering a unique and special service to make the moment memorable in the customer's mind. According to our expert, Louis-Univ, understanding the cultural specificities of each nationality is important, but it should not be limited to applying responses automatically to all customers from the same country. In other words, the service must be tailored individually to each client. Customers may have a nationality in common, but each individual will certainly also have different expectations: *"There are differences that are culturally defined, but that become, in the world of luxury, individual differences. It's true that if I work in a hotel and I see a Japanese person, I say 'OK, as a Japanese guest, he might want something different from a Russian person', but I have to go further: 'This is Mr. Hirohito and Mr. Hirohito wants his oysters in a particular way and he wants to be treated differently from Mr. Kawasaki, who wants to be treated like an American.'"*

4.2.3. ... ensuring continuous service improvement by incorporating an adapted CRM...

Continual adaptation to the individual specificities of each customer puts the human being at the core of the service provision. Due to technological developments in customer relationship software, service automation increase. While technology is a considerable asset in helping staff to better customize the relationship (by way of data collection), it must be done in an intelligent manner, consistent with the specificities of the service as such. In this regard, Lucas-Pro insists on personalization specific to the field of luxury services. In particular, he argues that service personalization involves three dimensions: *"the functional, aesthetic and human dimensions."* He thus considers *"that a luxury service must be the perfect synthesis of all three dimensions, given that the professional dimension essentially serves the functional, and the human and aesthetic dimension serves the emotional. So how does service create emotions? It's the human aspect, but not as in 'it's a person who serves me', but rather, 'what kind of emotion does it give?'"* And in fact, *it's customary to say that if the professional dimension aims at efficiency, the human dimension aims at touch, in other words, to touch someone in an emotional way, and the aesthetic dimension aims to be pleasant and beautiful... and so, at some point, if we have to analyze a service or a relationship with a customer, we tend to analyze things through these three dimensions."* The three dimensions certainly serve to make the luxury service experience unique, but in particular, they create a kind of emotional impression that the customer will remember.

4.2.4. ... to create small touches that make the difference...

The staff need to acquire a form of competence that resides in situational intelligence. This kind of intelligence enables staff to detect *"a multitude of opportunities to leave traces of the client in their memory, like fingerprints."* Lucas-Pro illustrates this as follows: *"How is the imprint created? By the ability of the house cleaner to 'use', in quotation marks, the information she has about the clients by observing their room if they stay more than one night, and saying: 'here', take an*

example, “he has glasses on a book, what can I do? I can take them, I can clean them, I can put them like this, perhaps on a small piece of felt, and I can also close his book, slipping a hotel bookmark inside.” And that’s what the customer will notice: “Hey, my glasses have been cleaned, they’ve been laid very gently, and the book was closed without losing the page while I left it open, that’s great.” In this example, our expert illustrates what we can expect from staff through the notion of situational intelligence. In the end, what it means is to rethink a fairly standardized and formatted delivery by small, simple and easy to implement actions that have a triple benefit. Indeed, the little attentions to detail accomplished by the maid will 1) enhance the value of her work, 2) customize and differentiate the service, and 3) retain the customer and send a message about the VIP status granted. This is because it is so normal and predictable for customers find their hotel room clean and tidy that they naturally tend to forget or even underestimate the work needed to achieve such results. The small “savoir-être”es mark the passage of the cleaner and at the same time invite the customer to notice the quality of the service in the smallest detail. This new skill also proposes a form of evolution of the profession: from the routine, automated, ‘millimeted’ and quasi-industrial execution of standardized tasks to a more human and relational execution, which also imposes a certain degree of reflection, spontaneity, initiative and intuition to ensure exclusive treatment of the customer.

4.2.5. ... while ensuring a humane and intelligent approach to service

This more humane approach to the delivery of services is essential in the luxury sector. As Nolwen-Pro confirms: “Human beings and respect for one another are central. It’s complicated because you have to have intuition and good knowledge of humans.” Putting people at the center corresponds to the detailed way each contact person needs to think about their service. The issue for staff who perform somewhat repetitive and predictable tasks is to assign this luxurious character to their service. In this regard, Gabriel-Univ notes that everything depends on the “way of doing” and in particular, “the way of receiving, the way we take care of your bags, how we seek to answer your questions, and how we try to respond immediately to your requests.” This way of doing things requires several skills and tools to achieve the desired results. It needs present and past interactions with customers to be recorded on a customer database to achieve an ultra-personalized service. In this respect, Nicolas-Univ recommends intelligently collecting certain data to design a better service: “Remember, for instance, where a regular hotel guest sleeps (on the right or the left of the bed) to know where to position his slippers at night. We need to collect this information and store it (big data).” In the same vein, Diana-Pro, working in the field of haute couture, explains how to customize the reception of VIP customers using previously collected data. “Sometimes we’re warned of their (customers) arrival, they’ve made an appointment, and everything is in their size and ready, according to the client’s tastes recorded in the client database. This reflects the criteria of comfort, space, personalization and discretion.” While databases are necessary to customize service delivery, they are also essential to anticipate the wishes of customers, ensuring constant responsiveness from the contact staff. All of these elements constitute facets of personalization. As one of our hospitality expert said: “For the customer, the first element of luxury is to be recognized as soon as one arrives and be called by his first name”.

In short, our experts define the frontline employees’ capacity to personalize the relationship as adapting the content of the service to the customer’s unique needs, history and culture, in a warm and friendly manner. Our experts’ viewpoints resonate with Mittal and Lassar (1996)’s justification of personalization as the main reason customers seek a likable and friendly staff.

4.3. Knowing how to behave, displaying the right “savoir-être”

Behaving right is another important dimension in the field of luxury. This aspect is relatively complex because it has many facets involving the qualities a true ambassador staff needs to have to represent the brand. For Paola-Pro: “Attention to the customer is not simply to provide little extras, like a drink for example. It’s in the way of being.” According to our professional experts, the best way of being is not natural but comes from training: “We teach our staff to be intuitive, discreet, but also warm.”

4.3.1. Respecting discretion...

Above all, luxury service is a discreet service. As Nolwen-Pro explains: “Luxury is peace and quiet, not having to bother asking for what you want, but rather, giving you the impression that we are discreetly listening to you.” For professional experts, luxury is also being sincere and warm, according to Paola-Pro: “You have to be simple in human relationships.” In other words, it is very important to develop a warm relationship without overdoing things, hence the

importance of sincerity. Nolwen-Pro explains that big houses are now very careful of this point: *“Now, houses have become globalized and they work with very different clients, including in Los Angeles where it’s much more casual, where a billionaire can come in ripped jeans and clappers. This has forced a kind of mentality revolution and a much warmer welcome.”* Our experts emphasize the quality of human relations that must permeate every staff member in the field of luxury. In luxury service, the privileged stance is that you are not addressing a consumer but an individual.

4.3.2. ... while being devoted to the relationship

Luxury service does not dictate behaviors, but leaves frontline employees with a lot of freedom. The subtlety required by luxury is quite complex; it means the contact staff need to combine discretion on the one hand with proximity and dedication in their customer relations on the other: *“To keep their distance with the customer, while being close, so that the customer feels close. It’s a feeling. It’s knowledge,”* Floriane-Pro explained. This director of a large hotel described the distance the staff need to have to be a true ambassador of luxury: *“Not having the profile, would mean someone who’s too casual. Someone I wouldn’t take may be someone who didn’t know how to step back from what can be said to a client.”* According to Paola-Pro: *“What’s important is simplicity: that is, not to overdo it. We must highlight a jewel, and we must be simple in human relationships. That’s to say, it takes a warm relationship (it’s very important), without making tons, hence the importance of sincerity.”*

In summary, our experts describe the “savoir-être” of a true brand ambassador as being a kind, warm, empathic person capable of intuition and sincerity while being discreet, mild and unobtrusive. This is in line with Berry et al. (2006)’s humanic clue: “the behavior and appearance of service personnel, choice of words, tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, body language, neatness and appropriate dress” that determines the overall consumer experience. Recently Lechner and Paul (2019) found that customers who experience positive affect perceive displays of positive emotion by frontline employees as more authentic. Cultivating emotional connectivity extends respect and esteem to customers, exceeds their expectations, strengthens their trust, deepens their loyalty and extends to the ability to deal with possible customer dissatisfaction. In this later case, frontline employee’s devotion to the relationship could be reinforced (Xie and Peng, 2009).

4.4. Managing temporality

4.4.1. Being reactive...

This emerged as a crucial theme in the quality of service in the luxury sector through the notion of immediacy. More than in other sectors, staff must be extremely responsive and fast. According to Diana-Pro: *“speed is important, but speed does not mean being rushed. If I take the after-sales service, for instance, if there’s a faulty product, which can happen in all luxury brands, we don’t ask questions, we change, replace or repair it depending on what the client wants. All of this must be done very quickly.”* According to this luxury expert, sales personnel must be able to respond to customers fast in order to meet their needs, but they must also understand them quickly: *“You have to be quick to understand the demand that is more or less expressed. It’s even more important to be efficient, to understand very quickly.”* For Florence-Pro: *“We have to be fast, to get more information without giving the impression of asking too many questions. The answer must be correct, of course. It must be reactive, that’s to say, it’s done right away.”* Such staff diligence is particularly important in the hotel industry, where Jason-Pro explains the current nature of his clients: *“People today want to get everything done well, all the time and right away. And that’s part of their daily lives. We’re in a civilization of immediacy. And even more so when you’re in a big hotel ... I think luxury customers today are not just customers who have the means, there’s a bit of a diva among the rich Chinese or the Russians. There’s a little diva or caprice: “I want that right away.” And today you have people in hotels that do just that. And you didn’t have that 10 years ago. You didn’t have an entire team that met the wishes of the rich.”*

4.4.2. ... but wait patiently when the product requires it...

In contrast, professionals from large luxury houses like Diana-Pro explain that rarity and the need to wait before getting a product is very important: *“There’s also a part of waiting in luxury: there’s a waiting list of 2 years for a Birkin bag: it’s part of luxury. It’s related to a craft issue. We’re talking here about luxury products that are handmade and that take time to be crafted, and this waiting time is necessary when you’re looking for exclusivity.”* These items are exceptional because the object has a life and a follow-up of the life, even when they are transmitted or inherited. This long life of the object transforms it into a long-term investment. Temporality also covers synchronization of the service. *“The customer appreciates the staff’s fast reactivity in answering, seeing, and anticipating their needs and desires, but is sensitive to the*

manner as well as the moment when this help occurs: luxury is not necessarily caviar; it's having the caviar you want, when you want it. Luxury is the moment. There's a logic of time, of the moment" (Gilles-Univ).

4.4.3. ... while respecting cultural differences...

It is interesting to note that the timing of salespersons' efforts must be culturally tailored. According to Nolwen-Pro, the cultural aspect is crucial: a customer, who has just entered the consumer culture, such as a Chinese client for example, will find it inadmissible that we do not serve him every 5 minutes, while a Japanese customer will find it unacceptable to be disturbed so often.

4.4.4. ... in order to anticipate and detect the right moment

According to Jason-Pro, standardized service is not a luxury service: *"We must anticipate the customer's desires because the definition of luxury is to meet desires and not needs. Needs are universal worldwide. Everyone needs to eat and drink. Desires differ according to nationalities. And in the hotel business, the best service we can get is a non-existent service, that's to say that the customer arrives and everything he might wish for or desire is already there, even before he asks, rather than ubiquitous service because the client doesn't want to be continually bothered with "Do you want this or that?"* Anticipation emerges here as a fundamental element of the salesperson's mission to *"understand what the customer wants, even before she tells him. We have a very high-end service because it's made up of anticipation."* To summarize this temporal aspect of the service, fluidity is important. *"True luxury anticipates desires, so the service is very discreet, so you're as gentle as possible, there's nothing intrusive."* What is quite common in our experts' discourse is the notion of moment of service. A luxury service must anticipate and realize the customers' expectations and desires when they need them. Detecting the right moment and working upstream so that the service flows to perfection for the customer is one of the challenges a luxury service must rise to. According to Gabriel-Univ: *"Luxury service is having what you want, when you want. Luxury is the moment. There is a time-related logic. Luxury means being able to respond when the customer wants it."*

To sum up, this theme puts the spotlight on the importance of managing temporality as an ability to synchronize the service with customer expectations, to be fast and responsive, to anticipate desires and to enhance rarity. Our experts' viewpoints give us an opportunity to reconsider the pre-core and core service encounters (Voorhees et al., 2017) in order to take advantage of temporality management through a well-constructed anticipation of customers' desires and possible expectations.

4.5. Know the product

4.5.1. Showing your expertise...

The sales literature recognizes expertise as a key dimension. It is natural to see it appear as important in the field of luxury, but professional and academic experts also emphasize the staging of the product. For Floriane-Pro: *"For instance, in catering there's a culture of service. It's not just serving tea, it's knowing where the tea comes from."* Expertise about the product seems less important to our experts than sophistication in providing advices. In the field of luxury, the product is by definition excellent, thus it is the service that make the difference.

4.5.2. ... and exceeding expectations

The service should give pleasure, an emotion that comes as a supplement to the discovery of the product. It helps to please the customer because in luxury everything is in the service performance details, which should exceed expectations. Elisa-Univ told us *"The Ritz-Carlton hotels have absolutely understood everything, since their motto expresses itself in four words: exceeds unexpected customer expectations."* The academic expert added that the staff stage a theatrical presentation of the product as, according to her *"everything is in the detail: be it gestures, language, body language... We must be trained to be attentive to detail, including in our gestures, our vocabulary, etc."* The aim of exceeding expectations is to create emotion for the client: *"It's the divine surprise you didn't expect. On the continuum of emotions, I didn't expect it to be as good as that, truly better than I could have imagined."* Staff must therefore have these luxury codes and be up to the mark in their presentation of the product. For Floriane-Pro, this meticulousness is hard to find in staff: *"Many people don't have the skills or the requirements to be able to work in luxury. It's very difficult to find qualified staff... who have a sense of others, namely, the customer, who is well educated and not interested in glitter."* The expert added *"In terms of the main hiring criterion (since I'm the HRD), it's the requirement: in other words, to live up to the product we sell."*

To conclude, in this last area our experts pinpoint the importance of product knowledge and the salesperson's

ability to stage the product, to dramatize the presentation and to be sophisticated to make the experience delightful for customers. Their quotes are in accordance with Berry et al. (2006), Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh and Grönroos (2017) and Wang, Luo and Tai (2017). Exceeding the unexpected is essential to surprise luxury customers and to cultivate the emotional dimension of the luxury service experience.

5. Discussion

Burton, Gruber, and Gustafsson (2020) call for greater cooperation of academic with practitioner to promote research relevance by sharing problems, ideas and data. Experts can provide new light that complement finding gained from customer viewpoint on the competencies and behaviors expected from frontline employees in luxury industries. Firstly, the results show that luxury practitioners and academic with a managerial experience share a similar vision, with one exception. Academic experts tend to cite personalization more often, while professional experts refer more frequently to product knowledge. This discrepancy might come from the academic taking for granted that frontline people have the necessary product knowledge while manager have come across more disappointments. Our qualitative study highlights five dimensions of luxury service. First, the creation of an emotion of exclusivity and prestige. This most frequently cited dimension is specific to the luxury sector. Second, service personalization. This dimension is not specific to the luxury sector, but personalization with luxury customers requires more experience and acute attention to the customer specificities given the multicultural nature of the clients. Third, it is the frontline employees' "savoir-être" that gives the client a feeling of being at the heart of the experience, a dimension particular to the luxury sector. Fourth, diligence in synchronizing with clients' expectations is also specific to the luxury sector. Fifth, the ability to stage a sophisticated and theatrical product presentation. For this last dimension, knowledge of the product is not specific to the luxury sector, but its staging is specific.

This research confirms the interpersonal aspects of the Idiosyncratic Service Experiences (ISE) proposed by Collier et al (2018) and so is the central role of frontline employee attitudes and emotional work in delivering this experience. The employees' desire to achieve this level of experience and the capability to be empathetic are crucial in luxury service delivery. Sophistication is important but our experts insist on the emotional competency. Experts explains that the customer should not perceive the effort. The service delivery should appear natural, authentic and adapted to cultural differences. Emotional intelligence skills may be essential or even indispensable for achieving such goals (Lechner and Paul, 2019). Furthermore, according to the theory of emotional contagion, employee perceptions of customer delight can affect positively the employee's emotions as discussed by Barnes et al. (2015).

If the literature and academic experts underline the importance of customer orientation and adaptation in service delivery, professional experts insist on the expertise and the "savoir-être" a frontline employee should possess in order to deliver a luxury service.

Finally, while the reactivity is an important aspect of service delivery, this research underlines the importance of rarity and waiting time, which are specific of the luxury industry.

5.1. Managerial contributions

Luxury experts do not easily deliver their practices and secrets. It was challenging to select the experts who took part in the study and obtain their consent for a long interview. The verbatim collected illustrates the five dimensions and competencies needed to provide luxury services. These five dimensions constitutes an important contribution and highlights the views of luxury experts. These descriptions and salient anecdotes could enrich the customer orientation content and form a benchmark by which to evaluate the quality of service in the field of luxury. The results show that successful luxury service should offers a unique, distinguished and personalized customer experience that provides customers with an emotion of exclusivity and prestige. While this experience obviously takes place in a luxurious setting, it is the responsibility of the "actor" in particular, in other words, the salesperson or the frontline employee, to produce a memorable experience as advocated by Torres and Kline (2013) and Wang et al. (2017).

This dramatization can only be successful by training highly qualified sales personnel. The staff is the cornerstone of a luxury service delivery. They must therefore be naturally empathetic and acquire complex skills through appropriate training. Enhancement of the status and role of staff in the field of luxury implies rethinking the work and training of these key players for luxury brands.

5.2. Practical implications

Our results show that the right distance between staff and customers is a key aspect of the luxury sector. It is therefore not easy to give managers simple recommendations to answer the question: “Should the devil sell Prada?” According to our luxury experts, the distance and disdain advocated by some researchers (Ward and Dahl, 2014) might not be systematically advisable. It is certainly important that customers feel the brand is exclusive. However, having a distant and haughty demeanor is a stereotyped behavior. Our experts highlight the experiential dimension of a great luxury service encounter: i.e., the emotional experience of exclusivity and prestige that sales staff should offer the client. These magical moments result from the emotional work of sales personnel in the sense of Hochschild, (1983). This work is largely conveyed by “surface acting” with a language, an expression, a gesture, a way of expressing oneself, and the ability to “stage” the luxury brand. The staging of the luxury brand, through specific rituals and costumes (like uniforms in the brand colors) in the servicescape, corresponds to play-acting as described by Goffman (1973).

Therefore, a first recommendation concerns the management of frontline employees starting with the recruitment and selection of employees that are naturally empathetic and customer oriented so they will be able to personalize the relationship. Our experts recommend to recruit salespersons with a sense of service and experience with the luxury clientele. Here, personality tests that measure the extent of a salesperson’s proactivity could be useful since it is an important trait in the field of luxury and an antecedent to sales performance (Sitser et al., 2013). Even more important, luxury brand should identify and select employee that possess emotional competencies so they will be capable to create an emotion of exclusivity managing their emotional work.

The demands on luxury frontline employees are very specific, sophisticated, and sometimes considered as an extra role, making it difficult to recruit such profiles. It is therefore essential that managers on the one hand and frontline employee’s s on the other work closely together to implement the coaching and competency tests suggested by the experts.

Therefore, a second managerial implication of our research deals with the frontline employees training. Indeed, only a well-trained salesperson is able to identify the clients’ desires, meet their specific expectations and produce service quality through emotional work, customization, empathy, simplicity, discretion, diligence and sophistication. Frontline employees training especially on their emotional role of creating an extraordinary experience is then fundamental. Special training on customer welcome and intercultural orientation seems also important. Indeed, our work show that the attentiveness to the cultural aspect goes beyond simple language learning. Our experts prescribe advanced training on customer intercultural specificities, their requirements and their expectations. Training in simulation or scenario in order to anticipate and adjust to the expectations and desires of the often disparate and complex clientele would also be appropriate.

A third recommendation developed by our luxury experts concerns the job titles that should evolve with the nature of the tasks in order to give the staff a more rewarding status. A status more in line with the expertise required by their function, and which emphasizes the importance of their role as an ambassador of the luxury brand. Research on the link between Human Resource Management and service quality shows that employee satisfaction is a major antecedent of customer satisfaction (Hogreve et al., 2017). A higher status will certainly reinforce frontline employee’s satisfaction but more than the status the management also play a crucial role here.

Another recommendation concerns managers. Providing an excellent service require a “servant leader” that has himself an empathetic attitude, listen attentively to his collaborators and understand their needs and concerns. According to Jaramillo et al (2009), managers’ servant leadership emphasizing genuine concern for subordinate welfare is a catalyst of parallel concern by salespeople for their customers.

Eventually, our experts provided us with a last recommendation, namely, to devise tools to collect and analyze historical relational data of (such as notes on regular customers). Those database and customer insight will help frontline employee to personalize and anticipate customers’ desire.

5.3. Limitations and opportunities for future research

As any research, this study has some limitations to be overcome in future research. Our experts come from European countries. The USA, China, Japan and developing countries are not covered. The study adopts a holistic stance to explore experts’ views on the luxury service experience in order to rethink the management and role of frontline employees in the field of luxury. It would be interesting to complete this study with research that measures the quality of

the service experience simultaneously for the frontline employees and the customer. Specific measurement tools need to be developed, adapted to the distinctive features of the luxury industries. The dimensions generally taken into account to study service quality, such as those present in the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988), may be insufficient and incomplete. Adapting the SERVQUAL scale to the views developed by our experts would be a useful development. The evolving format of flagship luxury brand stores in partnership with art institutions creates new challenges for salespersons, as product for sale are displayed alongside art objects customers cannot buy (Joy, Wang, Chan, Sherry and Cui, 2014). Experimental studies to reconcile expert viewpoints with the contradictory findings emerging from scenario-based manipulation conducted on students with little demonstrated evidence of luxury buying experience are needed.

As suggested by Ladhari et al. (2017), customer's emotional responses may particularly influence consumers' assessment of service performance for high-contact services such as luxury service. So capturing the emotional experience during extended service interactions and their dynamic constitute another interesting research area.

While innovative technologies affect retailing, experts did not insist on their usage. Despite the characteristics of luxury retailing (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Joy et al., 2014), smart technologies could strengthen the (human) relationship between customers and salespeople, which requires a high involvement (Pantano et al, 2018). Future research should examine the benefit of smart technologies on the different dimensions of luxury service quality.

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Appendix 1

Expert’s names and functions

Expert	Pseudo	Function, type of interview and language
Professionals	Diana-Pro	Director Valentino, telephone, in French
	Nolwen-Pro	International Market Research and Consumer Insights at Guerlain, telephone, in French
	Floriane-Pro	Director housing, Hôtel Le Bristol, face to face, in French
	Paola-Pro	DRH Tiffany and Co, telephone, in French
	Jason-Pro	Director Luxury insight, face to face, in French
	Caroline-Pro	Gouvernante Hôtel Métropole, face to face, in French
	Lucas-Pro	Co-founder, Luxury Attitude, face to face, in French
Academics	Pierre-Univ	Professor at University Hannover and consultant, telephone, in English
	Gabriel-Univ	University Professor and consultant, telephone, in French
	Elisa-Univ	University Professor and consultant Aix Marseille, face to face, in French
	Louis-Univ	KU Leuven University Professor and consultant, telephone, in English
	Nicolas-Univ	HEC Paris University Professor and consultant, face to face, in French
	Owen-Univ	Center for Research On Luxury, University Professor and consultant, telephone, in English