The dark side of salesperson brand identification in the luxury sector: When brand orientation generates management issues and negative customer perception

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ABSTRACT

While there is extensive literature on the positive impact of salesperson brand identification, we have little understanding about its negative effects in the luxury context where brand aura can generate deviant behavior. To investigate the negative consequences of salesperson brand identification in the luxury sector, we conducted qualitative studies, including observations and interviews with retail managers, salespeople and consumers. On the one hand and according to managers, salespeople with brand identification present high resistance to change and generate brand distortion. On the other hand, salespeople with brand identification, in particular those with low self-confidence or low brand seniority, develop a selling approach with strong brand centricity but little customer orientation. Regarding consumers, salespeople with brand identification may generate negative perceptions, particularly for those customers with brand and product expertise and those engaging in exclusive brand relationships.

1. Introduction

Salespeople play a central role in luxury organizations both as persons embodying the brand values and levers to creating strong relationships with clients. Indeed, in the luxury context, the salesperson-brand relationship is considered fundamental for driving a brand's success and turning its sales teams into brand champions or brand ambassadors (Adidam, 2009; Merk, 2014). According to the Vice President of the Comité Champs Elysées: "*Salespeople are the most important people in our company. They are in front of the customer. They make the difference. Customers buy when they are satisfied … Good salespeople are real brand ambassadors, who convey confidence in the brand*" (Merk, 2014 p.2). For luxury salespersons, communicating brand and product value to the customer is a major task (Wieseke, Homburg, & Lee, 2008) and the key to forming long-term relationships (Scharwey & Fassnacht, 2017). In the luxury sector, brands create extraordinary in-store shopping experiences designed less to please customers than impress them and generate awe (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Luxury retail seems to encourage brand orientation rather than consumer orientation in order to induce a relationship of adoration. In the same vein, luxury houses foster salesperson identification, which involves defining oneself with the same attributes as the brand (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Effectively,

salesperson brand identification allows the appropriation of meaning by the consumer (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013), it generates more work and effort for the salesperson and better brand performance (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). And because salespeople are internal stakeholders, their brand relationships with both corporate and commercial brands involve using the brand identification concept to grasp this integrated brand relationship.

Be this as it may, high-ranking retail managers and CEOs of luxury brands express serious concerns about the dangers of salesperson brand identification (Merk, 2014). An ambivalence is emerging in buyer-seller relationships in the luxury sector (Bush, Yang, & Hill, 2015) due notably to the difference between brand and consumer orientation in selling approaches. While luxury retail praises salespeople with brand identification because they send out brand signals and generate positive outcomes for the brand (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), salesperson brand identification can also generate negative effects whenever brand interests are placed higher than those of customers (Mitchell, 2005). Little is known about the negative effects of salesperson brand identification in general and in the luxury sector in particular. When considering the negative impact of salesperson brand

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identification, three key questions are still unclear. How does salesperson brand identification negatively affect salesforce management? What are the negative consequences of brand identification on the salesperson's selling approach? And how does the consumer negatively perceive the interaction with a salesperson with brand identification? To address these questions and better understand the limits that arise among salespeople with brand identification, we used various qualitative techniques on salespeople with brand identification, retail managers and consumer-salesperson dyads. The research was conducted in various luxury sectors (watches/jewelry, fashion/accessories, perfumes/cosmetics). The findings bring new insights to the literature on salesperson brand identification, salespeople management and luxury retail. While previous research highlights the selling performance of salespeople with brand identification, our study showed that a salesperson's brand identification encourages a brand centric rather than consumer centric selling approach. This brand orientation seems particularly true for salespeople with little brand sales experience or low self-confidence and high resistance to change, making them lose sight of the consumer. This brand orientation of salespeople can generate negative perceptions for consumers ranging from boredom to rejection, particularly for customers with brand expertise, experts on a product category, and consumers engaging in an exclusive brand relationship.

2. Theoretical development

From a theoretical perspective, our research focuses on luxury consumption, on customer selling approaches in the luxury sector and on salesperson brand identification.

2.1. Consumption in the luxury sector

The consumption and purchase of luxury show five particularities compared to other purchase behaviors (Ko, Costello, & Taylor, 2017). A luxury brand signs products or services that consumers perceive to (1) be high quality; (2) offer authentic value via desired benefits, whether functional or emotional; (3) have a prestigious image within the market, built on qualities such as artisanship, craftsmanship, or service quality; (4) be worthy of commanding a premium price; and (5) be capable of inspiring a deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer. Individuals may conspicuously consume luxury goods to signal wealth to others, who then infer status and power (Dubois, Laurent, & Czellar, 2001; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Also, according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals show preference for luxury brands as a way of conforming to the majority opinion of their membership groups that they may use luxury brands (Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006; Wiedemann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2009). Along other lines, the self-concept theory is a potential motivator for luxury consumption. Luxury brands can appeal to self-concept by making consumers feel good about themselves through possession or gift giving (Gil, Kwon, Good, & Johnson, 2012; Shukla & Purani, 2012). Following the theory of uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977), the rarity inherent in luxury goods due to high price and restricted distribution represents a strong resource for those attempting to display uniqueness to others (Bian & Forshythe, 2012; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). This particularity of luxury brands can generate a narcissistic orientation of consumption (Kang & Park, 2016). Consumers with covert narcissism, looking for admiration from others and visibility, buy counterfeit products with a fast purchasing cycle; while consumers with overt narcissism, looking for signals of wealth and social superiority, buy genuine products embodying durability, ethicality and legality (Yoo & Lee, 2009). As previous research shows, luxury consumption is based on distinctive motivations, both personal and interpersonal (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012), and luxury houses must understand these differences in order to create value for their clients. And to create value for this multifaceted luxury customer, aside from the products, brands look to give their clients a memorable experience.

Here, salespeople represent one of the keys to success (Cailleux, Mignot, & Kapferer, 2009).

2.2. Selling approaches and the luxury sector

Even if shoppers are becoming more and more omnichannel-oriented, both online and offline, personal selling is still central to the purchasing process. There are strong conceptual linkages between customer orientation from salespeople and job performance (Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Employees who are highly customer oriented can be expected to act on this orientation by engaging in behaviors that identify and satisfy customer needs, while eschewing behaviors that might lead to dissatisfaction (Grizzle, Zablah, Brown, Mowen, & Lee, 2009; Zablah, Franke, Brown, & Bartholomew, 2012). As a result, employees who are customer oriented are those who contribute most to company-benefitting outcomes such as customer loyalty, willingness to pay for products and services, and perceptions of service quality (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). As customer orientation increases, employees will behave in accordance with their role expectations as boundary spanners who satisfy customer needs and therefore end up performing better on the job (Prestini & Sebastiani, 2017).

However, an ambivalence is emerging in buyer-seller relationships in the luxury sector (Bush et al., 2015) due notably to the difference between brand and consumer orientation in selling approaches. In the luxury sector, brands create extraordinary in-store shopping experiences designed less to please customers than impress them and generate awe (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Luxury retail is brand oriented rather than consumer oriented and aims to induce a relationship of adoration, with a charismatic origin. Luxury brands try to impose their offerings on the market not by responding to customer demand, but by developing an esthetic ideology that can be diffused to the consumer (Dion & Arnould, 2011). For luxury salespersons, communicating brand and product value to the customer is a major task (Wieseke et al., 2008) and the key for forming long-term relationships (Scharwey & Fassnacht, 2017). In this context, the role of the salesperson is a critical component in the process of enhancing customer shopping experience in luxury stores (Kapferer, 1997; Scharwey & Fassnacht, 2017). To attract and retain customers, luxury personal selling is a key to differentiation from competitors and represents the major difference between the selling of luxury and non-luxury goods (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). In this, salesperson brand identification is considered as key in the creation of shopping experience and personal customer-salesperson relationships.

2.3. Salesperson brand identification

Brand identification involves defining oneself with the same attributes as the brand (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). In the literature, salesperson brand identification is analyzed as a positive characteristic. Formally, salesperson brand identification is defined as the cognitive connection denoting retail salespeople's perceived oneness with a manufacturer's brand and experience of a brand's successes and failures as their own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van Dick, 2004). Formal membership in a group is not required for identification (Pratt, 1998) and, just as consumers, they prefer brands that elicit associations consistent with their self-identities (either actual or desired). Indeed, self-congruity theory suggests that salespeople form strong bonds – up to identification – with brands when brand and self-identities converge (Aaker, 1999; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Sirgy, 1982). From these findings, the literature shows that salespeople who identify with and reflect the brand are more effective in sending brand signals. They generate positive outcomes as opposed to salespeople who do not reflect important aspects of the firm (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). Overall, empirical research has linked salesperson identification with several long-term benefits, including effort (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010), performance (Gammoh, Mallin, &

Bolman Pullins, 2014; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010), job satisfaction, and commitment (Gammoh et al., 2014). In addition, salesperson brand identification has been positively linked to brand advocacy (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011) and salesperson brand psychological ownership (Gillespie & Noble, 2017; Gillespie, Noble, & Lam, 2016). When individuals identify with specific brands, they form a psychological relationship with the brand, demonstrate favoritism, and work instinctively to the benefit of the brand (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). The above literature also suggests that brand identification can be fostered, especially among customer-contact, frontline employees or relationship partners (Ahearne et al., 2005; Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). In the luxury sector, salesperson brand identification is also perceived as a positive characteristic allowing the appropriation of meaning by the consumer (Cervellon & Coudriet, 2013). Since salesperson brand identification occurs mainly with brands associated with prestige, uniqueness, social benefits and memorable positive brand experiences generating emotional associations (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012; Torres, Godinho, & Augusto, 2017), the luxury sector is particularly involved in managing salespeople with brand identification. Nowadays, luxury salesperson management is defined according to brand orientation (Merk, 2014) and encourages salesperson brand identification to ensure the proper match between brand and salesperson values. To conclude, it is admitted that salesperson brand identification is a positive aspect for organizations (i.e. performance, consumer point of view, management), in the luxury sector in particular.

However, salesperson brand identification can generate resistance to change as a brand champion (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009) and an organization's brand narcissism that puts the interests of the brand *against* those of the consumer can generate negative effects (Mitchell, 2005). To the best of our knowledge, there is no research about the negative consequences of salesforce brand identification in general and in the luxury sector in particular. Given the particular nature of luxury store sales and consumption, salesperson brand identification in the luxury sector raises various questions. What are the negative consequences of salesperson brand identification for sales managers? What are the negative consequences of brand identification on the salesperson's selling approach? What are the negative effects perceived by luxury clients when salespeople manifest brand identification?

3. Method

To address the consequences of salesperson brand identification on luxury shopping, we followed a three-step qualitative approach: (1) Interviews with managers, (2) In-store observations of salespeople while serving customers, as well as interviews, (3) Interviews with customers served by salespeople during our in-store observations. Fig. 1 presents the workflow of the three studies. Conducting our research in this order allowed us first to collect data in the most objective and unbiased way, then validate and understand the data through fine-tuned interviews. And to ensure our findings be applicable to luxury retail as a whole, we conducted our research on two different segments of personal luxury goods: watches/jewelry and fashion/accessories. Overall, the diversity of respondents and methods allowed us to challenge the validity of emerging interpretations by triangulating the data across informants, and searching for limiting exceptions (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Real names have been anonymized into pseudonyms to avoid easy recognition of participants. Likewise, we refer to the luxury segment as a whole rather than reveal the brand/house in which we made our observations.

3.1. Face-to-face interviews with managers

The first phase of our qualitative research consisted in interviewing

managers of luxury companies in the three main luxury segments: watches/jewelry, fashion/accessories and perfumes/cosmetics. Although there are various luxury levels – accessible, intermediary and inaccessible – (De Barnier, Falcy, & Valette-Florence, 2012), it is important to analyze the managerial point of view on salesforce brand identification not only in traditional luxury segments, such as high fashion and jewelry, but also in selective cosmetics market officially belonging to the luxury goods sector. Indeed, the desirability rate of luxury cosmetics brands is clearly identified (D'Arpizio, Levato, Kamel & de Montgolfier, 2017). The objective was to better understand the consequences of salesperson brand identification in salesforce management. Table 1 provides detailed overviews of the sample characteristics of all interviewed managers.

We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with managers. The managers, all holding positions in senior retail, human resources or general management, were close to their salesforces. They were selected from major luxury markets such as China, France, Germany, Italy, and the USA. Interviews with French managers were held in French in the managers' offices. Due to the geographic dispersion, all the other interviews were held in English using Skype. We started the semi-structured interview asking retail managers to talk about salesperson management: (1) How would you describe salesperson management in the luxury sector? (2) How would you describe the relationship between the salespeople and the brand? (3) How do you identify salespeople with brand identification? (4) How do you manage salespeople with brand identification? (5) What are the consequences of salesperson brand identification? (6) Are there negative aspects to salesperson brand identification? What are they? (7) What could be done to reduce the negative impact of strong salesperson brand identification? This last question was asked at the end of the interview to avoid bias. In all interviews, managers highlighted the limits of strong salesperson brand identification before we posed the question. Interviews with managers lasted on average between 30 and 60 min.

All interviews with managers were recorded and transcribed. We coded the data using open coding and analyzed them using a hermeneutic approach (Thompson, 1997). We revised our coding continuously through an iterative process between the verbatim analysis and our theoretical understanding of the interviewees.

3.2. In-store observations and interviews with salespeople

The purpose of the observational approach was to analyze, in the most unbiased way, the interaction of customers and salespeople perceived by managers as identified with the brand (salespeople voluntarily wearing iconic brand clothing, reproducing the lifestyle of the brand's emblematic figure, being very active on social media, sharing their brand experiences and news, taking a leadership role among their colleagues and developing a missionary spirit). We obtained authorization from retail directors and store managers of 6 luxury companies to observe salesperson-customer interactions in their stores. Three brands belong to the luxury watches and jewelry segments, the other three belong to the luxury fashion and accessory segment. For each brand and for one day, we were authorized to follow 2 or 3 salespeople demonstrating brand identification according to their managers and validated by interviews we conducted with each salesperson during the day. None of the observed salespeople were individually incentivized for pushing one product over another. This was important since previous research showed biased sales results due to salesperson incentives (Banker, Lee, Potter, & Srinivasan, 1996). In total, we were able to observe 18 salespeople serving and selling luxury brands to their clients. Our observations were made in the brands' flagship stores located in the center of Paris. On average, over 50 salespeople work in these stores, which encounter high traffic of 400 to 600 clients per day. We made our observations on Saturdays, when traffic is at its highest, so as to observe as many situations as possible. The clientele frequenting these stores is a combination of local shoppers and tourists, loyal clients
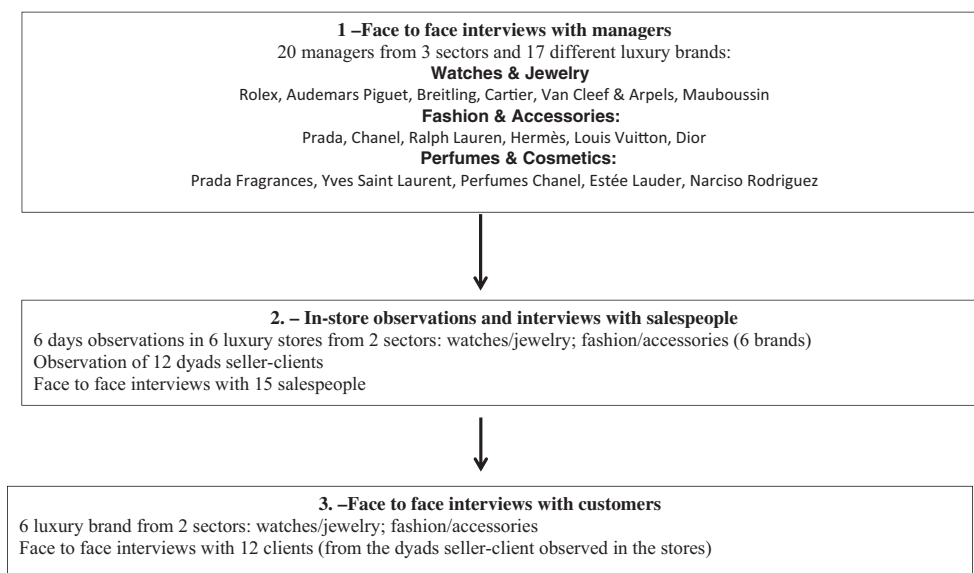
Fig. 1. Three-step qualitative approach.

Table 1
Face-to-face interviews with managers.

Manager pseudonym	Age	Seniority	Brand	Position	Country	Interview
Fashion & accessories						
Daniela (F)	42	9	Prada	International Retail & Buying Director	Italy	40 min
Alex (M)	34	6	Prada	Retail Director	Italy	30 min
Paul (M)	32	4	Dior	Retail Education Director	USA	30 min
Sophia (F)	39	10	Louis Vuitton	Client Development Director	USA	60 min
Arthur (M)	33	4	Ralph Lauren	Retail Sales Manager	France	60 min
Salomé (F)	51	14	Hermès	Head of Retail Fashion	France	60 min
Marina (F)	44	6	Chanel	HR Director	Europe	60 min
Watches & jewelry						
Patrick (M)	42	3	Rolex	Sales Director	France	30 min
Alphor (M)	47	6	Audemars Piguet	General Manager	France	30 min
John (M)	41	5	Breitling	After Sales Director	France	45 min
Alain (M)	75	46	Cartier	International CEO	International	60 min
Noémie (F)	52	12	Cartier	Retail Director International	France and Germany	45 min
Maya (F)	42	10	Van Cleef & Arpels	Education Director International	International	45 min
Adam (M)	64	13	Mauboussin	President International	International	60 min
Perfumes & Cosmetics						
Roberto (M)	45	11	Narciso Rodriguez	Retail Director	Italy	40 min
Julia (F)	34	6	Puig/Prada	Travel Retail Director	Asia/China	35 min
Jeff (M)	55	22	Estée Lauder	Retail Director	USA	30 min
Jade (F)	48	12	Puig/Prada	Retail Education Director	USA	45 min
Heloïse (F)	53	13	Perfumes Chanel	Regional General Manager	China	40 min
Dora (F)	31	7	Yves Saint Laurent	Retail Education Director	France	45 min

and new customers. This too was important since we wanted to observe how different customer types reacted to salesperson brand identification. Per brand, we were able to observe an average of 5 salesperson-customer dyads, allowing us to collect 35 customer interactions.

To facilitate observation, we used a semi-structured observational grid, giving us the opportunity to add unexpected information. The grid was organized around six themes: (1) welcoming the customer, (2) exploring the customer's desires, (3) demonstrating the desired product, (4) conclusion, (5) creation of a long-term relationship and (6) personal impressions and emotions during the service ritual. We recorded all scenarios and took notes after each salesperson-customer interaction in order to capture the most interesting observations and detect customer reactions. All recordings were transcribed leading to over 100 pages of field notes. We then classified the voluminous content by topic, following the main six steps in the selling process in order to structure and facilitate our analysis. 15 out of 18 salesperson observations were retained for our research. The remaining 3 were not included in our study since the observed salespeople did not show clear signs of brand

identification. The salespeople's verbatims were transcribed and coded using open coding and a hermeneutic approach (Thompson, 1997). Our coding was continuously revised through an iterative process between the verbatim analysis and our theoretical understanding of the verbatim.

To verify that the appointed salespeople really demonstrated brand identification, we asked informal semi-structured questions during the day. We introduced the questions by asking salespeople about their perception of a "good salesperson". This question provided an initial insight into the balance the salesperson had developed between brand and customer centricity. Following this, to obtain the most honest answers, and once the salesperson had gained confidence and got used to our presence in-store, we asked them about their relationship with the brand. The questions were inspired by the literature on brand identification (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Gammoh et al., 2014; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Mallin, Gammoh, Bolman, & Johnson, 2017). We asked the salespeople about (1) their feelings for the brand, (2) how they characterize their relationship with the brand during and outside

work, (3) why they chose to work for the brand, but also (4) how they feel when they hear positive and negative messages about their brand. This was an important step in validating the managers' selection of salespeople we were authorized to observe.

3.3. Face-to-face interviews with customers

The third phase of our qualitative research consisted in interviewing customers served by salespeople with brand identification. The luxury stores in which we conducted the observations granted us permission to interview the customers who had been served in our presence. The objective was to understand negative customer perceptions of interactions with the salespeople identified with the brand previously observed in the luxury stores. Whenever possible, we interviewed the customer immediately after their visit to the store to obtain their top-of-mind feedback. If the customer had to leave on completing their store visit, we obtained their details from the store and contacted them afterwards. Of the 35 customers we observed in 6 stores, 10 were international clients with very little knowledge of French or English. We therefore analyzed their salesperson-customer interaction alone but did not conduct customer interviews. Among the remaining 25 consumers, 12 agreed to be interviewed about their interaction with a specific salesperson. We thus ended up with 12 salesperson-customer dyads, of whom 8 were interviewed right after each in-store observation when the customer was about the leave the store, and 4 were contacted 2 to 5 days later (Table 2). The customer profiles were very diverse from both a geographic and brand-relation perspective (Table 3). Our sample included both local and French customers, and international customers visiting Paris. We asked semi-structured questions assessing their interaction with the salesperson and about their luxury consumption. (1) We first asked them for an overall assessment of their in-store experience; (2) We asked them for a precise description of their interaction with the relevant salesperson and their opinion about their selling approach. (3) Thirdly, we probed them on negative impressions they may not have mentioned previously. (4) Lastly, we sought to establish how strongly the luxury shopper identified with the luxury brand (What is your relationship with luxury? What are your purchase habits in the luxury sector?). The interview lasted some 40 min to 1 h. We analyzed the narrative accounts using an inductive coding. The codes were not defined by the literature but determined during our analyses according to the meaning of the verbatim accounts (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). Narratives were submitted to triangulation among the researchers. The comparative analysis began by tracking the main themes tackled in

every narrative dyad. Each researcher carried out categorizations, grouping the indexed themes within a common set of categories. Cross-validation then enabled us to compare the narratives in order to identify recurrent situations and similar behavioral logics. Each researcher's analysis was compared with the others' to obtain a shared understanding (Goulding, 1999). Our data analysis, combined with a literature review, allowed us to propose a theoretical analysis.

4. Research findings

This study's findings provide in-depth insights into the consequences of salesperson brand identification. We divide our results into three main facets: (1) Managers' concerns about salesperson brand identification, (2) Impact of salesperson brand identification on their selling approach, and (3) The negative effects of salesperson brand identification on customer perception.

4.1. Managers' concerns about salesperson brand identification

The 20 managers from various luxury segments affirmed that salesperson brand identification is a condition to successfully selling their brand and its products to very demanding luxury customers. This correlates with existing literature on salesperson brand identification, which found numerous positive effects of brand identification such as increased brand performance, effort and brand advocacy (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). In the course of the interviews, however, most of them saw not only the positive side but also the negative, bringing up concerns related to the salesperson brand identification. Analyzing the manager interviews, we found three types of concern: (1) brand orientation in salesperson management, (2) brand distortion and self-identity transformation in salespeople, and (3) neglect of customer orientation.

4.1.1. Brand orientation difficulties in salesperson management

Our interviews with sales managers in strategic retail or human-resource functions for luxury brands allowed us to identify two main managerial challenges that seem to arise when salespeople identify with the brands they sell to customers: (1) resistance to change, and (2) difficult talent management.

Firstly, retail managers revealed that salespeople with brand identification show significant resistance to new procedures and brand strategies. They fight to preserve the brand legacy and its traditions. As the testimony below shows, they seem to refuse changes to their

Table 2

Observation and interviews of salespeople and salesperson-customer dyads in luxury stores.

Salesperson (pseudonym)	Age	Company seniority	Luxury segment	Duration of observations	Number of interactions	Clients in a dyad with a salesperson from the 1st column
Arnaud (M)	52	8	Fashion/Accessories	1 day	4	1.Alyssa
						2.Sabrina
Sandrine (F)	43	10	Fashion/Accessories		1	
Ydris (M)	34	6	Fashion/Accessories		1	
Eliot (M)	32	7	Fashion/Accessories	1 day	2	
Sophie (F)	41	9	Fashion/Accessories		3	3.Iris
Caroline (F)	29	5	Fashion/Accessories		1	
Vanessa (F)	45	12	Fashion/Accessories	1 day	3	4.Corinna
Bettina (F)	56	25	Fashion/Accessories		3	5.Birgit
						6.Peter
Lea (F)	39	6	Fashion/Accessories		3	7.Sonia
Stephan (M)	43	8	Watches/Jewelry	1 day	2	8.Yann
Maurice (M)	39	6	Watches/Jewelry		1	
Bernd (M)	36	7	Watches/Jewelry	1 day	3	9.Robert
Helen (F)	45	10	Watches/Jewelry		3	10.Pierre
Kathrine (F)	38	8	Watches/Jewelry	1 day	2	
Raphael (M)	43	10	Watches/Jewelry		3	11.Laura
						12.Melina
Total				6 days	35 interactions	12 dyads

Table 3
Customer interviews.

Customer pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Profession	Visit of a luxury store	Interview duration/timing
Robert	35	French	Event Management	Watches	30 mn 3 days later, by phone
Pierre	35	American	Trader	Watches	30 mn Just after the visit, instore
Melina	28	French	Event Manager	Watches	20 mn Just after the visit, in store
Paul	49	French	Consultant	Watches	20 mn 2 days later, by phone
Corinna	37	French	Entrepreneur	Fashion	30 mn Just after the visit, in store
Alyssa	30	American	Coach	Fashion/accessories	30 mn Just after the visit, in store
Iris	28	French	PR Manager Luxury	Fashion/accessories	40 mn Just after the visit, in store
Birgit	45	German	Event Manager	Fashion/accessories	40 mn Just after the visit, in store
Sonia	46	French	Coach	Fashion/accessories	20 mn Just after the visit, in store
Peter	35	French	Entrepreneur	Fashion/accessories	20 mn Just after the visit, in store
Laura	37	French	Study manager	Fashion/accessories	30 mn 4 days later, by phone
Sabrina	40	French	Journalist	Fashion/accessories	40 mn 5 days later, by phone

treasured brand.

> *Brand identification is extremely important when selling luxury. Without identification, no-one can be a good salesperson and cannot offer customers a unique experience. However, I have observed that salespeople who personally identify strongly with their brand are the most difficult to convince when it comes to modernizing the brand. They want to stick to the brand's roots, its past, its heritage, its foundation. They don't want to change, they don't want anyone to touch their beloved brand. Any kind of brand shift is difficult to implement with them.*
>
> (Sophia, Client Development Director, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

This testimony highlights the paradox of salesperson brand identification in the luxury sector. Brand identification is one quality of a good salesperson yet can also inspire inertia harmful to brand management dynamics. This phenomenon has been studied in the management and organizational literature, where resistance is a foundational concept in anti-performative approaches to organizations (Fournier & Grey, 2000). As the quote below demonstrates, salespeople who do not want their brand to change keep it from adapting to the future.

> *It's especially the salespeople from traditional watchmaking, "horlogers", who bond strongly to our brand. They are absolute experts in the industry but tend to regret any change. Very often I hear them complain that the olden times when we were still selling manual watches were much better. They keep saying that Rolex used to be a true and authentic watchmaking brand "une marque d'horlogers" while today our products and those who sell them have become machines.*
>
> (Patrick, Sales Director, luxury watch and jewelry brand)

We believe that Patrick is alluding to the idea that resistance emerges when people feel their identity or self is put in jeopardy, refusing to accept changes to their own identity (Harding, Ford, & Lee, 2017). Salespeople with brand identification show reluctance to change since they feel their own self in danger. This management challenge was related not only to training but also recruitment. As highlighted by the verbatim below, human resources directors in particular observed that sales managers with brand identification tend to make recruitment bias, since they value brand identification over other competencies.

> *Employees who identify with their brand tend to make mistakes in recruitment. They put the brand first instead of validating the candidate's own personality and expertise. What they value most is feeling the candidate's full identification with the brand and match with brand DNA instead of checking their fit for the position. There are professions, especially in support roles and high expert functions, where we don't require full brand identification. For instance, someone in finance, IT or supply chain must master their field of expertise first before showing their love for our brand. I found that great experts were not chosen as candidates since they did not express full brand identification.*
>
> (Marina, HR Director, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

As Marina explains, brand orientation in salesforce management highlights that organizations putting brand over consumer can generate dangers for luxury houses employing salespeople with high resistance to change.

4.1.2. Brand distortion and self-identity transformation in salespeople

Managers value the storytelling capacity of their salespeople with brand identification and their willingness to take initiatives beyond expected tasks. However, like Jade, a retail education director, they expressed particular concern with regards to salespeople's tendency to deform the brand message as soon as they fully assimilated with the brand.

> *A salesperson very close to the brand believes they are the brand itself. When this happens, they can become so convinced they know everything about the brand that they start deforming the brand content. They simplify complex brand information or invent new stories which are simply derived from their own personal conviction but not from the brand.*
>
> (Jade, Retail Education Director, perfumes and cosmetics brand)

This testimony shows the dangers of salesperson brand identification generating an interpretation of the brand identity based on the salesperson's personal point of view.

> *There are stores where customers feel like they're entering the store manager's boutique, where they ought to feel welcomed into the home of the brand, not of the salesperson. The customer should be treated like a king, but if salespeople identify with their brand too strongly, they are the ones pretending to be kings and acting like they were the brand designer in person.*
>
> (Noémie, Retail Director, watches and jewelry brand)

Here, Noémie supports the idea that the conflation of brand and salesperson personality represents a serious danger in salesperson brand identification. The fusion interferes with the expression of brand identity and, ultimately, the brand image in the consumer's mind. This is Marina's experience in her position of human resources director:

The big danger I see is that salespeople who are identified with their brand are losing their own identity. We can only feel good if we remain authentic. I have especially observed this phenomenon with very strong brands. Employees were literally absorbed by the brand. When they looked into the mirror, they saw the brand and not themselves. The brand changed their identity, leading to arrogance and artificial behavior towards colleagues and clients.

(Marina, HR Director, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

These testimonies show how brand invades the identity of brand-passionate salespeople. As explained by Sophia, brand absorption or assimilation may be expressed in various ways ranging from tattoos to transformation of their personal living space with brand codes and logos.

I had several cases in my former management experience when salespeople identified too much with the brands they worked for. They started having tattoos on their arms illustrating the famous logo of their brand. At Ralph Lauren, the tattoo was printed on their skin at the exact position where the Polo Horse is embroidered on the shirts. Their homes turned into Ralph Lauren showrooms with all the interior decoration the brand has developed over the years. This was dramatic since there was no more distance between the brand and the person.

(Sophia, CEO at a luxury fashion and accessories brand)

Sophia is alluding to the idea that over and beyond brand identification, both salespeople and customers can present fanatic behavior towards a brand. Fanaticism is characterized by intense levels of commitment, passion, emotional attachment and involvement for a brand (Chung, Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2008; Cova & Cova, 2002) generating extreme behaviors already considered a barrier to marketing activities from the consumer point of view (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry Jr, 2003). For salespeople, the testimonies also reveal the negative impact of brand identification on the selling approach due to the lack of distance from the brand, and neglect of the customer.

4.1.3. Neglect of customer orientation

Interviewed retail managers showed that salespeople with brand identification feel a deep desire to share their passion with their potential clients and put extra effort into their tasks of selling, recommending and supporting a specific brand (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011). However, they also expressed significant concern that brand identification could lead to decreased customer focus and increased self-focus. This is what managers Alphor and Julia said about their salespeople:

Salespeople on my team who are very close to the brand don't listen to their customers since they talk too much about themselves, our products and the brand. It's great that they're so attached to the brand but I prefer them to focus on our clients first before overloading them with information about our brand.

(Alphor, former General Manager and Retail Director, luxury watch and jewelry brand)

The danger is that such salespeople listen to their own preferences instead of listening to customers' desires and advise wrong products.

(Julia, Travel Retail Director, selective perfumes and cosmetics brand)

As sales managers highlight, salespeople with brand identification tend to forget their role as salesperson and step into the territory of customer. As Alphor attests, this blurs the roles and can become very unpleasant and intimidating for demanding luxury customers.

Passion resulting from brand *identification* brings *with it* the danger of transforming a salesperson into a customer. The exchange *then* becomes extremely egalitarian. *One* should never forget that a customer is a customer and a salesperson a salesperson. There are two levels. Everyone needs to *stay* on *their own* level. If the brand relationship becomes too close, customer and salesperson relationships *become entwined* and clients might feel oppressed.

(Alphor, former General Manager and Retail Director, luxury watch and jewelry brand)

Additionally, salespeople with brand identification may give advice that goes against the clients' expectations. As Patrick explains, brand identification can make salespeople rather stubborn:

I also find that the salespeople strongly identified with the brand are not at all flexible when it comes to serving the client. They have trouble accepting clients' tastes, especially when they break conventions: for instance, clients who want to combine a sporty wristband with a more classical watch. They almost impose their taste on clients. They even go so far as to forbid clients from choosing certain product combinations when it comes to customization.

(Patrick, Sales Director, luxury watch and jewelry brand)

These testimonies support the idea that the managers are aware of the limits of salesperson brand identification. They point out their resistance to changing their opinion about the brand, they highlight how they distort brand meaning and transform their self-identity, and hence the negative consequences for clients who lose their freedom of choice. The managers stress that salespeople should be excellent technicians but not passionate customers. How then does the brand identification impact the selling approach of salespeople and their interaction with customers? To address these questions we interviewed salespeople designated as identified with brand by the managers.

4.2. Impact of salesperson brand identification on their selling approach

Our salesperson observations and interviews allowed us (1) to detect salesperson behaviors revealing brand identification; and more importantly (2) to highlight attitudes and behaviors where brand orientation predominates over customer orientation.

4.2.1. Salesperson characteristics revealing brand identification

Immersed in the luxury store, we were able to identify salespeople with brand identification clearly. Salespeople who brand-identified revealed a strong congruence of their own personal values with those of their respective brands. As Sophie explains:

I fully adhere to the values of the brand I sell since it stands for modernity, is always ready for a change and able to adapt quickly to changes in society. Our brand never stands still. This corresponds to my own personality. I follow bloggers and influencers to be up-to-date, I've always been interested in the latest trends and am also ready for change. I could not work for a brand that is not permanently on the move.

(Sophie, sales advisor, luxury fashion and accessories boutique)

This quote refers to the idea that the salespeople identify through similar character traits and a certain overlap between their own personality and the brand personality. The overlap between personal and brand values can even go so far as psychologically incorporating a brand into one's family bonds. Like Sandrine (below), some salespeople serving luxury brands with strong brand identities consider the brand as a family member. This high level of identification allows them to remain authentic in their words when talking about the brand.

I absolutely believe in what I say to my clients since I fully believe in my brand. When I talk about our brand it's as if I'm talking about a family member. It all becomes so natural. And it is this natural aspect that is very convincing and makes customers buy. Previously, I worked for

another fashion brand that was totally different in its style. I remember it was much harder to sell that brand since it was simply not for me.

(Sandrine, sales advisor, luxury fashion and accessories boutique)

This comment from a sales advisor confirms that the bond between brand and salespeople is a typical characteristic of salesforce brand identification (Gammoh et al., 2014). Brand identification could also be observed when salespeople were introduced to the brand through their parents or other close family members and not only through the brand experience. In many cases, the salesperson with brand identification either received a brand product as a gift for an important occasion or observed their parents using the brand during their childhood. These are Helen's and Raphael's experiences:

I will never forget when I got my first (< brand name >) ring from my parents for my 18th birthday. It was a very important moment in my life and it's almost as if a bond to the brand has formed since then. It became part of my own. I felt so privileged. This is also when my desire was born to work for the brand one day.

(Helen, sales associate, luxury watch and jewelry boutique)

My dad used to collect watches. He told me a lot about their mechanisms and how to identify the high quality of a good watch. His favorite brand was (< brand name >) and he convinced me that it was the best. He passed on to me his love for (< brand name >) since childhood. It has always been part of my life since I've always been surrounded by watches.

(Raphael, sales associate, luxury watch and jewelry boutique)

These testimonies show the link between brand identification and brand attachment (Gillespie & Noble, 2017) and complement the literature highlighting that, beyond sharing similar values, salesperson brand identification can be generated by nostalgia referring to significant memories in salespeople's lives. Observing and interviewing salespeople in various luxury stores revealed how much effort they are willing to put into serving and selling their respective brands to their customers. As sales associates Kathrine and Arnaud explain, this effort was primarily driven by a strong desire to help their brand to perform as best as possible.

I do everything I can so my brand is successful. I want it to be stronger than competing brands at Place Vendôme. In our last retail seminar, our general manager showed the excellent results we made at the beginning of the year. This made me very proud since I know to what extent I contributed with my colleagues to such great numbers.

(Kathrine, sales associate, luxury watch and jewelry brand)

Over the years, I've built up a very intense relationship with my brand so I'm eager to push it even further forward as much as I can. This closeness stimulates my working energy every day and I love to pass this energy on to my colleagues. Only if we act as a team we can make our brand successful.

(Arnaud, sales associate, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

These verbatim confirm that salesperson brand identification generates increased levels of effort towards the brand (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Gammoh et al., 2014; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Mallin et al., 2017). Most salespeople we encountered exceeded the level of effort requested by their managers. Salespeople putting extra effort into their brand were enthusiastic to show what they'd done to enhance work efficiency and help grow their brand. Stephan, for example, told us about the brand tool he had devised for newly recruited sales associates.

As floor manager, I created a welcome booklet for new salespeople. It contained information about the brand, products and company structure. No-one asked me to do it, but I felt keen to do so for the brand. I felt it would be easier for new salespeople to be able to tell our clients stories about our brand and all those wonderful creations too.

(Stephan, floor manager and sales associate, luxury watch and

jewelry brand)

Stephan's testimony alludes to the idea that no extra task seemed too much in order to help their brand perform successfully. The salespeople showed how committed to their brand they were and even felt guilty at times they could not contribute to its performance. Léa told us about her involvement with the brand even while she was pregnant and officially not supposed to work.

Even when I was on maternity leave I came to the store to see if the performance was good, if all of my colleagues were doing well and on Saturdays, when lots of people were in the store, I stayed to contribute to extra sales for our brand. I even felt guilty at not being there every day to help generate even better sales results.

(Lea, sales associate, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

This quote highlights the idea that the brand identification motivates employees to not only fulfill their roles but also voluntarily engage in extra activities to achieve brand goals (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). All the above-mentioned salesperson behaviors confirm that the salespeople we observed, selected by their managers, revealed clear signs of brand identification. We now focus on the selling approach of luxury salespeople with brand identification, to highlight the negative sides to their energy and activities in promoting and selling their brand.

4.2.2. When brand orientation predominates overs customer orientation

Asking salespeople how they perceive "a good salesperson" let us identify their priority: brand representation or customer care. Most salespeople we observed proposed knowledge of brand history, its values, and an in-depth knowledge of the range. For them, a good salesperson serving the highly demanding luxury customer knows, embodies and lives these values. This is the opinion of Léa, sale associate for a luxury fashion brand:

You need to embody your brand to experience the entire scope of your brand. Your degree of involvement is much higher when you love your brand and its products. Then you truly enjoy explaining, demonstrating and repeating the same information to your customers over and over again. Since joining the brand 3 years ago, I've done several training courses so to be able to share all those interesting stories about the brand with my customers. At the start, I wasn't allowed to sell the brand until I'd completed all the training and fully embodied its values.

(Léa, sales associate, luxury fashion and accessories brand)

This verbatim supports the idea that perfectly mastering and incorporating the brand values was considered the most important criterion for being a good salesperson in the luxury sector. This is related to the luxury retail characteristic of being more brand than consumer oriented to induce a relationship of adoration (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

Less senior salespeople in particular pointed out the importance of brand centricity since they wanted to prove themselves capable of quickly incorporating the brand as their managers expected. For instance, Bernd confirmed the importance of fully embodying the brand in order to share its secrets with their customers. He joined a watch & jewelry brand as sales advisor only 2 years after a long-term experience at a competing brand:

When I joined (< brand name >), I realized how much it had to tell. I quickly tried to become familiar with all its secrets and the selling ceremony that's very specific to the brand. The ceremony is based on our designer's values and lets us share them with our customers at every selling step. It's our responsibility to pass our brand and product knowledge onto our customers as best as possible. Even though I haven't been working for our brand for long, I have become a big fan and want to be a good ambassador to all our clients.

(Bernd, salesperson, watch & jewelry brand)

These verbatim highlight that the main task of luxury salespeople is to communicate brand and product values, since these are supposed to personify the brand (Cailleux et al., 2009). However, salespeople with a longer track record serving the brand show less brand centricity than those selling the brand for only a few years. Interestingly enough, senior salespeople, like Bettina, seemed to be more aware of the necessity to place the customer at the heart of the selling process.

> *Over the past 25 years I've seen how different customers can be and to what extent we have to adapt what we say to their profile. I've also seen how customers have changed over the past years. Now, they're so well informed about our brands that we have to focus on their individual needs instead. Compared to 10 years ago, I've now become a coach for my customers rather than a salesperson. I talk much less about our brand values since they mostly know them already.*
>
> (Bettina, salesperson, luxury and fashion brand)

Bettina and other more experienced salespeople like her seem to have enough selling expertise to liberate themselves from barriers dictated by luxury origins. They have become robust enough to not simply follow strict company guidelines but also integrate consumer expectations in their selling approach. This allows them to prioritize the customer over the brand and to have a better knowledge of the consumer need (Homburg et al., 2009).

The interviews with salespeople with brand identification revealed it was not only the less experienced salespeople who tended to put the brand first but also the psychologically more fragile. Listening to their personal stories, we learned that some of them had experienced a radical setback in their life, such as that described by Vanessa:

> *I got divorced a few years ago. At that time, I'd already been working for my brand. It was a very difficult time for me but my brand gave me the strength to continue every day. I'm so thankful since it pushed me up, gave me confidence, and made me feel that I'm a valuable person. Since that time, my brand's become something sacred to me. I owe it so much. I do the best I can to serve it the way it deserves.*
>
> (Vanessa, salesperson, luxury and accessory brand)

Vanessa seems to highlight the notion that weakened salespeople restored their self-confidence through devotion to the brand. The brand helped them overcome grief, and they in turn cared for their brand and wanted to give back everything they'd received when times were hard.

The study findings provide in-depth insights into the dangers that may emerge when salespersons are brand-identified. Overall, salesperson brand identification shows a dedication to the brand spanning the salesperson's professional and personal life. Salespeople with brand identification thus adopt a more brand than customer orientation in their selling behaviors. This brand orientation in selling approach seems to be more frequent in salespeople with little work experience and those integrating the brand in their private life. The question now is what are the negative consequences of salesperson brand identification on the perceptions of luxury consumers? How do consumers feel in a luxury store when they interact with a salesperson with brand identification?

4.3. Negative effects of salesperson brand identification on customer perception

The in-store observations in 6 different luxury stores allowed us to observe numerous scenarios in which customers were served by salespeople identified to their respective brands. Observations of physical and verbal expressions gave some indication as to customer reactions and these data were completed by face-to-face interviews with the relevant salespersons and customers. Our findings showed that salesperson brand identification can lead to positive or negative reactions according to customer profile. More exactly, we highlight three main conditions where salesperson brand identification can generate a negative consumer perception: (1) When the consumer is a brand expert, (2) When the consumer is a product expert/product-oriented, (2) and

when the consumer had developed an exclusive brand attachment.

4.3.1. Negative perceptions of salesperson brand identification when the consumer is a brand expert

Customers seem to like being served by salespeople with brand identification especially when they are not brand experts. They come in with a certain curiosity to see something new and without limits. After her visit to (< the brand >) store in Paris, Alyssa recalled with enthusiasm how she just acquired her first (< the brand >) bag.

> *I came here with my French friend because she wanted to get herself a big bag. She loves the brand but I didn't know much about it. We were served by a salesperson who knew everything. He told us the brand's history, the names of all the bags, which accessories to add to which bag. He told us every single detail. He invited us to touch the bags and hold them. I didn't have any intention of buying, but when I learned how all these bags are crafted and can be customized, my desire grew to have one, too. He gave us great service and wrapped up everything in front of us. I'm really happy I got this bag because it will be a wonderful souvenir of my stay in Paris and this amazing shopping experience.*
>
> (Alyssa)

Alyssa's experience echoes with the idea that consumers usually bring more time to enjoy a new experience and absorb the brand in all its aspects, they come to learn about the brand. This makes them more receptive to detailed information about the brand, products, production methods, designers and any other nugget a salesperson with brand identification can give.

However, customers who consider themselves brand experts in the know are less receptive to the selling approach of salespeople with brand identification. Like Robert, many of them are convinced they know more about the brand than the salesperson.

> *I used to work in watches some years ago. That's how I acquired a lot of knowledge about the brand. Unfortunately, I did not like the way this sales advisor served me. The way he talked about the brand, you got the impression he was the creator in person! He didn't even seem interested in what I actually know about the brand.*
>
> (Robert)

Robert supports the idea that customers feel aggressed and humiliated by the fact that another person even dare rival them with their knowledge. Brand experts perceive salespeople visibly identifying with the brand and with extensive brand expertise as arrogant. Indeed, according to social comparison theory and upward comparison (Festinger, 1954; Mandel et al., 2006), customers facing a salesperson with brand identification might feel hurt in their self-esteem. Clients with high brand expertise want to feel unique as brand experts and be recognized as such (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wagner, Klein & Keith, 2003). Salespeople who display strong brand knowledge through their brand identification might be considered arrogant competitors who fail to attribute sufficient value to the customer's own expertise in the same field. Corinna, for example, who considers herself very knowledgeable of (< the brand >), displayed a strong need for recognition from salespeople and, following her trip to a high-end fashion store in Paris, found the salesperson arrogant.

> *The salesperson who just served me was so obsessed with her brand she didn't even ask me what I actually knew about it. Right from the beginning, she gave me the feeling the client's wrong and the designer's right. Since she worked for the brand she obviously thought she had the right make judgments on good and bad taste. She insisted I had to get the total look just as the designer had imagined it. It was very irritating and arrogant not to respect my own preferences.*
>
> (Corinna)

The verbatim reveals that salesperson brand identification can generate behavior perceived as superior to others (Hareli & Weiner, 2000). And even if brand rejection could, in some specific situations,

provoke brand desire (Ward & Dahl, 2014), consumers can also cold-shoulder brands they perceive as arrogant and making them feel inferior or hurt in their self-esteem (Munichor & Steinhart, 2016). Customer brand experts not only perceive salesperson brand identification as arrogant but also restrictive of freedom. Right after his experience at a watch boutique at Place Vendôme in Paris, Pierre expressed his frustration:

I came here to buy one of the brand's latest watch models and asked my wife to join me to make the final choice. But the way the sales associate advised us was very disturbing. He clearly had one piece in mind he wanted to sell to me. Consequently, he was overselling a product that for him was the absolute icon of the brand, and we felt we were losing freedom to make our own choice. He was almost criticizing the models we had selected previously, calling them less emblematic.

(Pierre)

Pierre's reaction echoes the idea that customer brand experts expect salespeople to use their brand knowledge and help them find the right item and take interest in their individual style. They do not like any upward comparison with salespersons showing greater or different brand knowledge (Snyder & Fromkin's, 1977; Tian et al.'s, 2001). These reactions from customer brand experts illustrate the negative perception of salesperson brand identification placing the brand above the customer and generating a feeling of inferiority. In addition, expertise in the product category can also influence how luxury customers perceive salespeople with brand identification.

4.3.2. Negative perceptions of salesperson brand identification when the consumer is product-oriented

Consumers are product-oriented when they are sensitive to the product features or experts in a product category. The experts are connoisseurs of a specific market (watches or fashion, or perfume) and develop in-depth knowledge about a large number of products without showing a specific attachment to a particular brand. For product-oriented consumers, the product is always above the brand. And in particular for consumers with high product expertise, they may consider detailed brand information and stories about its products as boring. Sonia, for instance, was not interested in the salesperson's monologue and would have preferred more advice with respect to her own personal style so as to underline her personality instead of getting generic brand information.

I'm passionate about fashion, and have followed various luxury brands for years… The person who just served me was like a walking brand encyclopedia. She was obviously more concerned about dumping her expertise on me instead of caring for my needs and finding a unique fashion item that underlined my style. It was like blasting information into my face instead of helping me find the product that really fits my shape. I think her strong belief in the brand made her blind to me as a customer. It was a monologue and not a dialogue.

(Sonia)

This testimony shows that product-oriented customers buying luxury brands for the products' features do not like their interactions with salespeople focusing on the brand. They want more customized advice. Peter, for instance, who buys a specific brand because of its high-quality products, is less open to brand related stories and expects the salesperson to deliver precise information about the specific product's features.

What counts when I shop luxury items is quality. I came here to buy (< the brand >) shoes since I know that I have better chances of finding shoes that correspond to my quality demands than at Gucci or Dior. I've tried lots of luxury brands… I'm looking for the best-quality and product performance. So I didn't care about the stories the salesperson kept telling me to build up romance around the brand. Honestly, all the stories I

heard just don't make me buy. The salesperson should be there to answer my questions about quality. Also, I like my independence when shopping without having to put up with a salesperson being there all the time.

(Peter)

Additionally, because consumers with high product expertise have great knowledge about products in a particular area and are especially interested in the product's technicality and other features, they get irritated by salespeople telling them the brand story. For consumers with high expertise, brand is not a key to buying luxury products. This is Pierre's experience:

We decided to leave because we needed to recover from all the information the salesperson was trying to ply us with. It was too much and not related to my interest in the product. So we preferred not to buy there, even though we intended to. I don't think I'll return to this store so as not to bump into the salesperson again.

(Pierre)

Pierre's verbatim show that a salesperson with high brand identification can generate negative perception in customers who buy luxury products for their intrinsic characteristics and not symbolic aspects.

4.3.3. Negative perceptions of salesperson brand identification when a consumer develops exclusive brand attachment

Customers attached to a brand may like being served by salespeople with brand identification. Birgit, for instance, loved her experience at (< the brand >) due to the fashion advisor who fully embodied the brand:

I was very curious to discover the heart of the brand in this boutique. I dreamed of going to one of (< the brand's >) most emblematic stores here in Paris. To be honest, I love the brand a lot. I was lucky I was served by a fashion advisor who was simply amazing. You could tell that she loves her brand and was so keen to tell me everything she knew about the designer, the current collection, the fabrics… I could also tell she loved helping me find the best fitting piece in color and style. She made suggestions, she literally cared for me. She wanted me to love the brand, too. In the end, I found a dress but didn't want to carry it with me. So, she proposed sending it to my hotel. I feel that everything she did was for me and that she wanted to get it right.

(Birgit)

Iris had a similar positive experience. She was a big fan of fashion, following influencers and fashion shows on Instagram, and particularly loves (< the brand >). That's why she decided to give her mother a (< the brand >) scarf for her birthday:

My father and I came here to buy a scarf for my mum who is very demanding. We were well informed about the scarves but needed to finalize our choice. The salesperson who advised us was fabulous. She explained all the house codes to us, all the technical details about the 'carré'. Her eyes sparkled when she talked about her brand. She involved us in her stories like an adult telling their kids a beautiful story. We had the impression we were embraced by her and her stunning knowledge. We were lucky to purchase the scarf from such a wonderful salesperson.

(Iris)

These testimonies support the ideas that customers attached to the brand like being served by salespeople who spend considerable time with them and share their brand knowledge. Vice versa, these same clients tend to enjoy sharing their own passion with salespeople, embodying the brand and belonging to the same social group. Other customers attached to the brand, however, do not like salesperson with high identification. As the quote below demonstrates, they present an exclusive relationship with the brand and don't want salespeople interfering.

I don't often buy luxury products and when I do it's usually to make myself a gift, to hearten myself. I want to enjoy myself and choose a

brand I love. And when I go to the store, I know what I want and don't want the salesperson trying to change my mind or tell me the brand story. The person who served me in the store took too much time to give me information about the brand but I didn't actually want that. I just wanted to buy the product quickly and showed it to the salesperson to avoid discussions with them. I want to maintain my privacy with the brand without an intermediary such as a salesperson. I want to maintain my intimacy with the brand.

(Sabrina)

In this particular case, Sabrina's experience highlights the idea that customers looking for an exclusive brand relationship perceive salespeople as intermediaries polluting their brand relationship. She did not like the salesperson's brand orientation and cut his monologue short, claiming a business appointment. Due to her brand love (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012), she feared the salesperson's stories about the brand or his passion for the brand would spoil her brand bond. This luxury brand made her feel good about herself through possession and self gift-giving (Shukla & Purani, 2012). For her, the only role of the salesperson was cashier. This was also the case of Laura who visited (< the brand's >) store and try to limit contact with the salesperson.

When I buy a luxury product it's always for a special occasion and especially when I want to buy myself a gift… In bad times, when my dad died for instance or now with my divorce, I buy a luxury bag as consolation. I knew exactly which one I wanted. I love (< the brand >) and wanted to make myself a gift from the brand because I've been a fan for a long time. Because it was a specific moment when I wasn't very happy, I wasn't willing to talk with the salesperson. He started talking about the brand and its various new products and I think he was passionate… but I just didn't want this person interfering in my relation to (< the brand >). It's my story, my intimacy with the brand, and I can't share that with a salesperson.

(Laura)

This quote alludes to the idea that when a luxury purchase is related to a private moment, especially a difficult moment, for the client, the brand orientation of the salesperson with brand identification seems inappropriate. Here again, Laura just wants the salesperson to be a cashier, give her the product, and charge her credit card.

To conclude, our results show that salesperson brand identification generates a negative effect on customers' perception, particularly when consumers (1) are brand experts, or (2) have a product-orientation, or (3) when they engage in an exclusive brand relationship. In these situations, they may find the salesperson's brand identification boring or irritating and this may generate negative customer perception inhibiting intent to buy.

5. Discussion

Our findings provide important implications for luxury salesforce management and luxury retail. Building a good relationship with customers is recognized as an important strategy in luxury selling. To satisfy clients, luxury houses encourage salesperson brand identification as an essential sign of the brand embodied in the salesperson's behavior. However, our research is the first to show the possible negative impact of salesperson brand identification on salesforce management and consumer perception. Our research provides important contributions, from both theoretical and managerial perspectives.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our study complements existing research on brand identification, luxury salesforce and luxury consumption (Fig. 1).

5.1.1. Contributions to brand identification research

All existing research on salesperson brand identification has examined the various positive consequences when salespeople identify with their brands. In our research, numerous salespeople interviews and in-store observations have allowed us to confirm previous research results in luxury showing that salesperson brand identification enhances brand performance through increased salesperson brand involvement (Badrinarayanan & Laverie, 2011; Gammoh et al., 2014; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Mallin et al., 2017). We also confirm that salesperson brand identification can even incite salespeople to take on extra roles (Dutton et al., 1994; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010) in order to showcase the luxury brand to consumers. Our study complements this field of research, revealing that brand identification encourages salespeople to sell with brand orientation (telling the brand story, speaking about their own brand experience, etc.). Salespeople embodying the brand follow a brand centric selling approach. Additionally, concerning the development of salesperson brand identification in a luxury context, we confirm the importance of congruence between personal and brand values in generating the identification (Gammoh et al., 2014). However, and specifically within the luxury context, a world emanating a powerful aura, the salesperson's initiation into the luxury world through close acquaintances also seems an important lead-up to brand identification.

5.1.2. Contributions to luxury salesforce research

To the best of our knowledge, the present research is the only empirical study identifying the negative effects of salesperson brand identification, particularly in the luxury context. Prior literature focused on the consequences of salesperson brand identification on selling performance (Gammoh et al., 2014; etc.). While the research showed that salesperson brand identification can boost performance, gain commitment, and increase job satisfaction among salespeople (Gammoh et al., 2014; Gillespie & Noble, 2017), we highlight three main negative impacts of salesperson brand identification from the salesforce managers' point of view. According to the managers, salespeople with brand identification, embodying the brand values, tend to forget the customer. Also according to the theory of attachment, salespeople with brand identification show resistance when the organization seeks to change an aspect related to their object of adoration. Finally, our research brings an additional insight to the salesperson brand identification literature, showing that brand identification generates brand distortion and a transformation of the salesperson's self-identity. These findings are similar in three sectors (Fashion/Jewelry/Cosmetics). Interestingly, in accessible luxury, our interviews with managers in the selective cosmetics industry show that the negative effects of brand identification occur predominantly with brands stretched from the high fashion to the cosmetics sector (Chanel, Armani, Valentino, Prada, Yves Saint Laurent, etc.). Indeed, the brand desirability built into high fashion seemed capable of spilling over the original sector's boundaries and encouraging salesperson brand identification with the cosmetics brands, generating both difficulties in salespeople management and occasional negative consumer perceptions.

5.1.3. Contributions to luxury consumption research

Regarding the luxury consumption literature, our findings allow a better understanding of the negative perception of customers faced with salespeople with brand identification according to brand and product expertise and according to brand attachment.

Firstly, our research shows that even if a salesperson and client share the same attachment for a luxury brand, the consumer brand expert does not like salespersons with brand orientation selling. Effectively, and according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), luxury salesforce brand identification can generate an upward comparison that makes the consumer feel inferior. Consumer with high brand expertise do not want a salesperson who rivals with their knowledge, they want to maintain their pride of brand expertise. They

thus tend to perceive salespeople with brand identification as arrogant and may feel hurt in their self-esteem. Likewise, because they are more interested in product features than brand meaning, luxury customers with product-orientation may also reject salesperson with brand identification. Consequently, they show little appreciation for salespeople telling brand stories and putting a lot of effort into magnifying the brand heritage.

Secondly, our findings highlight that customers with strong bonds to the brand do not like brand-oriented salespeople because their own brand love is exclusive (Batra et al., 2012; Caroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and they want to preserve their strong brand relationship. These findings contribute to the knowledge of consumer-salesperson relationships in the luxury sector (Scharwey & Fassnacht, 2017) showing that luxury customers with strong bonds to the brand may manifest little interest in brand information provided by salespeople because they want to prevent salespersons with particular personalities from damaging their strong brand bond. Luxury consumers, looking for uniqueness, may also prefer to obtain brand information from influencers or communities they admire. Customers want to distinguish themselves by means of self-enhancing consumption differentiating them from their social environment (Snyder & Fromkin's, 1977; Tian et al.'s, 2001) and, faced with a salesperson allocating greater importance to the brand than to customers, could lose their sense of uniqueness.

Although our contributions apply directly to luxury sectors, we assume that the negative impacts of salesperson brand identification are not exclusively restricted to these. The dark side of salesperson brand identification could affect any brand laying the foundations of strong brand identification by developing desirable brand values and a unique identity, especially when related to social benefits (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2017). A mass-market brand such as Coca Cola, for instance, combines a host of criteria with huge potential for brand identification thanks to its successful communication around happiness, celebration and social commitment. According to Coca-Cola managers, employees may collect large numbers of Coca Cola bottles or decorate their homes with brand print campaigns and some of them, having long identified with the brand, tend to reject new flavors and champion the original version of Coca Cola. However, we find that salesperson brand identification in the mass market environment does not seem to impact end-users but rather the wholesalers with whom salespeople interact.

5.2. Managerial implications

In line with existing research findings, salesperson brand identification leads to major positive effects allowing luxury brands to develop successfully in a highly competitive environment. Increased effort and willingness to go beyond requested tasks are very positive salesperson characteristics. It is therefore important, in the luxury context, that managers find salespeople whose personal values match those of the brand since value congruence is confirmed to be an important antecedent to salesperson brand identification. Even though brand identification has significant positive effects, the present article points out possible negative consequences of salesperson brand identification. We therefore wish to advise managers on concrete actions they may take to avoid possible negative effects or reduce their impact on salesforce management and on the customer's perception.

The first recommendation is related to salesperson recruitment. Managers must carefully select their sales teams by paying particular attention to their selling expertise and empathy. The main purpose here is to avoid selecting salespeople who easily tend to be absorbed by the brand, lose their own personality, be resistant to change, and neglect the customer. This is why we recommend putting more emphasis on salesperson personality than brand or product expertise during recruitment. Managers should ensure that candidates naturally love serving customers rather than joining the brand for its luxurious aura. Visible signs of strong brand identification such as tattoos or obvious

brand-related jewelry should alert managers to a tendency of brand dependence. Managers should select candidates with strong personalities capable of living at a healthy distance from strong luxury brands and very demanding customers.

The second recommendation refers to salesperson training schemes. Our research revealed to us that salespeople with brand identification put the brand at the heart of their selling approach to such an extent that they tend to neglect the customer. We therefore recommend that managers reinforce salesperson training on customer centricity to ensure they never lose focus on the client. During our interviews with managers of various luxury brands, we noticed that most brand or luxury houses still put more effort and emphasis on brand and product training than developing salespeople's soft skills. We advise putting more importance on personality development so salespeople can strengthen their own personality in the face of strong brand values, can learn to keep a suitable distance between the brand and themselves, but also develop the empathy letting them recognize the various customer profiles they serve each day. Our research has shown that customers like or reject salespeople who display brand identification depending upon their own brand familiarity or attachment and also according to their motivations to buying luxury products. It is therefore important that salespeople be trained to rapidly identify customer profiles and adjust their behavior accordingly.

The third recommendation for managers is how to react if the negative effects of brand identification are already visible. We recommend setting up regular monitoring of customer experience on the floor. This could be done by in-store coaches observing day-by-day interactions between customers and salespeople, giving concrete advice on improvement, and leading to immediate adjustments preventing negative salesperson habits turning into irreversible routines. Since recommendations to change could impinge upon personal values, individual coaching would probably be taken on board more willingly than collective training. Given the growing importance of customer in-store experience, we recommend decentralizing training as much as possible to adapt it to the variety of store configurations, with on-going confirmation of on-the-spot effectiveness. If salespersons have become absorbed by the brand and put their own personality in the shadow of the brand, it is important to clarify with them in one-to-one interviews the importance of maintaining suitable distance between them and the brand. Particularly in luxury, the notion of distance is important in mastering the selling approach and meeting the customer's expectations. We further recommend intra-store sales-team exchange to break daily routines and open salespersons' mindsets to different situations. In the luxury hospitality sector, this is already practiced with success between different services, or even different hotel locations. For a limited period, an employee could be sent to another hotel or service to experience a new environment, open their mindset, develop a better understanding of new fields of expertise and allow them to learn new best-practices. Such "live-my-life" situations could allow salespeople with high levels of brand identification to take a healthy distance from their settled habits in interacting with their brand. Implementing such practices requires good coordination among services and strong involvement by Human Resources on a corporate level (Fig. 2).

A final recommendation relates to salesperson evaluation by customers. Numerous luxury brands today have mystery shopping guidelines executed by external companies to assess customer perception by salespeople in-store. Such guidelines, if formulated in a too rigid way, force salespeople to be more brand focused in order to earn all points during the evaluation process. Indeed, such evaluation guidelines incite the salesperson to focus less on customers and essentially concentrate on brand imposed procedures in the selling approach. Therefore, we recommend loosening these kinds of guideline in order to allow salespeople to balance more naturally between being customer centric and brand oriented. Managers must liberate salespeople from the brand power so they can listen to the customer, and thus reduce the possible negative effects of salesperson brand identification.
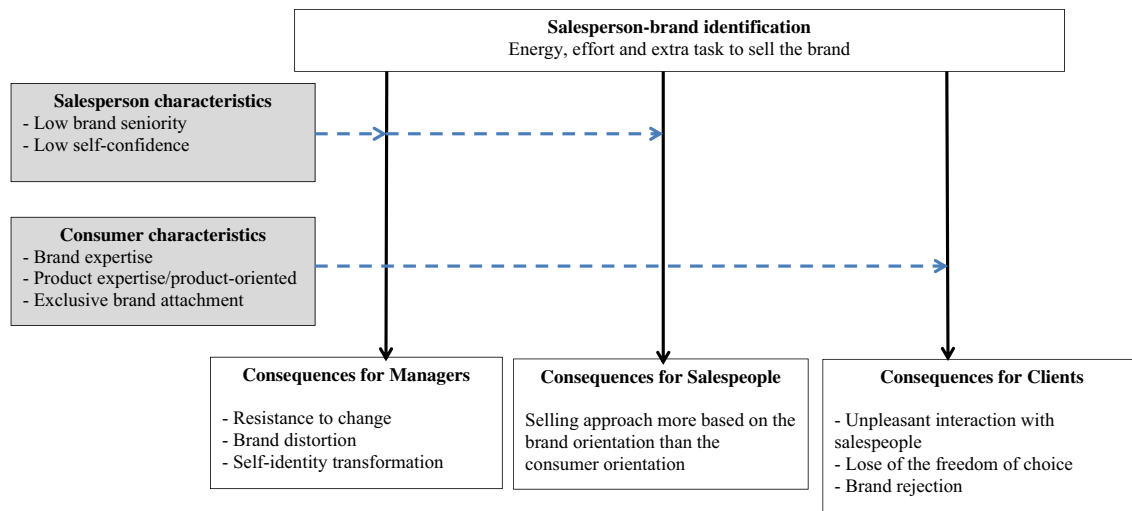
Fig. 2. The dark side of salesperson brand identification in the luxury sector.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The present study detects negative effects of salesperson brand identification on the selling approach, salesforce management and customer perception. We chose a qualitative approach based on interviews and field observations. It allowed us to collect numerous variables identifying new consequences of salesperson brand identification. To validate these findings, we encourage conducting further research on the negative effects of brand identification by applying a quantitative methodology. This should make it possible to develop a model on the negative effects of salespeople with brand identification that validates the moderating variables. It would also be interesting analyzing the negative impact of salesperson brand identification according to individual customer characteristics, particularly regarding customer self-monitoring (Kim, Kim, & Johnson, 2010). Effectively, it would seem that salesperson brand identification is liked less by customers with lower self-monitoring. Low self-monitors are individuals who regard their personal value system and private realities as important; thus, they tend to keep their self-presentation consistent across situations and would be less open to salespeople with high brand identification and high brand centrity. Analyzing the impact of salesforce brand identification according to type of luxury consumption as either personal or interpersonal (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999) and according to condition of store visit (alone or accompanied) would also be wise.

Although our results are based on various product categories in the luxury sector (fashion/accessories/jewelry as well as perfumes/cosmetics from the manager's point of view), it is nevertheless important to validate our findings in other categories, particularly in luxury services (hotels, restaurants, spas, etc.) where interactions with salespeople are different. Even though our research was conducted on international luxury brands in two predominant luxury segments – fashion & accessories and watches & jewelry –collecting customer and salesperson data in flagship luxury boutiques in Paris, future research could expand data collection to luxury boutiques in other geographic areas such as the USA or Asia. This would let us compare our findings on a French geographical setting with other cultural settings.

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